

RESEARCH PAPER

Interreligious respect manifested in Chautauqua

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This narrative case study report will focus on an intentional community (Lakeside, Ohio) that seeks to promote interreligious respect. It is posited that this interreligious respect is both directly expressed via community programming and indirectly expressed via normative community structures. This kind of community can serve as a model for other types of settings. The thesis statement for this report stresses that the Lakeside Chautauqua promotes interreligious respect through its defined community and programming. A fundamental premise is that in a diverse society such as we have in the United States, it is imperative that we have foundations for our varied religious perspectives to peacefully co-exist and, ideally, appreciate each other.

Keywords: interreligious relations, Chautauqua, Christian communities, ecumenism, diversity

Introduction

In a diverse society such as we have in the United States, it is imperative that we have a foundation for our varied religious perspectives to peacefully co-exist and, ideally, appreciate each other. This narrative case study report will focus on an intentional community that seeks to promote such interreligious respect. It will be apparent that this interreligious respect is both directly expressed via community programming and indirectly expressed via normative community structures. This kind of community can serve as a model for other types of settings.

My thesis statement purports that the Lakeside Chautauqua promotes interreligious respect via its defined community and programming. As such, this report will convey the fundamental features of this defined community and its programming as they relate to notions of interreligious respect. Altogether, this report will exemplify how such approaches can manifest themselves in other settings.

Lakeside, often referred to as “The Chautauqua on Lake Erie,” is an intentional community located on the shores of Lake Erie. It adjoins Marblehead, Ohio, which is about halfway between Toledo and Cleveland. I grew up in

Gahanna, and my family vacationed 1 week each summer on Catawba Island, about five miles to the west of Lakeside.

I was vaguely aware that there was a town called Lakeside but never knew more than that until 1996, when I was invited to go speak to their community. A friend of mine, Reverend Jim Wilson, had led a “Lutheran Week” session at Lakeside the previous summer, and he gave me a call and told me he thought I would enjoy visiting there. I sent them my resume, introduced myself, and suggested they have me come speak about cross-cultural dynamics. An invitation to speak followed.

My two-day visit was a learning experience for me. I learned a great deal about Lakeside and its rich history. It was clear to me that I had stumbled upon another one of those relatively little-known communities that had a distinct vision that bound them together and set them apart from the mainstream.

Jim was right. I was very comfortable there. I wondered why I had never heard of it before.

Research elaborations

Something that struck me from my visit there was the evidence of interreligious foundations. It was founded as a Methodist community but evolved into a Chautauqua.

Lakeside proclaims itself to be “the Chautauqua on Lake Erie,” and this has resulted in the embrace of interreligious phenomena. “Lutheran Weeks” are designated within their program year, regularly scheduled Catholic Mass services are offered, and the educational programming consistently stresses interreligious themes.

This all corresponds with actions associated with ecumenism. “Luke’s presentation of the apostolic history argues for a genuine ecumenism... it has definite implications for Christian Eucharistic sharing/ecumenism today” (1).

This focus on ecumenism resonates throughout Lakeside and should be recognized as a fundamental theme in this report. The ecumenical emphasis can be recognized throughout varied research elaborations that consistently highlight the prioritization of ecumenism. This is apparent in stated objectives and in more subtle implied meanings that are stressed in the Lakeside community.

The overall ethos of Lakeside reflects outward expressions of being a welcoming and affirming community. I have maintained linkage with Lakeside since that time and been intrigued by the evolution of the community and how interreligious themes have permeated that evolution. The relationship among Catholics, Lutherans, and Methodists is strong at Lakeside. A Catholic-Lutheran dialog produced imperatives stressing we should: (1) begin from a point of unity; (2) let ourselves be transformed; (3) commit ourselves to seeking visible unity; and (4) witness together to the mercy of God in proclamation and service to the world (2).

The first religious camp meeting occurred at (what is now) Lakeside on August 27, 1873. Roughly 100 Methodists were in attendance. “Little is known of this first camp meeting or for how many days it lasted. It is known that the first meeting took place in the evening amid a cluster of 20 canvas tents, that a number of fire stands had been erected for light, that the seats were of two-inch planks, and that a preacher’s stand had been set up” (3). The small beginning provided the foundation for a Lakeside town that, at times during the summer, has had a population of over 6,000.

Results

Lakeside, which is “related” to (but not owned by) the Methodist Church, has had a long and meaningful life, but it has taken an immense amount of effort and dedication to do so. The mission has expanded to include a blend of religion, education, culture, and recreation. Lakeside biographer James Kestle writes, “the casual observer... has no comprehension of the ‘blood, sweat, and tears’ and prayers that have gone into the building and maintenance of Lakeside... For Lakeside has existed, does exist, and will continue to exist only because of the faith of those who believe in it” (4).

This blend of religion, education, and culture consistently resonates with interreligious themes. “How to reconfigure ekklesia not as a box but as a transmuting organism with many living cells and organs... can evolve as necessary through the ages in accordance with its contextual crises, growth, challenges, and opportunities” (5).

The historical evolution of Lakeside underscores how ecumenical orientations were apparent from the beginnings of Lakeside and nurtured in varied forms during the development of Lakeside programming over the years. Of course, everything must be understood within the context of the time period it rests within, and Lakeside reflects this. Lakeside has evolved within the context of the larger American society, and Lakeside reflects the continual changes that have occurred in the United States.

