



## Theology on Tap



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*Church group starts monthly theology discussions in Kutztown bar*  
By Erin Negley

**(This article appeared in the October 25, 2008, issue of the Reading Eagle. It is used by permission.)**

A visiting theologian was ready to deliver his lecture, so members of the congregation grabbed their beers and found a seat.

Beer in church?

Not quite.

It's theology night in the Kutztown Tavern.

On tap are the brewery's own lager and stout as well as a discussion on religion in politics.

Welcome to *Theology on Tap Berks*, a discussion group focusing on faith, spirituality and contemporary religious issues, all washed down with some beer as a chaser.

If a bar seems an unlikely spot for a religious discussion, perhaps that's the point.

Some people can be intimidated by a church setting, especially if they don't belong to a congregation, said the Rev. Sara Hertzog, pastor of Maiden Creek Union Church in Maiden Creek Township.

"I think theology belongs anywhere," Pr. Hertzog said. "It doesn't need to just be in a church."

Maiden Creek Church, a jointure of United Church of Christ and Lutheran congregations, started the group in September to



discuss contemporary issues and how they affect faith.

"Christianity and your faith don't necessarily involve sitting in a chair reading Bible verses," said Kevin Fisk, 35, a member of the group.

"It's not just a Sunday thing," said his fiancée, Kristen Snyder, 34.

Both live in Fleetwood.

The church's young-adult group lined up some local experts and picked the Kutztown Tavern as the spot to meet for their heady discussions, scheduled every second Tuesday at 7 p.m.

Organizers have already discussed topics like whether Christians can combine conventional and alternative medicine. And recently they tiptoed through the minefield of religion and politics at the neighborhood bar.

The group meets upstairs in a quiet private room, above the long bar and the clinking pint glasses. Their meeting place looks more banquet room than bar with round tables, bright lights and plain decor. A few people ordered a brew at the small upstairs bar. Others sipped sodas during the talk.

Pr. Hertzog, Maiden creek Church's pastor, suggested its young-adult group start the discussion group after she attended a similar meeting in Lancaster. They're trying to present relevant and challenging topics in a relaxed setting.

That was one thing that attracted Dan Leininger, a 61-year-old Exeter Township resident, to follow a friend's invitation.

"I found it a very pleasant setting for discussing important issues," he said.

Leininger went to both sessions looking for a civil discussion where people aren't trying just to win an argument.

At the October session, Dr. Lee Barrett, professor of theology at Lancaster Theological Seminary, discussed the presidential candidates' values and how their faith influences their political and policy proposals.

During Dr. Barrett's presentation, the group was respectfully quiet, allowing the din of the bar below to filter up.

After his talk, people asked a wide range of questions, setting off equally wide-ranging discussions, even touching on normally divisive issues.

As the discussion wound down, another man dropped a bomb.

How can a religious person be pro-choice?

A few people gave their opinions, some quoted Bible verses, and no one lost their temper.

"Religion and politics are both pretty sensitive subjects, but I was impressed that he (Dr. Barrett) did such a good job keeping everything relatively objective and civil," said Josh Ferris, 23, of New Tripoli, Lehigh County.

"I think it's awesome that a church is stepping outside of the box to sponsor an event like this, discussing faith-related topics that actually matter in our society today," he said.

More than 60 people, not all church members, have attended the first two meetings. Their ages ranged from 20s to 70s.

The young-adult group hopes to attract anyone who wants to talk about religion in the friendly atmosphere of the tavern.

Monthly sessions are scheduled through May and will take a break for the summer.

#### Here's what's "on tap" through January:

- **November 11**, Dr. Donna Yarri, an assistant professor of theology at Alvernia University, and Dr. Spencer S. Stober, an assistant professor of biology at Alvernia, will discuss God, science and designer genes. Modern genetic science is at the state where we can now control our genetic destinies. What are the implications? Are we playing God?
- On **December 9**, the Rev. Dr. Harry Serio, a retired United Church of Christ minister, will talk about the evidence of life after death. Is the afterlife simply a matter of faith or is there empirical and credible evidence for postmortem survival? A critical look at ghosts, hauntings, reincarnation, near-death experiences and more.
- On **January 13**, Rev. Daniel T. Moser, a United Church of Christ minister in Montgomery County, will talk about keeping Sabbath as a countercultural activity. Keeping the Sabbath is not a suggested spiritual practice we are urged to consider. It is one of the Ten Commandments. So why did God command it? How did we lose it? And what can we do to get it back?



