

Fr. Zorn and the Beginning of Interfaith Life in Columbia

On the wall in the lobby of the Wilde Lake Interfaith Center there is a plaque in memory of George Zorn which states simply, "Teacher, Scholar, Friend." How many people seeing that wonder who he was?

Fr. Zorn was a Jesuit priest sent to Columbia by the Archdiocese of Baltimore in the mid-60's to be the "Coordinator for Archdiocesan and Ecumenical Planning," to help get the interfaith concept off the ground. He was given a moderate schedule at St. John the Evangelist Parish, but his primary assignment was to promote Interfaith Ministries in Columbia. A review of early interfaith papers finds Fr. Zorn's name prominent in almost everything. He was very active in the formation of the Columbia Religious Facilities Corporation (which built and financed the city's first two Interfaith Centers at Wilde Lake and Oakland Mills.) He was also active in many new Columbia ideas such as the Funeral Practices Task Force.



Fr. Zorn on the left, drinking coffee at a parish event

Fr. Zorn had serious health issues when he was sent to Columbia, and he died from a heart attack in 1972 at the age of 58. Writing a remembrance of Fr. Zorn for the book, *Creative Tension*, Phil Gallagher recalled that when the Wilde Lake Interfaith Center opened in 1970, Fr. Zorn was concerned about how the parishioners would accept this multi-purpose use of their worship building, and he wanted to reassure the parish that this "church" was not a strange new idea, but was indeed following in good liturgical form. He gave a series of three sermons at St. John the Evangelist Roman Catholic church on the significance of this new building to the Catholic parish, to the local interfaith community, and to the Columbia community at large.

Fr. Zorn said that the new multipurpose center "follows a very ancient, authentic and noble Christian tradition." He traced worship spaces for Christians from the borrowed "upper room" of an ordinary dwelling in Jerusalem where the Eucharist was instituted, to the homes of early Christians, to the Roman basilicas made available to Christians after the Emperor Constantine recognized Christianity, to the great gothic structures of the high Middle Ages. Over the years all of these structures had served many functions in addition to religious liturgies and were in

constant use throughout the week by the entire community. According to Fr. Zorn, “the church building itself is not holy. The holiness of the community assembled therein is what will make this place holy and sacred.” *Creative Tension*, pp. 160-161.

How did the early parishioners accept this idea of worshipping in such a non-traditional manner? Phil Gallagher said that for many Catholics moving into Columbia, the new Vatican II image of the church as the People of God was very appealing and James Rouse’s image of the Next America tied into that idea. But of course, this enthusiasm for change was not unanimous. Gallagher said that within the Catholic community-- and in all the other congregations involved in the interfaith movement—there were also some who were actively opposed to the idea of shared facilities, while others were indifferent to the concept as long as traditional liturgies would be available to them at the appropriate times. *Creative Tension*, p. 161

A poll of present-day parishioners would probably evoke the same feelings about the interfaith centers: whole hearted acceptance; total dislike; or complete indifference as long as one’s liturgical needs are being met.