

Love of God and Neighbour
Mayor's Prayer Breakfast, Beaumont, Alberta
David Kilgour
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Mayor Camille Berube was born and raised in this community; his service and leadership are second to no-one. Whether it's been overseeing development in Beaumont (Alberta's only bilingual community and reportedly Canada's 5th fastest growing small community with 18,000 residents), preserving our French heritage, being involved in regional, national, and international projects, maintaining our community identity, or carrying out myriad other measures to improve life here, we'd all be hard-pressed to name someone who has had more positive influence on Beaumont than Camille. Like all of you, I am sorry he will not be running for re-election as mayor...

Dalai Lama



Early this week, the Dalai Lama, the world's best-known Buddhist, criticized Buddhist attacks on Burma's Rohingya Muslim minority. His Holiness said the Buddha would have helped Muslims fleeing violence. "(He) would definitely give help to those poor Muslims. So still I feel that. So very sad." My experience with Buddhists from Edmonton and elsewhere would indicate that they would side firmly with the Dalai Lama.

Despite inhuman violence against Muslims and many other faith communities internationally, it appears that about 80 percent of those harassed or persecuted around the world for their religion today are Christians. Pew Research estimated several years ago that Christians then numbered about 2.1 billion. Approximately one-tenth of them were then being persecuted in varying degrees by governments or fellow citizens. Approximately 105,000 Christians are murdered yearly because of their faith.

Author Paul Marshall notes that Latin America has become one of the most religiously free regions. The nations of central/eastern Europe have also been largely free from such persecution, as have many in Africa and several in Asia. During the siege of Sarajevo in the '90's, for example, by self-described Christians, many Edmonton residents of Christian, other faiths, and no faith demonstrated at city hall about the treatment of Muslims in Bosnia. Later, some of the same individuals gathered to protest the treatment of Christians in Pakistan. An attack on sisters and brothers in one faith community somewhere often becomes one against all of them.

While the world continues to grapple with the issue of persecution of faith communities, democratic governments must protect our own religious minorities, and ensure that all can worship, live, and work without fear. The protection of the freedom of conscience, religion and speech distinguishes open societies from closed ones. Os Guinness, author of *The Global Public*

Square, is an eloquent voice for religious freedom, or ‘soul freedom’ as he terms it, because he includes the rights of the non-religious as well as those of faith. He sees this freedom as key to the maintenance of an open public square in which all can live with civility and harmony. Part of that liberty, of course, is the right to change one’s religion.

Let me speak now about some individuals who, with Mayor Berube, exemplify “Love of God and Neighbour”:

Jane Alexander



Jane Alexander is the Anglican Bishop of Edmonton. Interestingly, as a child she was reportedly forbidden from attending any religious classes at school by her father. It was not until she was 25 that she was baptized. After moving to Canada from the UK with her family in 1990, she worked as a professor at the University of Alberta. She was ordained as a priest in 2001 after earning her masters from Newman Theological College. She then worked in many parishes in the diocese of Edmonton and was elected bishop in 2008.

Mark Pickup

Mark and LaRee Pickup have lived in Beaumont for 30 years. As friends. I watched aggressive multiple sclerosis take him from a healthy and athletic person to electric wheelchair dependent. He was forced into medical retirement from Canada’s public service at 38 and sank for a time into a clinical depression. Later, he emerged to use it to witness to the value, sanctity, and dignity of every life, including people with profound disabilities.



Mark came to the belief that there is an underlying theme of salvation that invokes love and the natural dignity of human life. His path to this was Christ’s commandment to love one another. He believes that if we love Christ, our hearts will ache with compassion for humanity. For Mark, the *inward* expression of love towards God is a reflection and spiritual refining of His image within us.

He has spoken across North America. His blog *HumanLifeMatters.org* has more than 635,000 page-views from across this continent. He has received numerous awards, including the Monsignor Bill Irwin Award for Ethical Excellence and a Governor General’s Medal for community service.

Kim Phuc



One of the National Prayer Breakfast speakers in Ottawa was Kim Phuc, whose photograph as a young Vietnamese girl running from napalm was judged in Japan to be the most important photo of the entire 20th century. She now lives in Canada and her biography, *The Girl in the Picture*, was written by Denise Chong.

Kim Phuc spoke on reconciliation and how after she became a Christian she could forgive all who had caused her grief,

including the American who authorized bombing near her home. She has a special place in her heart for children, heading up the Kim Foundation International. It is a private charitable organization providing funds to support international organizations that provide free medical assistance to children who are victims of war and terrorism.

Romeo Dallaire

Romeo Dallaire is a Canadian hero for his work as commander of the U.N. peacekeeping mission during the 1994 Rwandan Genocide. He was one of few officials who acquitted himself well throughout the entire 3-month ordeal, although he still insists on blaming himself. His personal courage and that of his tiny band of U.N. peacekeepers, while so many other foreigners were 'turning tail', seemed anchored in the Great Commandment. Dallaire told a National Prayer Breakfast, "There must be God because I have shaken hands with the devil." He most recent book, *They Fight*



Like Soldiers, They Die Like Children, is about the plight of the estimated 250,000 child soldiers used by military and paramilitary organizations today across the world.