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*(AJ Rogers is the vice president of the synod's Lutheran Youth Fellowship board. This article is adapted from one that appeared in the March 16, 2008, edition of the Easton Express.)*

Three years ago, AJ Rogers had a bright idea: He wanted to start a skateboard company.

His incentive? It sounded like fun.

Today, the 17-year-old from South Side Easton is part-owner of Graffiti Skateboards, a Christian-based skateboard business that designs and sells custom-made boards in skate shops in the Easton area.

The merchandise is emblazoned with Christian images. The underbelly of the board Rogers rides has a red heart with a cross through the center.

Not only are he and friends Mike Bazulka and James Darwin selling great skateboards, Rogers says, they're "sharing the word" as well.

Not bad for someone who was then an 11th-grader.

These days, one of AJ's biggest concerns is getting kicked off private properties with ideal skateboarding conditions. However, a couple of years ago, he says, it was whether or not he'd live to see graduation.

Upon initiation into a gang in just his first year of high school, AJ says his grades fell, relationships with friends and family grew tense and hopes for a positive future began to disintegrate.

Tired of a destructive lifestyle, AJ decided to shed what he calls



the "I'm thug this, I'm thug that, I can do whatever I want" mentality and finally faced the person he had become.

AJ says his family was a key motivation for breaking away from the gang, but he also credits his transformation with a powerful moment that occurred at St. Paul Evangelical Church, 610 W. Berwick St., Easton.

"I heard the sermon on what's right and what's equal, and it just really affected my life," says Rogers, a senior at Easton Area High School. "Right then and there."

AJ says as he sat in a pew listening to the Rev. David Newman speak, it was as if someone flipped a switch. One visit turned into another and, according to Pr. Newman, AJ is now a valuable role model as vice president of the church youth group.

"He's a natural-born leader who builds the community up and has a lot of different types of friends because of it," Pr. Newman says.

One of those friends, Jason Gilbert, a classmate of AJ's since kindergarten, considers AJ more than simply someone with whom to hang out.

"AJ likes to teach people and he knows what he's talking about," says Gilbert, who's also involved with the church. "He's always there."

So how does skateboarding fit into the equation when it comes to religion?

"Skate church" is what AJ and Pr. Newman call the weekly meetings in the basement of Christ United Methodist Church at West Berwick and Seitz streets in Easton. On Friday nights, teens fuse worship and skating together without having to worry about getting hounded by police for skating where they're not welcome.

Sometimes, AJ says, up to 30 teens participate.

"He's going to be a pastor when he graduates," said AJ' mother, Melody Rogers. "I'm so proud of him doing this and getting other neighborhood kids who might have strayed and are now a big part of the church."

Although AJ aspires to go to college and eventually the seminary, he vows to return to Easton.

"There's a lot that needs to be done," he says. "Gangs, drugs, no love. No love as in you can't walk down the street without someone giving you the stink eye."

AJ says he's grateful for abandoning the gang lifestyle. The

pressure is always there. But, AJ says he's found in all areas of life that honesty — with everyone — is the best policy.

"Just talk to them," he says of others. "Don't be scared and don't be stubborn. Just listen to what people have to say to you."

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*the spirit*



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By the Rev. Jane Kropa, pastor, Huff's Union Church, Alburtis, PA

Whenever I read an article featuring congregations that have grand and wonderful-sounding projects, I feel sad inside, and wonder, "What is my congregation doing?"

I imagine other people have had the same thoughts. If a congregation does not have one important mission outreach project, does it mean it is ineffectual, or unfaithful?

Absolutely not!

I wonder if your congregation isn't like my own. When I went through what we do to support those in need, I found, rather than an absence of programs, a great number of little things we do.

No, there is no one grand or large program that we do or support, but, in our own small way, we make a difference through our two denominations: Our Church's Wider Mission in the United Church of Christ, and supporting Synod Benevolence through the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

We also support the Church World Service "Blanket Fund" and "Tools for Hope" projects; we give to four local agencies that supply food and social services to those in need; we support a volunteer agency that provides transportation for people in our rural area by our monetary gifts and providing several volunteers who drive people to appointments. (One of our men drove another parishioner to dialysis for over 19 years.)

We support Habitat for Humanity, and receive eight monthly offerings for special projects within the ELCA and UCC. Before



our annual rummage sale, we send area agencies vouchers for their clients so they might shop free of charge. We collect for four area food pantries and participate in a walk to aid the hungry/homeless yearly.

