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Bioneers: A new vision of reality

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Eco Catholic



The experience of liturgy, I believe, should impact us in two ways.

First, good liturgy paints an alternative vision of reality. Good liturgy (and good preaching) wakes us up to the sinful condition of the status quo, presents the way the world could be and hints at pathways toward that future. It inspires us toward a different way in which our future might be created.

Second, good liturgy presents a gathering of the community of communities. Folks who have been shaping in their day-to-day reality something of that world to come gather together.

In sharing their stories, their common wisdom of what has happened and how they have experienced the sense of the sacred, my own eyes are opened. I am encouraged and inspired by the stories of others to approach the coming week with a freshness of spirit and new eyes. In so doing, I forge allies for the work ahead.

Unfortunately, even though I have presided at liturgy for almost 28 years, I have rarely experienced liturgy where that kind of energy and vision is released. As I participated in the annual Great Lakes Bioneers Detroit 7th Annual Conference, I did experience an uplift of spirit.

Bioneers was founded in 1990 by Kenny Ausubel and Nina Simons to "describe an emerging culture." As stated on the Bioneers website, the vision of Bioneers is to gather "social and scientific innovators from all walks of life and disciplines who have peered deep into the heart of living systems to understand how nature operates, and to mimic 'nature's operating instructions' to serve human ends without harming the web of life." Their satellite conference program, Beaming Bioneers, began in 2002.

Bioneers has many different year-round programs, such as a series of documentaries throughout the year in Santa Fe, N.M., and the San Francisco Bay Area that highlights the Bioneers vision, as well as a series of radio programs. What lies at the heart of Bioneers, however, is the annual conference featuring visionaries in the application of nature's operating instructions and from the wisdom of indigenous cultures.

For a number of years, the originating site in San Rafael, Calif., has featured some of the pathfinders in the interface between understanding the natural world and application of its principles to bettering human society.

Past plenary speakers have included Michael Pollan, Jane Goodall, Janine Benyus and James Hansen.

This year's plenary speakers include the fungi author Paul Stamets, Mary Evelyn Tucker of the Forum for Religion and Ecology at Yale, Philippe Cousteau Jr., champion of the ocean ecosystem and grandson of Jacques Cousteau, and many others.

Two things distinguish the Beaming Bioneers. First, the plenaries are bracketed by workshops. These workshops (or learnshops) are run by local folk who are applying and living Bioneers principles in their day-to-day vocation. Topics can range from how to recapture the commons to how to garden according to permaculture principles. Artists and music are also part of the Bioneers scene.

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Second, the Bioneers conference creates a virtual community across the North American continent through satellite downlinks. This year, there are 23 sites, from Anchorage, Alaska, to Houston. The plenaries are viewed at each site, and local workshops reflective of that site's bioregion are also presented. Opportunities for networking abound.

Great Lakes Bioneers Detroit

Two IHM sisters, Gloria Rivera and Paula Cathcart, shared a vision of engaging the urban Detroit community in conversations that address our common ecological and eco-justice challenges.

After attending the conference in California, Sr. Gloria and Sr. Paula brought Bioneers to Detroit in 2005 as the first fully urban Bioneers Conference site. This year's conference took place Oct. 14-16 at Marygrove College.

Friday was Young Bioneers Day, which included tours of local centers of sustainable activity and workshops designed for youth. Exhibitors ranged from local environmental and eco-spirituality groups to alternative bookstores and cleaning products. In the midst of a community that has known its sense of challenges, Great Lakes Bioneers Detroit shone a bright light toward the possibility of a better future and modeled collaboration that transcends generations, races and the city/suburb divide.

This year, I presented a learnshop on the green burial movement ("What A Way to Go!"). Other learnshops addressed topics such as greenmapping, permaculture, immersion education and green alternatives to traditional cleaning products. The vegetarian meals and snacks were prepared from local sources, including Avalon Bakery and locally grown produce like Grown in Detroit.

Saturday evening, participants were treated to local singer-songwriters and poets. And like good liturgy, there was a sending forth ritual Sunday afternoon.

Implications

If the faith community is to be relevant in addressing the ecological, social and fiscal challenges of our age, it will be by allowing itself to become engaged with and partner with the dreamers and the practitioners of the new heaven and the new earth.

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