Oscar Shepard authored *The Story of Lakeside* in 1923 (6). It chronicles the first 50 years of Lakeside and offers insight regarding the financial life of Lakeside as being a blend of religious and financial ventures and the program life of Lakeside as being a blend of religious and educational. Regarding financial aspects, Shepard reports “it seems fortunate that Lakeside, although primarily a religious venture, was so near the beginning forced to build upon a strictly business basis” (6). I recognized the financial challenges of Lakeside as being paralleled with similar economic challenges experienced by other groups with utopian visions.

“Success involved an unprecedented balancing of social and religious enthusiasm against the hard laws of economics... The specific problem was not only to help people to an appreciation of something better, but to instill into them a willingness to pay what it cost.”¹

The interreligious contextual themes at Lakeside exemplify such a consideration. It is one thing for members of a community to tolerate religious diversity but to have those community members subsidize such interreligious experiences offers illustration of the Lakeside frame of reference. As such, one can witness the benefits of interreligious philosophies, and this witnessing can promote other forms of interreligious outreach. There is a contagion element to it.

Part of the success of Lakeside is based on the joint ventures of their financial base and the programming forces that govern it. These complementary interests still exist today. “Lakeside was a dual organism made up of The Lakeside Company and The Lakeside Camp Meeting Association.

The Company owned the property... The Association... drew the crowds.... Fortunately, the men in control of the Company were Christians first and businessmen second.”²

Just as Lakeside blended the financial with the religious, it also blended the religious with the scholarly. “Lakeside

¹ Ibid., 25.

² Ibid., 37–38.

adopted the Chautauqua idea and molded it to suit its own needs, joining the best of the old with the best of the new, resulting in a true welding of knowledge with Hallelujah!”³ This blend of the religious with the scholarly helped keep Lakeside financially afloat as it needed numbers drawn to both objectives to bring in needed revenues. “Both indicated a movement away from the narrower forms of camp-meeting piety; the one popular; the other scholarly.”⁴

The special nature of Lakeside is a key aspect of what consistently draws people there. Kestle⁵ provides historical context for how this draw evolved. He explains that after the Civil War, there was a significant migration to the cities. Many of those who got caught up in the fast-paced life of the cities felt a need to slow down and get back to nature, but they also wanted the environment to have a degree of mental and spiritual stimulation.

Having an emphasis on interreligious themes has nurtured Lakeside efforts to embrace a larger segment of the population that might consider making Lakeside part of their vacation plans. This exemplifies a move that supports their programming appeal and their financial wellbeing.

Shepard addresses the utopian theme of Lakeside by observing, “They established these ideal communities—experiment stations in democracy—whither they might retreat for a season for refreshment and counsel.”⁶ Similarly, Durr speculates, “Lakeside might be considered a spiritual mecca... In such a relaxed atmosphere, creative gifts and perceptive vision develop”⁽⁷⁾. Consideration for post-denominational realities has been discussed at Lakeside. “The emergence of post-denominational identities... contributes to a deeper form of ecumenism in the way they integrate different traditions... they also seek to develop over time through ongoing dialog with different traditions”⁽⁸⁾.

It is within this macro-level awareness of the history of Lakeside that one can appreciate how ecumenical themes have been consistently stressed. Furthermore, one can appreciate how this ecumenical orientation will continue to play out in the future. This will occur with a sharpening of focus on the changing times that will exist. The Lakeside Heritage Society does a wonderful job of documenting this progression and can serve as a referent point for objective reporting of relevant developments.

Conclusion

One can see that the aforesaid blend of the religious and the scholarly helps offer an interpretation for how the

interreligious orientation at Lakeside came to exist. The scholarly emphasis clearly conveys interest in global cultures (to include global religions), and this has served to generate appreciation for “the other” both in study and in deed. This appreciation for interreligious themes is commensurate with the genuine, academically oriented curiosity that manifests itself across the Lakeside schedule and programming.

There are parallels with how we conceive of the concept of “university” in the larger global culture. “The potential enrichment—rather than impoverishment—that can arise from ecumenical exchange... is preconditioned on Christians’ humble openness to being continually converted to Christ”⁽⁹⁾.

It is worth noting the belief that “the true Lakesider is born, not made,” as revealed in the experience of one resident. “I was very much prejudiced against the place before I landed. I arrived on a Saturday evening in the 1880s, heard Sam Jones preach on Sunday, bought the lot I now own on Monday, built a cottage that fall, and have not missed a season since...”⁷ “Use of the notion of narrativity (story—narrative) in ecumenical dialog can help overcome the overemphasis on propositional language, to which much theology is prone”⁽¹⁰⁾.

Though my enthusiasm for Lakeside lacks the follow through conveyed in the aforementioned, I must say my first visit there in 1996 registered with me strongly enough that I have returned to visit at least once each year since. Each visit brings a little more understanding of Lakeside and the unique vision it promotes. I am intrigued by the inner peace, reflection, and interreligious appeal that I find there, as well as the zeal with which they covet their community.

Author contributions

JS was the sole author of this article.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

³ Ibid., 30.

⁴ Ibid., 33.

⁵ Kestle, *This is Lakeside*, 16.

⁶ Shepard, *The Story of Lakeside*, 44.

⁷ Shepard, *The Story of Lakeside*, 47.

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