



The Polis  
Center

*We bring things  
into perspective.*

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## COLLEAGUES:

*Last month the Supreme Court ruled that student-led prayer at a Texas high school football game represented an unconstitutional establishment of religion. Is there any place left in the schools for religion?*

*When I was serving as a university chaplain, an English department colleague told me, "If the chaplain was doing a better job, I wouldn't have to work so hard."*

*He wasn't weary of offering crisis counseling to students, or of preaching honesty at exam time. Instead, he bemoaned the fact that only a minority*

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# CLERGY NOTES

## CLERGY IN THE CLASSROOM

Separation of church and state. The phrase is common, but what does it mean?

When Indiana's first public schools were founded in the mid-19th century, one of their primary functions was "character education." Generally, that meant imparting religious instruction from a Protestant point of view. State sponsorship of a religious tradition is now strictly taboo, but clergy can still play a legitimate role in public education.

Stan Banker is pastor of First Friends Meeting in Indianapolis. For Banker, knowing the history of the Quaker tradition adds meaning to his sense of religious and national identity. As he points out, Quaker history and American history are closely intertwined; to understand colonial, revolutionary, and antebellum America, it's essential to know something about the Quakers.

"It's no strange fact that our nation was born in the Quaker city of Philadelphia," Banker says. "Much of what our country is today was influenced by its religious traditions. You can't divorce who we are as a people from religion. I believe clergy have something to contribute to the educational process in telling that story."

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## CLERGY IN THE CLASSROOM

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Banker sees in the U.S. Constitution the influence of two Quaker motifs: religious tolerance and human equality. Quakers were deeply involved in both the 19th century anti-slavery movement and the Underground Railroad.

Occasionally, at the request of teachers, Banker talks to history classes in both public and private schools about these subjects. His goal in these talks is not to convert the students to his religion. Rather, he wants to tell them how one religious tradition helped shape the national story.

Some educators or officials might be leery of this sort of talk, but the consensus seems to be that it falls well within the bounds of what is permissible. Banker does not use these opportunities to proselytize, and his talks have a valid educational purpose. In general, clergy are welcome in the schools so long as they follow these guidelines.

"It wouldn't be a problem so long as there is no attempt at evangelization," says Tom Smith, principal of Speedway High School. "We're always welcoming of people who can come in and make the educational experience a better one."

There is a wide range of topics on which clergy could speak. A Baptist minister could talk about how the principle of the separation of church and state found its way into the Constitution, in part because of the political alliance between Baptists and Thomas Jefferson. A Methodist could talk about the importance of circuit riding preachers in frontier life.

Some clergy would be qualified to talk about the apocalyptic strain in American culture. Images and allusions from the prophetic books of the Bible—particularly the book of Revelation—are pervasive on television and in books and movies. Yet many high school history and English teachers have little familiarity with the roots of this theme.

A priest might talk about the role of the Catholic Workers movement in the political

reforms of the early 20th century. A rabbi could speak about the origins of monotheism. The options are not limited to history and literature classes. Religion has influenced art, music, law, science, and society.

Larry Hamm, pastor of Speedway Baptist Church, has given talks to high school health classes about the markers of healthy and unhealthy relationships. Because clergy spend much of their time counseling people, they are a logical choice to give such lectures, assuming they have training and credentials. Hamm has a doctorate in theology with an emphasis on pastoral care.

Because the definition of church-state separation is vague and always evolving, school districts may take very different approaches to conforming with the law. In Indianapolis, particularly in the city's suburban districts, schools will generally permit clergy to speak in classrooms, within proper limits.

While school systems offer few formal opportunities for clergy to appear in classrooms, often a teacher who knows someone in the ministry will invite him or her to come as a guest speaker. Hamm's involvement with Speedway High School came about because of his connection to someone within the school. Still, there is no reason clergy cannot or should not take the initiative, provided they have something relevant to offer.

## AN INTERVIEW WITH KEN KNOWLES

**Ken Knowles teaches four sections of Bible Literature**, both Old and New Testament, every semester at Carmel High School. A member of the school's English faculty, Knowles has been teaching the course for 26 years. "There are so many facets to biblical literature," he says. "Archaeology, history, geography, culture—there's always something more to learn."

In this excerpt from a recent interview, Knowles talks about maintaining the barrier between church and state while teaching about the Bible in a public school.

**Clergy Notes:** How do you make it clear to students that you intend to approach the Bible in an academic manner, not from a particular faith perspective?

