

The mission of the CHARIS Ecumenical Center is to build up the Body of Christ by

- providing a balanced array of continuing education for clergy and laity
- promoting ecumenical collaboration and interfaith dialog
- assisting the community in exploring emerging issues in faith and life
- serving as a regional resource for churches, lay church staff, and others

CHARIS Website Overhauled

Hiring a computer wizard can do wonders for your website!!! Check out our revamped and improved website at www.charisecumenical.org. Administrative assistant Diane Renner has been working on the website, but we are not done yet. We also have a new logo, designed by Pastor Karla Mickelson. The website should be easier to use and more complete, with some color versions of brochures. We are hoping to get secure online credit card registration, but so far the cost is prohibitive for our limited budget. Moreover, since a high percentage of our participants are pastors, and payment is typically in the form of checks from congregations, we are not sure that credit cards would be used enough to justify the expense.

Et Tu, Judas?

Just in time for pre-Easter marketing, the National Geographic Society flooded a naïve media with news of a new gospel linked to the Betrayer, Judas Iscariot. Much attention was given to the claim that this gospel provides new insight into Judas' motives for betraying Jesus. National Geographic simultaneously published two books: *The Gospel of Judas*, ed. by Rodolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer, and Gregor Wurst and *The Lost Gospel: The Quest for the Gospel of Judas Iscariot*, by Herbert Krosney. In addition, they have a DVD on "The Gospel of Judas" and the May issue of *National Geographic* headlines the same gospel.

The Gospel of Judas was found in Egypt in the 1970s, and smuggled out. The subsequent story of the gospel is one of international intrigue, motivated by greed and resulting in the serious degradation of the fragile and ancient papyrus manuscript. Written in Coptic, it is a translation of a gospel originally in Greek condemned by Irenaeus in 180 A.D. Therefore, we can assume that the original gospel goes back to around 150 A.D or even earlier.

The Gospel of Judas is a Gnostic writing. The God of the Old Testament, who created the world, is not the real God. Jesus, who comes from this real God, often laughs at the foolishness of the disciples who do

not understand this. Judas, who knows things that the other disciples do not, is asked by Jesus to betray him so that Jesus can slough off his worldly flesh to return to "the immortal realm of Barbelo," a kind of Gnostic divine mother.

It is pretty obvious that Judas' motivation is linked to the gospel's Gnostic worldview and has little claim to historicity. Our four gospels are not without problems either. For example, Judas' role there is odd: why does Jesus, portrayed as openly preaching in the Temple, have to be "betrayed"? (The Greek is literally "handed over").

The Gospel of Judas, which deals only with what seems to be "Passion Week," is, however, of great interest for understanding the development of early Christianity. Because of its fairly secure mid-2nd century dating, it shows how advanced Gnostic Christianity had become already that early. What it tells us about Judas himself is of little interest, though it lent itself to much media hype. The scholars who worked on the document were serious scholars, though the companion volume by Herbert Krosney is not by a biblical scholar. Still, there are questions about these scholars too, since they agreed to the secretive process mandated by National Geographic rather than the more open scholarly process of publishing photos and transcriptions of the manuscript so that other scholars could have access to the gospel.

For a different take on the Gospel of Judas, as well as for a review of the portrait of Judas in the New Testament and the story behind the story of this new gospel, go to James M. Robinson's *The Secrets of Judas: The Story of the Misunderstood Disciple and His Lost Gospel* (Harper, San Francisco, 2006). Robinson was the scholar who created and led an international team of scholars in publishing the Nag Hammadi manuscripts. One of his chapters is called "The Peddling of the *Gospel of Judas*." But one suspects that the publisher also was seeking to cash in on the Gospel of Judas; the title of Robinson's book sounds like it came directly from the marketing department.

A lot more than thirty pieces of silver are involved in this latest Judas episode!

Summer Reading Suggestions

Here is a variety of recent books to consider for summer reading.

Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture—a series by InterVarsity Press. 18 volumes so far. Excerpts from the church fathers give insight into pre-critical views of the Bible.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer. This year is the centenary of Bonhoeffer's birth (6 Feb. 1906). Many of his works are being republished by Fortress Press and others. Go to the International Dietrich Bonhoeffer Society for much more information (www.dbonhoeffer.org).

Nancy F. Cott. *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation*. Harvard, 2001. Cott, Stanley Woodward Prof. of History and American Studies, Yale, gives a history of marriage and public policy.

David Brion Davis. *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World*. Oxford, 2006. Davis, Sterling Prof. of History Emeritus, Yale, is the leading scholar of slavery in the New World. Related book: Stephan R. Haynes. *Noah's Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery*. Oxford, 2002.

L. Shannon Jung. *Food for Life. The Spirituality and Ethics of Eating*. Fortress, 2004. The title says it all. Jung is now Prof. of Town and Country Ministries, St. Paul School of Theology, Kansas City.

Charles P. Lutz and Robert O. Smith. *Christians and a Land Called Holy: How We Can Foster Justice, Peace, and Hope*. Fortress, 2006. Lutz is a Mpls. peace activist; Smith is pastor of St. John Lutheran Church, Gatesville, TX. Lots of links to resources.

Shawnthea Monroe Mueller. *Not So Desperate: Fantasy, Fact, and Faith on Wisteria Lane*. Chalice, 2006. A cheeky and extended meditation on "Desperate Housewives" by UCC pastor Monroe Mueller of First Congregational Church, Moorhead.

Amanda Porterfield. *Healing in the History of Christianity*. Oxford, 2005. A survey of ideas, rituals, and experiences in healing from Jesus to today.

Jonathan L. Reed. *Archaeology and the Galilean Jesus*. Trinity Press International, 2000. A very careful, well-documented study by the University of LaVerne professor. Another excellent book: Sean Freyne's *Jesus, A Jewish Galilean*. Continuum, 2005. Freyne is a recognized scholar on Galilee and teaches at Trinity College, University of Dublin.

Richard Rohr. *Contemplation in Action*. Crossroad, 2006. A selection of the best from popular writer Richard Rohr's *Radical Grace* newsletter.

Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton. *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. Oxford, 2005. Univ. of North Carolina sociologists present the findings from the huge National Study of Youth and Religion.

Harry S. Stout. *Upon the Altar of the Nation: A Moral History of the Civil War*. Viking, 2006. Stout is the Jonathan Edwards Prof. of American Religious History at Yale. A sample: "As the Civil War progressed onto increasingly eroded moral ground, something transformative simultaneously took place that would render the war *the* defining phenomenon in American history. Patriotism itself became sacralized to the point that it enjoyed co-equal or even superior status to conventional denominational faiths."

Larry A. Witham. *Who Shall Lead Them: The Future of Ministry in America*. Oxford, 2005. Journalist Witham looks at the state of both Protestant and Catholic clergy. A related book: *Priests: A Calling in Crisis* by Andrew Greeley. Univ. of Chicago, 2005.

My Apologies

The previous CHARIS newsletter had a piece saying that the Vatican had given the idea of "Limbo" "the old heave ho." Such flippant treatment of a matter that is of genuine concern to many was not appropriate, and I apologize to those whom I offended.

Free Symposium on Vocation

The Concordia Faith, Reason, and World Affairs Symposium for 2006 will focus on "Faith and Public Life: Celebrating Vocation in Action." This event, which is free and open to the public, will be held September 10-12 on the campus of Concordia College.

Among the speakers so-far committed are **David Batstone** (*Sojourners Magazine*), **Sharon Daloz Parks** (Harvard), **Paul Farmer** (Harvard), **Carrie Newcomer** (singer/songwriter, poet, activist), **Stephen Lewis** (UN Secretary General's special envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa), and **Peter Mayer** (singer/songwriter).

In addition to the plenary addresses, there will be numerous concurrent sessions.

For more information, call the Cultural Events Office at Concordia: 218-299-4366.

