

**25th Annual Appreciation Dinner
Network of Religious Communities
April 14, 2005
The Rev. Jim A. Morrison**

Dr. Bratton, honored leaders of the network, guests and most of all our honorees, I am thrilled and profoundly grateful that you have invited me to be with you tonight for this most significant celebration. Those who have addressed this awards banquet are certainly those of whom I stand in awe.

I also thank Carol Wolf for the introduction. I am indeed flattered by all she said. Since she has known me for a long time, she could have said some things which might not have been so flattering!

This is also a humbling experience for me. First, I am humbled because those luminaries who have addressed this banquet over the past 25 years are certainly those who inspire awe.

Second, and more important, when we are in the company of such as our honorees, we cannot help but be reverential. You, who are being honored, follow a great tradition and your nomination comes with highest regard for your contributions to the welfare of, not only the religious community, but to all citizens of Western NY and far beyond.

Let's see who was here at the first awards banquet?

I remember that night, 25 years ago, in the grand ballroom of the Stattler. I remember thinking we could not pull this off. The planning and detail seemed overwhelming. I felt more nervous than most brides and grooms. But Bob Grimm kept his cool and assured us that it would be fine. And it was! From that extraordinary first celebration we have seen 25 years of acknowledging outstanding persons of faith. Every year since has been a bravura event acknowledging in total more than 1500.

This is also special for me because it is coming home. As you have been reminded, a major part of my professional life was spent here in Western NY. I admit to being fugitive for a few years in Eastern NY. Now, living in South Carolina, where it is difficult to find any interfaith, cooperative religious endeavors—for which I long—this is truly coming home.

It was creative, accepting religious community of WNY which has propelled and sustained not only me but thousands in ministry around this area.

I hope you will understand if I pay tribute to 3 churches with which I had the privilege of being associated during my tenure in WNY. Brighton community church, Tonawanda; First Baptist Church, of East Aurora and Good Shepherd Baptist Church, south Buffalo. Each worked to be what we celebrate tonight.

Also, we must pay tribute to those who 25 years ago, gave the boost to the fledgling interfaith community so that today we see, what I believe Stan has accurately described as the best model known in the religious world—perhaps with just a tad of well deserved hyperbole. It was those dedicated visionaries who encouraged the development of a wide interfaith communion which truly represented the immerging model of collaborative achievement. We must keep that development alive.

While this is an anniversary celebration, remembering what has been, it is also a night affirming what is yet to be. Or in the words of the late General Secretary of the United Nations, Dag Hammarskjöld “For all that has been, Thanks. For all that is yet to be, Yes”.

Now after this moment of glad remembering let’s remind ourselves why we are here tonight.

We are here to honor very successful people.

Our culture is obsessed with success—success as determined by portfolio, power, assets. I do not know about other religions, but I see it even in our churches. The major concerns are bigger buildings, bigger budgets, bigger book sales. Poverty, poor health, bad education, favoritism and oppression are tolerated. Ignoring the consequences of superficial spiritual development, we look for that which gives us the most approval. Instead of confronting the damaging consequences of the exploited, church leaders are at the forefront of a wave of discrimination and harassment. We condemn any who are not in our religious camp. While condemning others, the assault on the wall between the separation of religion and state continues. And much of this in pursuit of success as characterized by approval. If you don’t make it, there is something wrong with you. And we all know what “it” is—more of everything. IT drives so much of what we do—from music to art to religion to politics.

Following this critical commentary, you may find it odd when I say we are here tonight to celebrate successful people. But we are going to put a different spin on the meaning. Our sense of success can be defined as effective actions which are holistic, emotionally rewarding and spiritually productive. Our awardees are successful in the best sense of the word.

There is a book recently published entitled, The One Thing You Need to Know to be Successful. I’ve not read the book, but hearing the title, I started thinking: What is the one thing our awardees knew so that they are successful—i.e. effective enough to be recognized.

If any one quality defines those who have been honored over the last 25 years and again tonight, it is compassion. I am suggesting that the success we are awarding is the **ACHIEVEMENT OF COMPASSIONATE LIVING**.

Illustrations of the lack of compassion abound. It is as Jim Wallis in his book says: “The truth is that hungry people are going without food stamps, poor children are going without healthcare,

the elderly are going without medicine, and school children are going without textbooks because of war, tax cuts, and a lack of both attention and compassion from our political leaders. The moral contradictions are too great to ignore. The deepening injustice of America's domestic priorities is increasingly impossible to justify. It is becoming a religious issue." (God's Politics)

And everywhere, we see the tensions among various groups—sad to say among religions each of which preaches, from their fundamental theological position, peace and acceptance. Not only are we lacking at home but world wide. Yet here tonight are these ambassadors of the peaceable Kingdom.

Anyone who cares the slightest for the plight of people whether here or in other countries cannot help but be saddened and distressed. However here among us are those who do not let the instances of destructive inattentiveness including poverty, poor health care, inadequate educational opportunities for all citizens, children abused, neglected, starving or myriad other illustrations go unchallenged. They have let us all know that we need not live with the gloominess of ineffectiveness or the anguish of failure. They have taught us that we can make a difference.

When there have been those who felt lost and lonely, when there have been those who have been forgotten or hurt, they came along with a word and deed of compassion, not cold calculation; with word and deed of caring, not condemnation. The situations and events may seem crushing, but then people like our honorees show up and we are restored.

We can fairly say of them, they lived by words chiseled into the Franklin D. Roosevelt memorial in Washington D.C. "The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much, it is whether we provided enough for those who have too little."

