

HUMAN RELATIONS NEWS

Quarterly Newsletter of the LOUISIANA COUNCIL ON HUMAN RELATIONS
incorporating THE BATON ROUGE COUNCIL ON HUMAN RELATIONS NEWSLETTER

JUL/AUG/SEPT 2006

SPEAKING OUT FOR A BETTER LOUISIANA SINCE 1964

Vol. 42 No. 4

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Dennis Contributes to U.L. Diversity Efforts

Over the next few months, U.L. will be working on what can be done to attract a more diverse student body. Joseph Dennis, President of the Louisiana Council on Human Relations, and respected community activist in Lafayette, is co-chair of the University's Diversity Advisory Committee. At the present time 19% of the freshmen class is African-American. The U.L. Dean of Enrollment Management, Dan Rosenfield, stated that "It's not just about encouraging more students to come to this university. It's about encouraging more students to go into higher education." Jennifer Hightower, director of UL's Office of Campus Diversity said that it has been a challenge to educate students about the opportunities available at U.L. Dennis also said that it is a long-term project to change perceptions. Older people remember some of the negative things when the campus was segregated, and the Ragin' Cajun mascot has been viewed by some as not being an inclusive symbol. The 50th anniversary of the initial desegregation of the campus was celebrated in 2004. However, it has been an on-going process to move forward.
(from *The Advertiser*, 9-30-06)

ANNIVERSARIES OF KATRINA AND RITA MARKED

August and September marked one year since the devastating hurricanes of last year. Fortunately, we have been spared any repeat this year. The resolve of citizens to return and rebuild is remarkable. However, with the massiveness of the flooding, the dislocation of population in New Orleans, and the slowness of the marshaling of resources, it is apparent that New Orleans, while not mortally wounded, (*cont. on p. 2*)

Race Relations Impaired in Lafayette

Efforts to have Willow St., a major artery in north Lafayette, changed in name to honor Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., have been at a stalemate in the City-Parish Council. There has been enough intransigence and blame to spread around to all parties involved in this situation. It has become obvious that many whites feel that Martin Luther King, Jr. means nothing to them, except someone who wasn't White. Certainly this is frustrating to African-Americans who better appreciate the symbolic value of King in the momentous struggle to have this democracy live out the true meaning of its creed of justice and equality for all, and full participation in governance by all citizens. If the seemingly non-controversial issue of renaming a street for Dr. King is such a huge hurdle, it is discouraging to consider how other thornier political issues of power and funding access and sharing may be worked out. The whole issue further degenerated (*cont., p.2*)

Anniversaries....cont. from p. 1 will be shriveled in size and weakened in influence. However, New Orleans' loss may be Baton Rouge's gain, as it now is the state's most populous city.

Many struggle in the coastal parishes, which were inundated in the storm surges of Hurricane Rita. *The Advertiser* in an editorial of 9-16-06 noted that there has been "Rita amnesia" on the part of the federal government. While a much smaller population was affected and no lives were lost directly from the storm, the property loss for many was total. Media attention and national assistance did not materialize as it had with Katrina, although the storms were only three weeks apart. Despite this, the people in affected areas of Cameron, Vermilion, Iberia, St. Mary, Terrebonne and Lafourche Parishes have been undeterred in resiliently rebuilding their homes.

RACE RELATIONS cont.

When Councilman Chris Williams expressed his frustration with the intransigence of his white colleagues by using an indelible marker to write "Martin Luther King Dr." on the Council credenza. This immature action generated a self-righteous furor with threats of prosecution for felony destruction of property. Eventually, it went to trial and damages assigned by the judge were for only \$60.

Many of the Council members will be out of office next term, due to term limitations. The whole debacle has shown a lack of productive leadership from the mayor on down. They have impeded a solution-oriented approach of finding common ground, so necessary for the Parish to take full advantage of its recent growth spurt.

MORE ON OLIVER-SIGUR RECIPIENTS

The recipients of the 2006 Oliver-Sigur Humanitarian Award of the Louisiana Council on Human Relations have been further seen in print. Artist Dennis Paul Williams was the featured artist at Galerie Lafayette during the month of September through Oct. 7th. This gallery is a focal point of the monthly Artwalk on the second Saturday of each month where all the downtown galleries are open the evening hours. Wine and cheese is offered and the crowds stroll leisurely through to view the exhibits and socialize. A portrait and article on Dennis Paul was featured in the *Accent* section of *The Daily Advertiser* on 9-8-06. It was his first exhibit since one in which he was featured at the Ogden Museum of Southern Art in New Orleans, which ended just prior to the hurricane. He is quoted as saying about his art, that "it is more of a prayer. I try to use it as an instrument to massage people's hearts. I try to get people to feed the physical and the spiritual—I believe both of them have to be fed at the same time. That's what my work is all about." As well as his renown as an artist Dennis Paul is a guitarist for his brother's band, "Nathan and the Zydeco Chas", and painted the cover art of the group's most recent CD.