Sofia Yaqub and Mohammed Jawaid



Two friends of Muslim faith in southeast Edmonton wrote about their faith for this talk, but for time reasons I'll quote only Mrs. Yaqub:

We grew with the belief that a Muslim's life is to serve God and everything you do should be to please Him. In Islam, there are two kinds of obligation: to God (e.g. saying prayers 5 times a day. God may forgive you for neglecting it); to other human beings, His creations (if you wrong a person, God will not forgive unless that person does.). Our religion teaches us to respect each other and... it should never be the source of hurting others. It should bring out the best in us.

More than other thing, you can please God by being useful to God's creatures, service to humanity, by supporting social justice.

Be grateful no matter what. God knows best.

-Nothing happens without God's will

- Wealth and privileges are gifts from God and come with great responsibility (e.g. to use a portion of it to help the underprivileged).

-One has obligation towards their family, relatives, community, larger community, environment, God's other creations.

I feel the above makes sense and gives purpose to life.

Monsignor Bill Irwin

The late Monsignor Bill Irwin will be known to many of you. He was tireless in his devotion to any group or individual in need. He touched so many lives, helped so many people, that his message of love and compassion resound to people of all languages, faiths and no faith. The work that he did with Catholic Social Services, Catholic Charities, Sign of Hope Society, to name a few, is enormous. In the true spirit of Albertans, Bill has been up before dawn, and long after dusk, planting a crop that extends far beyond the horizon. It is one of love and goodwill that will continue to nourish this community.



Shahbaz Bhatti



Shahbaz Bhatti, Pakistan's Minister for Minorities, was assassinated in 2011 and was well aware of the dangers he faced. Some of his friends in Canada urged him not to return to his country about a month before his death. A few years earlier, he led a group of Christian aid workers after an earthquake struck his country. They found a house where a man was trapped. Bhatti helped him get out and then noticed slogans on the walls against Christians, such as "Kill the infidels."

Bhatti asked the man what sort of facility it was. The answer was in effect that it was a training location for Al-Qaeda. The man added, "And you came here to save my life?" "Yes," Shahbaz replied, "Christianity is all about saving lives." For Bhatti, it was also about speaking up for all of Pakistan's religious minorities until the day of his death.

"Mayu" Brizuela de Avila

"Mayu" Brizuela de Avila was the highly-respected foreign minister of El Salvador from 1999-2004. "God", she feels, "gives talents to everyone; the more one has the greater the responsibility to be a 'beacon' for Him". At every meeting, we both attended in Latin America, her contribution was profound and unique, including the signing of the Democratic Charter by Organization of American States (OAS) foreign ministers on 9/11/01 in Peru.



She was invited to speak at an OAS student forum in Edmonton. Her message to our students transmitted her faith and positive attitude on life, encouraging them to excel in their daily lives. While here, she wanted to meet the Salvadoran community and a meeting was arranged at a church. She insisted on arriving early so that she could greet each person as she or he arrived. She saw God in every one of the political refugees that had fled her war-devastated country at the time. She sees work as a path to sanctity, a path to serve her country, her region, her fellow citizens, and God.

Gao Zhisheng



Gao Zhisheng, often called "the conscience of China", received a second nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2008. He had become a Christian after attending a Beijing house church in 2005, concluding, "In addition to physical needs, (human beings have) equally important spiritual needs..." He later gained international acclaim for donating his lawyers' skills to defend evicted farmers, miners, underground Christians, dissidents, and disabled persons.

His public criticism of inhuman regime persecution of the large Falun Gong community, a traditional exercise group with a spiritual component (www.endorganpillaging.org), triggered weeks of torture. It stopped only when he agreed to "confess" in a false article saying that the Beijing party-state treated his family well and that Falun Gong had tricked him into writing a letter to the U.S. Congress. Shortly after his release for a brief period, Gao wrote a letter detailing his ordeal and authorized its release to the public, even though he had been threatened with death if he spoke publicly about his torture. His latest book, *Unwavering Convictions*, is co-published by the American Bar Association (and is featured on my website (www.david-kilgour.com)).

Living one's Faith

Having observed faith communities around the world for many years, I'm constantly struck by how essentially similar are all their answers to the question of how we can live our faiths today. Many people of all ages in many lands attempt in their daily lives to be points of light wherever they are.

Grace – God's love for all humanity– merits the final word. It is the one thing that only places of worship can provide in a world which craves it. Grace can bring transformation and hope. As Philip Yancey expressed in his book *What's So Amazing About Grace?* it is hunger for grace that brings people to any place of worship. "I rejected the church for a time because I found so little grace there," he writes. "I returned because I found grace nowhere else." In a world filled with 'ungrace,' we believers of all faiths should seek to dispense grace wherever we find ourselves.

Let me close with this: The ministry of an unknown man in the furthest reaches of the Roman Empire lasted only three years and appeared to end with his execution in 30AD.

According to John's Gospel, even his half-brother James did not believe Jesus was the son of God until he met with him face to face after his resurrection. St Paul records that post-resurrection encounter in 1 Corinthians 15:3-7. Like so many of us, James needed to discover—to encounter—the amazing grace of Jesus. Now twenty centuries later, an estimated two billion people across the world worship him. It is something for all of us to ponder.

Merci.