**Knowles:** First, I introduce the course by saying, 'Look around you. We are a diverse school—we have Muslims, Christians, Jews.' I have to make them aware of how diverse we are. Then I try to make them aware of their roots. Most of them don't even know the roots of their own faith. I don't go into much church history, but I explain where the Christian movement came from. Then I mention that there are lots of different ways to take the Bible, and that they have to go with their own denominational beliefs, or go the way their own conscience dictates.

I can't say that they have to take it literally, or that it's all figurative. I constantly remind them that we live in a nation with freedom of religion, and that they have to respect each person's right to his own interpretation as dictated by his religious beliefs.

**CN:** You choose to teach Bible Literature full time, and you've been doing it for 26 years. What keeps you interested? Why do you believe it's worthwhile?

**Knowles:** First, it gives students a greater understanding of their own religious beliefs. As one of my students said, 'It's difficult to understand Christian beliefs until you under-

stand their roots in Judaism.' Bingo. How do you understand being 'washed in the blood of the lamb,' and the symbolism of Jesus being a lamb, without understanding that the Jewish idea of sacrifice was to cleanse yourself of sins? That's just one of hundreds of examples of understanding your own concept of God in relation to other faiths.

Beyond that, there are the literary allusions. So many expressions derive from the Bible: 'the patience of Job,' 'the wisdom of Solomon.' Stephen Vincent Benet's short story, 'By the Waters of Babylon'—the title means nothing unless you know that the Jews were held captive in Babylon and couldn't get back to their homeland. Steinbeck's novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*—that's lifted directly from Revelation. *The Scarlet Letter*, *Inherit the Wind*, *The Crucible*—they mean so much more if you have a background in Bible.

**CN:** People often lament the lack of biblical knowledge in today's younger generation. As a teacher whose primary subject is the Bible, how do you respond?

**Knowles:** I have hope for this generation. They have wonderful ideas and they're curious. I tell them to never stop questioning, because when you have questions, you're going to seek the answer.

Maybe when the pioneers had their one-room schoolhouse, and there was a lot of rote memorization along with Bible instruction—maybe children knew the biblical stories better back then. But my students also know the history behind the stories—when they were written and where to place them on a timeline. That's important, because it affects the literature.

For example, apocalyptic literature was very popular 200 years before and after Jesus. Why then? Why not at other time periods? Well, it's resistance literature. Any time people are in crisis, they latch onto apocalyptic literature because it fulfills that human need for hope.

## COLLEAGUES

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of his students knew the source or meaning of references to an exodus, to Goliath, or to 30 pieces of silver.

The Supreme Court has never forbidden teaching about religion's role in history and culture. This issue of Clergy Notes offers a glimpse of the role clergy can play in teaching about religion. You may be a key resource for a teacher who wants her students to learn about scriptural allusions in literature, or how religion has shaped art and music.

Are you an authority in world religions? Clergy have been invited into the classroom to discuss religious stereotyping, territorial conflicts rooted in religion, and the meaning of religious holidays. Have you participated in historic events such as the civil rights movement? Can you discuss the role played by your particular tradition in formulating laws, or in founding public institutions?

Football games may not have a prayer, but students still can learn about religion's role on the larger playing field of American culture. Have you been a teaching partner in the schools? I'd like to hear about your experiences. Let's keep in touch.



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## RESOURCES

The First Amendment Center in Nashville, Tenn., publishes *Finding Common Ground: A First Amendment Guide to Religion and Public Education*. The report includes an excellent overview essay and a summary of U.S. Supreme Court rulings related to religion and public education. Especially helpful are chapters seven and eight: "Rationale and Guidelines for Teaching about Religion" and "Resources for Teaching about Religion in U.S. History."

To download the report, go to <http://www.freedomforum.org/religion>, click on "Publications," and scroll down to the "Reports" section.

The report is also available by mail for \$9.50. Write to: The Freedom Forum, First Amendment Center at Vanderbilt University, 1207 18th Ave. South, Nashville, TN 37212.

The U.S. Department of Education offers several excellent publications that discuss the role of religion in public schools. Its home site is [www.ed.gov](http://www.ed.gov). See especially the statement from the Secretary of Education at [www.ed.gov/Speeches/08-1995/religion.html](http://www.ed.gov/Speeches/08-1995/religion.html) and the report "Religion in the Public Schools: A Joint Statement of Current Law" at [www.ed.gov/Speeches/04-1995/prayer.html](http://www.ed.gov/Speeches/04-1995/prayer.html).

**PLEASE NOTE:** There will be no August issue of *Clergy Notes*.



### The Polis Center

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