DAYLIGHT SAVINGS TIME

Prof. Bill Quigley of New Orleans was the other recipient of the '06 Oliver-Sigur Award. He is a professor of Law at Loyola University and a leading advocate for human rights, peace, and justice. His article on "The Living Wage and Catholic Social Teaching" was the lead article in a recent issue of *America* magazine, published by the Jesuit order. Quigley has a book out on the subject, *Ending Poverty as We Know It: Guaranteeing a Right to a Job at a Living Wage* (Temple Univ. Press, 2003).

Since the federal government has refused to raise the minimum wage above the level of \$5.15, which went into effect 9 years ago, states and municipalities have been taking the initiative. Church and labor organizations have cooperated in these efforts and Quigley contends that it is a religious imperative based in biblical and papal teachings. Quigley contends that the recent victories of church, labor, and community groups to raise the minimum wage are providing a surge of energy and enthusiasm to nationally make a living wage a right of all Americans.

In 1937 President Franklin D. Roosevelt stated, "Our nation, so richly endowed with natural resources and with a capable and industrious population, should be able to devise ways and means of insuring to all our able-bodied working men and women a fair day's pay for a fair day's work." It seems this principle has been abandoned by current political leadership, but our voice must become loud and clear for a living wage for all workers.

Civil Rights Trilogy Concludes with *At Canaan's Edge*



THE TENT OF ABRAHAM

The above is the title of a book with the subtitle of *Stories of Hope and Peace for Jews, Christians, and Muslims* published by Beacon Press and authored in sections by Sr. Joan Chittister, O.S.B., Murshid Saadi Shakur Chisti, and Rabbi Arthur Waskow, with a forward by Karen Armstrong.

The book is a series of meditations on the biblical and koranic stories of Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Isaac and Ishmael., and how they can be appropriated to provide hope for peace among all the children of Abraham.

Near the end of the book it is noted that in 2005 through 2007 there is an unusual confluence of sacred calendars and feasts in Jewish, Muslim, and Christian calendars. Most particularly with the lunar months of Ramadan for Muslims and Tishrei for Jews. Although both these calendars are lunar, the Jewish calendar inserts an additional month to keep the festivals within the same seasons of the solar cycle.

(cont. on P. 5)

Historian Taylor Branch has concluded his massive trilogy that began in 1989 with the publication of *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954-63*. The second volume, published in 1999, was *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years 1963-65*. Now Branch has masterfully concluded this historical saga with *At Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years 1965-1968*. As the above suggests, Branch has used the symbolism of the biblical Exodus story and the character of Moses, to illuminate the pivotal role of Martin Luther King, not only in leading the Civil Rights Movement, but in influencing and shaping American history and the meaning of democracy.

One cannot come away from reading the Branch histories without greater awe and appreciation of the enormous importance of Martin Luther King in inspiring and leading a renewal of freedom and democracy that would be earth-shattering and still reverberates to this day and into the future. King himself lived in a state of siege. His every move and word were under surveillance. His life was under constant threat from white racist elements. His lieutenants in the movement constantly squabbled as to who was most favored. His white allies were constantly trying to set his direction, his black civil rights compatriots were jealous of his appeal to the masses, and tone deaf to his insistence on non-violence.

While the Branch books are bulky and long, they are page-turners, because they capture a very dramatic, exhilarating time in American history, when changes were occurring at a fast clip. The historical back-drop is peopled with a large and colorful cast of heroes, most prominently King himself, and villains of the like of Bull Connor. There are tragic figures such as Kennedy and Johnson, one cut down before he can rise to the demands of the time. The other

genuinely wishing to respond to the poor and down-trodden, but blinded by power, and uncomprehending of the contradictions of delivering both "guns and butter."

On the crest of the movement there was a national swell of sympathy for the oppressed with a desire to see justice triumph over the oppression of segregation. However, as King brought his movement for change into the slums of Chicago, the climate of "White America" began to swing into a different direction. Rather than addressing racism as a deep-rooted national problem, the national mood and attention span quickly shifted. Instead of the challenge of King for this nation to live up to the true meaning of its creed of equality and justice, White America wanted to hear soothing pieties such as those that catapulted an actor into the governorship of California in 1966, and eventually into the White House.