We support a medical mission to Jamaica. Our youth do highway clean up.

And I'm probably forgetting something somewhere, because many of our members develop a passion for a particular way of helping others, organize a team, and go out and do it, without thinking to mention it to me or the congregation.

In short, while we might never be written up as the church that has one big project we all support, I've discovered we have many small projects, which add up to good things in our local area, our state, and our world.

I hope that when you look at what your congregation is doing, you'll be just as pleasantly surprised by how much your church does, too.

### **Caring for Our World**

On Huff's Harvest Home Sunday, when people bring in produce from their gardens to share with those in need, we asked the attendees what they were doing to help conserve the resources God has given to us. Here is a summary of their answers:

We have been—

Turning off the computer at night

Drinking water from a glass or Nalgene bottle instead of plastic

Taking shorter showers

Putting waste in a compost pile instead of in the garbage

Turning off the water when brushing our teeth

Car pooling

Leaving the air conditioner off

Eating lots of fresh food instead of packaged food

Teaching others how blessed we are to hold our earth in faith

Using dehumidifier water to water our plants

Doing all our errands on one day of the week to conserve gasoline

Recycling more items

Using the dryer less/hanging our laundry outside

Driving less

Turning off lights when not in the room

Using regular dinnerware instead of paper or plastic that gets thrown away

Planted a garden

Using recyclable containers instead of plastic wraps, foil, etc.

Watering plants with our kitchen water

Using our oven for more than one food at a time



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By the Rev. Barry Mitchell, Emmanuel, Emanuelsville

Our congregation was hosting an outdoor festival on Saturday, September 6, to raise money to build a house in a Katrina-ravaged section of Mississippi.

Planned by the Northern Lehigh Valley Mission District, *Benefit for the Bayou 2* was an outgrowth of a similar event held two years ago, where we filled a truck with supplies and raised money for hurricane relief.

The festival was to be held from noon until 8 p.m. Bands were scheduled and food was ordered.

Then we began to notice the weather reports. Rain was forecast – lots of rain.

Right on schedule, in the most wonderfully ironic way, the remains of Hurricane Hanna showed up from noon until 8 p.m.

Armed with a small city of tents and tarps, we donned our raingear and welcomed all of the volunteers and guests who were willing to brave the storm. The food was wonderful and plentiful. There were games for children and a huge tent for the entertainment. And we also had our pavilion and school house for added shelter.

More than 200 people came out in the rain to support the cause. We were delighted by a visit from our bishop, Samuel Zeiser, and his wife, Linda. We were overwhelmed by the core of volunteers from churches from the Northern Lehigh Valley who came prepared with tents and supplies and even generators to power their part of the food stands.



Dozens of volunteers from Emmanuel's did their parts, serving food, hosting children at the Kid's place and putting up all of the tents and tarps we could muster and working to keep them in place once the winds came. We got soaked, but our spirits didn't fail.

The entertainers played to modest crowds, but gave their all. The guys from SWiM, who played the last of the concerts, also took care of all of the sound and lighting, putting in many, many hours of hard work.

The results aren't complete, but we managed to raise a fair amount toward the cause, with some promising to add to the total in the near future. Many who came out to help had been to Mississippi, and look forward to going back to help again.

So, thanks to all who attended and to all who helped. Thanks especially to primary coordinator Stephanie Druckenmiller, a member of Emmanuel's, and Dean Mary Gade and a committee from the mission district.

Whatever the weather, God was gracious in moving so many to help and to join in the fun and the rain. And somehow, it seemed appropriate to weather a little bit of a hurricane while reaching out to some of the thousands who are still hurting following their experience with the full force of Hurricane Katrina.



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By Ruth Doty, Lutheran Congregational Services

When is a quilt more than a quilt?

When it is made with love and sent to children and families affected by disaster.

Even though Lutheran Congregational Services made few pleas for them this year, handmade quilts for Camp Noah and Lutheran World Relief (LWR) continued to pour into the agency.

This summer we shipped 270 quilts to various Camp Noah locations, including the camp our volunteers from Friedens, Oley, led in Prattville, AL. Leaders there reported how touched the children were that someone would make a quilt for each of them. They reached for their special quilt not only during story time, but also when they needed a touch of comfort.