North Dakota 101

Intended to introduce pastors new to North Dakota to the state's history, land, and people, "North Dakota 101" is an annual conference sponsored by the North Dakota Conference of Churches. This event has been much appreciated as a way of helping pastors understand their context for ministry. This year, the conference will be held September 28-29 at Sacred Heart Monastery near Richardton, North Dakota.

Presentations will include "The Lessons of Rural History," "The Beauty of the Prairie," "Seeing North Dakota," "Economic Themes of North Dakota," "The Dynamics of Small-town Life," "Different Forms of Doing Church," and "Social Services in North Dakota." Thursday evening will feature entertainment by North Dakota's prairie troubadour, Chuck Suchy.

The registration fee of \$150 includes meals, one night lodging, and the program. \$75 scholarships are available. To register or get more information, call Renee Gopal at 701-647-2063 or use e-mail at ndconchu@drtelwb.net. You can also find complete information and schedule at www.ndconference.org.

Rural Life Convo Set for June 25-26

"Discovering Hope: Building Rural Vitality" is the title of a convocation for clergy and laity set for June 25-26, 2006 at Jamestown College, Jamestown, N.D. Featured presenters are Dr. Alvin Luedke, Assoc. Prof. of Rural Ministry, Luther Seminary and Rev. Ray Branstiter, on the pastoral staff at Tri-County Ministry, a ten-congregation cooperative ministry at Cooperstown, N.D.

You will learn the best practices of exemplary and effective rural and small town congregations, discover how the book *Discovering Hope, Building Vitality in Rural Congregations* can be used by pastors and congregations, explore the changing face of rural America, and learn new ways to encourage faithful discipleship in rural congregations. To register, call Renee Gopal at 701-647-2063.

Intercessory Prayer Doesn't Work?

Six academic medical centers, including the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, participated in an extensive Study of the Therapeutic Effects of Intercessory Prayer on patients recovering from coronary artery bypass graft surgery. According to a news release from the Harvard Medical School, the study "found that intercessory prayer had no effect on recovery from surgery without complications. The study also found that patients who knew they were receiving intercessory prayer fared worse." Three Christian groups—two Catholic [including St. Paul's

Monastery, St. Paul, Minn.] and one Protestant—provided prayer over the multi-year study.

"Our study was never intended to address the existence of God or the presence or absence of intelligent design in the universe. The study did not endeavor, either, to compare the efficacy of one prayer form over another or to assess participants' understanding of the nature and purpose of prayer. Finally, it was not our objective to discover whether prayers from one religious group work better than prayers from another," said Father Dean Marek, Director of Chaplain Services at Mayo.

The *New York Times* reported that there have been ten studies of the effects of prayer in the last six years, with mixed results. The most recent study was designed to eliminate flaws with earlier studies.

But Going to Church May Help

An article in the March-April 2006 issue of the *Journal of the American Board of Family Medicine* suggests that religious attendance may extend one's life by several years. The article, "Religious Attendance: More Cost-Effective than Lipitor?" is available online at www.jabfm.org. Dr. Daniel Hall, the author, says, "this analysis suggests that the practical, real world significance of regular religious attendance (2 to 3 additional years of life) is similar to widely recommended health practices like regular physical exercise and statin-based therapy of CAD [coronary heart disease]."

Don't Mix Religion and Medicine?

Dr. Richard Sloan is professor of behavioral medicine at Columbia University Medical Center in New York. In a forthcoming book (due Oct. 31, 2006), Sloan argues that mixing religion and medicine does an injustice to both. The book is entitled *Blind Faith: The Unholy Alliance of Religion and Medicine* (St. Martin's Press, 2006).

In an article in *Science and Theology News*, Sloan says that physicians who include religion in their visits may misuse their scant time with patients who may need to have demonstrated risks addressed, like obesity or smoking. Patients may feel manipulated by physicians who focus on religion. And "Asserting that such activities [i.e., engaging in religious practices] promote health can lead patients who do poorly to question their religious devotion and to experience guilt and remorse over supposed religious failures," says Sloan. He continues, "Attempts to closely connect religion and medicine unwittingly imply that religion has no strengths of its own and instead needs the methods of science to establish validity.... In these efforts, they demean rather than value religion."