Branch did extensive research in the F.B.I. archives, and documents in detail the concerted effort of J. Edgar Hoover to take King down in one way or another. Hoover is revealed as a malicious bigot, and master manipulator of power; less than eager to investigate the KKK but zealously insistent that King was fronting for Communist subversives.

King found a partner in the White House in Lyndon Johnson, who understood the plight of the poor and was willing to get legislation passed for civil rights protections and anti-poverty programs. While his advisors cautioned him against upset-

ting Johnson by criticism of the Vietnam War, King could not in conscience remain silent. With prophetic clarity he condemned the technological fury unleashed on Vietnam and its people. A chasm opened between King and Johnson and Johnson's presidency imploded, as the War spun out of control, and with it the political and social fabric of the country. King predicted this but, of course, did not live to see this transpire. Even from the vantage of 40 or more years it is difficult to assess to in what ways and to what extent the Civil Rights and Peace Movements ushered in long-lasting change. Branch, however, puts this era into a high-definition multi-layered focus as never before.

In an interview in *Book Page (11/06)*, Branch speaks of how his study of King heightened his appreciation for what was the least accepted but greatest contribution of King— his commitment to nonviolence, the engine of social change in religion and politics. King's non-violent method gave new meaning to democracy for his people, long denied political participation. But King always thought in the broadest context, contending that all Americans were bound together in their experiment with self-government, and freedom was indivisible.

Latino Laborers Exploited in New Orleans

A federal lawsuit, filed by the Southern Poverty Law Center, has resulted in a major Katrina reconstruction contractor in New Orleans, the Belfor USA Group, Inc., agreeing to immediately pay more than \$200,000 in back wages to migrant Latino workers. Attorney J.J. Rosenbaum said that “the case should serve as a warning for companies that unlawfully profit from the sweat of migrant labor-especially those using multiple layers of subcontractors to avoid accountability for the exploitation of workers...Because of their unity and bravery, workers have won an important battle against ongoing wage theft and mistreatment by reconstruction contractors.”

Another suit targeted Decatur Hotels LLC, which owns a dozen luxury hotels in the Crescent City. After Katrina dispersed the New Orleans workforce, recruiters were sent to Latin American countries to urge migrants to work for low-wage, benefit-free positions. These workers had to pay upfront between \$3,500 to \$5,000 to obtain these hotel jobs as guest workers under federal permits. Once here they were trapped with less than half time hours, and many unforeseen expenses. Under the contracts they signed they were not allowed

under the law, to change jobs, and so were held in a situation of debt peonage.

President Bush has proposed legislation that would expand the guest worker program under which Decatur Hotels brought in the workers. Labor and immigrant rights organizations oppose this because of the inherently abusive nature of the program. Said Teresa Ortiz, “It’s modern-day slavery. What are my options? I go home to Bolivia, poorer than when I got here and deeper in debt. Or I break the law to find another job.”

An issue in New Orleans, one that is fueling anti-immigrant fervor in the U.S., is the idea that immigrants are taking jobs away from U.S. workers. But in reality, in many cases, U.S. businesses are actively recruiting workers in impoverished countries because they can pay lower wages and exploit captive workers who have few rights and little ability to speak up for better wages and working conditions. Along with the Southern Poverty Law Center, the New Orleans Worker Justice Coalition, and the National Immigration Law Center are working on the case. (SPLC Report Sept. 2006, p.1 &5)



Act would pardon everyone ever arrested under the state’s segregation laws. (*The Advertiser* 3/17/06)

Neighborhood Crime Focus

An editorial in *The Advertiser*, dated 9-6-06, stated what has long been advocated by the Louisiana Council on Human Relations. It noted that the Louisiana Legislative Black Caucus chair, Rep. Cedric Richmond, stated that their constituencies statewide are asking for more public involvement in the battle against crime.

Tolerance for criminal behavior is diminishing or gone. However, Richmond stated that simply getting extra tough is not the answer. Perpetrators of crime do not know or take into consideration the length of penalties before engaging in criminal activities. The “lock - ‘em-up-and-throw-away-the-key” approach has only resulted in overcrowded prisons with horrendous rates of recidivism and a huge burden on the taxpaying public. By focusing on rehabilitation programs and alternatives to incarceration, the number of repeat offenses, and prisoner maintenance costs can be reduced.

The Advertiser also suggested that expansion of community policing programs should be included in the Black Legislative Caucus initiatives. They state that community policing in Lafayette has done much already to restore lost trust and communication. Studies show that wherever community policing has been implemented, crime has decreased. *The Advertiser* commends the Black Caucus for being in a position to promote such crime-reduction tools as rehabilitation programs, alternatives to incarceration and community policing. They conclude by saying that crime diminishes when law enforcement agencies and private citizens work together.