How special it was to the children to take this piece of Camp Noah home at the end of the week! One mother, whose house had been destroyed by the tornado in February, reported that it was the first blanket they had received for their new home, which meant it was special for the entire family.

In mid-July, Cindy Johnson, director of the national Camp Noah program, asked if we could send quilts for three camps they were doing in Minnesota. Somehow we wrestled 150 quilts into six boxes, which DHL whisked out to Minneapolis. Cindy called to tell us about the joy the children expressed when they found out they could each take one for their very own.

LCS continues to collect and ship quilts for Camp Noah. In fact, 50 more arrived in early September. If we hear of children who



need these quilts before next summer, we will ship them out, knowing that more will come in.

We have found that quilts bring joy to many more people than the recipients.

First, those who make the quilts enjoy seeing what beauty can come out of a bunch of scraps. One member of St. Matthew's, Bethlehem, who is over 80 years old, makes at least one quilt per week, sometimes one per day.

Next, those who see the quilts smile in amazement and thanksgiving as they not only revel in the colors and patterns, but think about the loving touches that went into making the quilts and the bodies and spirits that will be warmed. Several churches we know spread their quilts on the backs of the pews for Sunday worship before shipping them off.

Then there are those who distribute the quilts and get to see the faces of the recipients. What joy they witness!

The quilt projects with which we have been involved are not limited to Camp Noah. Last November, San Martin Lutheran Church, Allentown, asked us to help them coordinate donations for the earthquake survivors in Peru. Gathering quilts to be distributed through Lutheran World Relief was a part of that response.

This past winter, Pr. Adeliz Mendez from San Martin and our own Carol Pertuit took one van full of large quilts to the LWR warehouse in Maryland. In early October, 2008, Dennis Ritter and Pr. Mendez had to stuff every nook and cranny of San Martin's van in order to get all of the remaining quilts to the warehouse.

While LCS is not presently collecting more quilts for LWR, we know there are a number of congregations that have been supporting this vital ministry for years and will continue to do so. Quilts sent to LWR provide not only warmth for sleep, but are also used as shelter and to wrap up belongings when a family needs to move.

How can you get involved? Just start cutting, sewing, and tying! Quilts for Camp Noah should be child to adolescent size, starting at approximately 3 ½' x 4' and ranging to 6'x5'. These can be brought to LCS.

Quilts for Lutheran World Relief are 60" x 80" and must follow LWR guidelines, which can be found at [www.lwr.org/parish/quilts.asp](http://www.lwr.org/parish/quilts.asp). These should be shipped or taken to their headquarters outside Baltimore.

If your congregation is already involved in making and taking

quilts to LWR, please let us know so we can refer others to add to you who might have questions or want to pool resources for transportation.





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A multiyear relationship had gone sour, essentially putting the woman and her children on the street.

“If you had asked me a year ago if I thought I would be homeless now, I would have said, ‘No way.’ I would have thought I would be one of the people giving the help, not one of the people receiving that help,” says the mother of two.

Yet the family’s difficult journey has been made easier by the compassion offered by Family Promise of Berks County, nearly 30 interfaith host and partner congregations that provide meals and overnight respite to guest families. Many of the congregations are Lutheran.

“The kindness and compassion we received has helped make this ordeal more tolerable,” says the mother. “It does my heart good to see there really are still people out there who care about other people.”

Diakon Lutheran Social Ministries, based in Allentown, recently provided a grant of \$8,750 to support Family Promise, the third year a grant has been provided by Diakon to the organization. A third-year grant of \$5,250 also was provided to Western Berks Free Medical Clinic, associated with St. Daniel’s Lutheran Church, Robesonia.

The two Berks-region grants were among seven provided by Diakon in 2008. To promote congregational-based, community-focused social ministry efforts, Diakon annually provides small stipends to assist a range of organizations in meeting local needs.

“The idea is to assist congregations and organizations with their initial efforts in creating services, especially in a type of service or



a region where we see unmet needs or where the funding may help those in need without unnecessarily duplicating existing services,” says the Rev. John Richter, Diakon vice president for church relations, who oversees the funding process.

While Diakon provides a range of social services requiring grants and other contributions, “We are able to use some organizational resources as a healthy way for Diakon to be involved in congregational social ministry,” says Pr. Richter. “These resources, not acquired through grants or recent contributions, are funds designated to support the work of local congregations.”

More information on the other grants can be found on Diakon’s website at <http://www.diakon.org/NewsDetail.asp?ID=237>.