After Stan had invited me to be here tonight, I called the office. Sally answered. I gave her my name adding a bit of identification. Before I could finish with my autobiography, she said: "Oh, Yes Jim I know it's you." While I'm not sure how to interpret her response I have to tell you I was moved that someone would remember me. And that is just one of the things this organization and these honorees are about. You confirm in so many ways that every single individual is important and that every religious expression is to be respected. And against any institution, any government, any situation which tries to say differently, you stand as a signal that disrespect and intolerance will not be accepted.

That's what we celebrate tonight: compassion, not cold calculation; caring, not condemnation.

Compassion is often derided. By some it is characterized as feeling good instead of doing good, sentiment over reason and intention over results. These honorees, and those before them, have reversed those criticisms. Because they have done good, many have felt good! Their sentiment has reasoned consequences! The incomparable results have been because of their intentions!

Where does their compassion come from? This attitude which says others are as important as I am and therefore I will be with them? I will be of service wherever I am required.

Certainly compassion is learned.

The mission statement of this religious network talks about motivation from sacred texts and traditions of the unique faith communities.

Here are two brief quotes from sacred texts which speak to us tonight. First Quaran "Let there be a community among you who will invite others to do good, command what is proper and prevent dishonor, those will be successful." 3:104

Second, from the Bible: "Remember true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another, do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another". Zech 7:9

Success, however, goes beyond a text. Something propels us beyond text to application. Certainly you are not those who thought these words from the sacred texts are just beautiful words to ponder, but rather are directions for action. Because of your compassionate fervor, you have neither neglected the lowliest nor been reluctant to confront the mighty. You have moved the mountains of troubling impediments to put level paths in front of the travelers.

Occasionally, thinking that no one else cared or that you were making little difference, you continued.

Need I remind you that a lone amateur built the ark and that is was a great group of professionals who built the Titanic?

We grab hold of inspiration from you because your compassion has not given way to discouragement. I know that sometimes you may feel like the moose hunters who were flown into the northern Canadian woods. The plane landed on the lake, the only way to get where the hunters wanted to go. The pilot told the three hunters, all we can take back is one moose. One week later the plane returned to take them home. Sure enough each hunter had a moose. I told you only one. After long discussion, one of the party said they had been here last year, the hunters persuaded the pilot he could do it. So with moose everywhere, on the pontoons, in the cabin, on the struts they take off. Full throttle they clear the first group of trees. Sighing a mini relief, the pilot tries to raise the plane to clear the next stand. Whump! They crash. Out of the snow and debris, one hunter craws to another and shaking off the shock asks, where are we? To which the hunter replied: "About 25 yards further than last year".

Isn't it true that sometimes we're only slightly ahead and banged up but we're making progress.

So your success comes from your willingness to persevere.

As chaplain at the Hilton Head (SC) Regional Medical Center, I am often called into the emergency room.

As you may know, Hilton Head is the second largest Barrier Island on the Atlantic Coast, and was originally owned by plantation holders. It was given to families of slaves as payment for services. Now, in addition to having some of the most expensive properties in the country, it is also a vacationers' paradise. Therefore we get many visitors to the emergency room. My pager summoned me to the emergency room on a Saturday afternoon. I was briefed by the supervisor. A man, swimming in the ocean had drowned and his companion as well as the young life guard who had tried to save him needed attention.

Once in my office, extremely upset, (as you can imagine), the young lifeguard sobbed over and over, I'll never life guard again.

Finally, making sure she had some friends around her and that she had made contact with her parents in Canada (she was working in Hilton Head for the summer) we got her back to her apartment.

When I checked with her a week later, she was back on her high chair at her life guard post.

I tell you this story because it struck me that it speaks to us of those who receive awards like these tonight. We've seen enough, failed enough, but very soon we are back where we need to be.

The work must grow even more committed over the next 25 years. Dare we try to see what the faces of those who will be receiving awards 25 years hence will look like? In some ways they will be much different, in some ways very much the same. For the essence of why you are being recognized tonight will not change, but the practice may. The message will remain, but the action may be different.

And I have a word for the rest of you who did not receive any award tonight but are here as a sign of your support for all the ministries carried out by the many of this network. **You are very vital and you deserve acknowledgment.**

Walter Cronkite in his book AROUND AMERICA, the account of his sailing the coastlines of America, tells of standing above the Columbia River near Portland Oregon with a Coast Guardsman (all personnel in the Coast Guard are called Coast Guardsmen). He tells how dangerous it is to navigate the Colombia when the tide is working against the current. The dangerous passage includes rocks and sandbars. The Coast Guard has had to rescue many a boat in very dangerous situations. Here I quote Cronkite:

“Watching the scene below one bright fall day when the seas were running light and fishing boats were working the now placid shoals, I asked the watching Coast Guardsman if it is ever too rough for the rescue boats to go out. ‘It is the code of the service’ he replied. “We are told we always must go out. We aren’t told we always must get back.”

In a very real sense, you who are being given awards tonight, have the same code of service. You are compelled to go where you are needed. And that is good news for those who are recipients of your compassion.

Dr. Benjamin Mays great black educator, theologian and preacher, said this:

“It must be born in mind that the tragedy of life doesn’t lie in not reaching your goal. The tragedy lies in having no goal to reach.

It is not a calamity to die with dreams unfulfilled. But it is a calamity not to dream.

It is not a disaster to be unable to capture you ideal. But is a disaster to have no ideal to capture.

It is not a disgrace to not reach the stars. But it is a disgrace to not have stars to reach for.

Not failure, but low aim is a sin.”

We salute you and thank you for helping the rest of us to keep our aim high.