ALABAMA PONDER'S PARDON

Alabama lawmakers may pardon hundreds, possibly thousands, of people who were arrested decades ago for violating Alabama’s segregation laws.

The idea of a mass pardon gained traction after the death of Rosa Parks. Even though the law she violated was long ago overturned, her conviction still stands in the legal record. The proposed Rosa Parks

TENT OF ABRAHAM
cont. from p.3

The Muslim calendar ignores the solar year, so that the lunar months proceed in a stately dance through the solar years. Thus Ramadan, the most holy month in the Muslim year, coincides with Tishrei only two or three years at a time in each generation. After 2007 it will be another thirty-some years before Ramadan and Tishrei coincide again.

For Christians, the feast of St. Francis and World-wide Communion Sunday, both in early October, hold significance as occasions for deeper connection to those strands of their tradition that call them to the practice of peace and reconciliation with their Jewish and Muslim sisters and brothers.

The call to all Americans to join in fasting, prayer, and the creation of multi-religious events was endorsed by the National Council of Churches, The Islamic Society of North America, Pax Christi USA, the Fellowship of Reconciliation, ALEPH:Alliance for Jewish Renewal, Ohalah, and the Jewish Committee for Isaiah's Vision. A full-page ad was placed in the *New York Times* 1-14-05, by the symposium for dialogue going under the name of "The Tent of Abraham, Hagar, and Sarah" which inaugurated this call for observation of this confluence of sacred days as opportunities for reflection and reconciliation of Jews, Christians, and Muslims. It is a powerful statement and is deserving of re-printing.

We are members of the families of Abraham-Muslims, Christians, Jews.

Our traditions teach us to have compassion, seek justice, and

pursue peace for all peoples. We bear especially deep concern for the region where Abraham grew and learned, taught and flourished. Today that region stretches from Iraq, where Abraham grew up, to Israel and Palestine, where he sojourned, and to Mecca and Egypt, where he visited.

Today our hearts are broken by the violence poured out upon the peoples of that broad region.

That violence has included terrorist attacks on and kidnappings of Americans, Israelis, Iraqis, Europeans, and others by various Palestinian and Iraqi groups and by Al Qaeda; the occupation of Palestinian lands by Israel and of Iraq by the United States; and the torture of prisoners by several different police forces, military forces, and governments in the region.

From our heartbreak at these destructive actions, we intend to open our hearts more fully to each other and to the sufferings of all peoples.

In the name of the One God Whom we all serve and celebrate, we condemn all these forms of violence. To end the present wars and to take serious steps toward the peace that all our traditions demand of us, we call on governments and on the leaders of all religious and cultural communities to act.

We urge the U.S. government to set a firm and speedy date for completing the safe return home from Iraq of all American soldiers and civilians under military contract. We urge the UN to work directly with Iraqi political groupings to transfer power in Iraq to an elected government.

We urge the UN, the U.S., the European Union, and Russia to convene a comprehensive peace conference through which the governments of Israel, the Palestinian Authority, Iran, and all Arab states conclude a full diplomatic, economic, and cultural peace with Israel and Palestine, defined approximately on the 1967 boundaries, with small mutual adjustments.

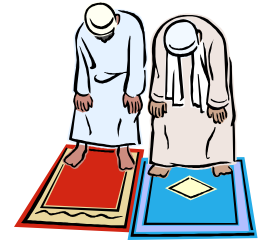
We urge the international community to work out lawful and effective means to deal with the dangers of international terrorism, the spread of nuclear and similar weapons, and conflicts over the control of oil and water.

We ourselves will act to create transnational and interfaith networks of Jews, Christians, and Muslim who will covenant together —to insist that governments take step, —to undertake whatever non-violent actions are necessary to prevent more violence and achieve a just peace throughout the region, —and to grow grassroots relationships that bind together those who have been enemies into a Compassionate Coalition.

According to tradition, Abraham kept his tent open in all four directions, the more easily to share his food and water with travelers from anywhere. In this spirit, we welcome all those who thirst and hunger for justice, peace, and dignity to join in affirming this statement.

Death Penalty

DL.C.H.R. has long opposed the death penalty. A recipient of our Oliver-Sigur Award in 2002 and a speaker at our 2001 Annual Meeting who has addressed this topic in his life and work has been Prof. Burk Foster of the Dept. of Criminal Justice at U.L. at Lafayette. Prof. Foster is no longer with us. He retired from U.L. and was spirited away to a leading state university in Michigan at a much higher salary. However, we remind our readers that he is the author of



one of the seminal current books on this issue, entitled *Death Watch: A Death Penalty Anthology*. Published by Prentice-Hall, Upper Saddle River, N.J., the co-author is Lane Nelson, a former death row inmate. Since the death penalty is most prevalent in southern states, the chapters make reference largely to what is going on here in the South, and Louisiana in particular.

Assistant Editor Dr. Paul Burns has read the book and strongly recommends it. If anyone wishes to borrow it from him to read he may be contacted at: pyburns@lycos.com



BATON ROUGE HUMAN RELATIONS NEWS

Vol. 41 Newsletter of the Baton Rouge Council for Human Relations

No. 4

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BRCHR BOARD MEETS

The August meeting of the Baton Rouge Council Board of Directors was a productive one in preparing to move the work of the Council on into the next year. All the committees were updated for this. Possible topics for forums were discussed. President Marjorie Green was asked to write a letter to *The Advocate* calling for public support for Capital Area Transit's tax funding proposal in the September 30th election. Plans were made for determining whether the Board will be able to support some projects at Istrouma Senior High School during the current academic year. Several years ago this school was "adopted" by the Council. There was a discussion about participating in the nation-wide grassroots reading program, One Book/One Community, through the Baton Rouge Area Chamber. Congratulations postcards were sent to those persons being honored as Volunteers in Public Schools with 25 years of public service.



ONE BOOK/ONE COMMUNITY

The Baton Rouge Council has received an invitation to participate in a national community-wide reading program. People from all walks of life, from age 13 and up, are encouraged to read and then discuss important issues raised by a single book. Discussion groups meet at libraries, coffee shops, businesses, churches, schools, clubs, and homes, over a concentrated period of time. Discussion leaders are trained to lead in talking about the key themes of the book, which will be selected for its wide appeal and social relevance. The concept began in Seattle in 1998. In the nine parishes in the Baton Rouge metropolitan area, the Baton Rouge Area Chamber and the E.B.R. Parish Library are co-sponsoring the project, which aims to strengthen community ties. The project is scheduled to begin in January 2007. More information is available from Mary Stein of the Library, at 225-231-3700.

PUBLIC TRANSIT IN B.R.

Baton Rouge suffers from inadequate public transportation. There was a meeting on July 27th of citizens interested in seeing improvements made. Dwight Brashear, Director of the Capitol Area Transit System, was the main speaker. Since his recent hiring, he has introduced an number of positive changes in the system.

Ms. Cynthia Manson, BRCHR

Public Transit, cont. from p. 5 Board of Directors member, represented the Council at the meeting. The meeting was sponsored by the Baton Rouge group of the Sierra Club, the Louisiana Wildlife Federation, and the League of Women Voters. The Baton Rouge Council has over the past 30 years, worked on and off to do something about the bus system, but the problems have been ongoing. Initially our concern was to end racially discriminatory practices. For the past 15 years our concern has been for the system to be more responsive to the needs of the low-income people who rely on public transportation. The greatest hurdle has always been the reluctance of wealthy and moderate income Baton Rougeans, who rarely, if ever, patronize public transit, to take an interest in its importance for those of lower-income. Consequently, there is little political will to provide the subsidies needed to improve the system.

VIRTLE JONES, R.I.P.

The name of Virtle Jones is well-known to all readers of this newsletter. Only last issue, it was noted that she was honored by the Boy Scouts of Wesley United Methodist Church. Ms. Virtle was a virtuous woman who served as President of the Baton Rouge Council on Human Relations in 1991-92. She had been active with and served in various official capacities with the Retired Teachers, the Delta Alumnae of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Wesley United Methodist, and other civic and

religious organizations. Miss Jones taught physics and chemistry for many years in the public school system. She was highly regarded for her serious dedication to her subject matter and her care for her pupils. We are saddened by her loss, but have been honored by her life, which was so well lived.

A.R. "GUS" WILLIAMS, R.I.P.

Mr. Gus Williams died on Sept. 17th in Baton Rouge. He was President of the B.R.C.H.R. from 1986 to 1988. He also served as Treasurer of the Louisiana Council on Human Relations, 1973-1977. In 1982 he was recipient of the B.R.C.H.R.'s Humanitarian Award. A.R. "Gus" Williams was a World War II Navy Veteran and a retired U.S. Postal Service worker. He was an active member of the First Presbyterian Church of Scotlandville, where he was a long-time choir member. The Early Risers Chapter of the Kiwanis Club was another organization he was long active with. For several years he served as a volunteer counselor at Istrouma High School, B.R.C.H.R.'s "adopted" school. Gus will be sorely missed by his surviving daughter, son, and four grandchildren. He will be missed also by his friends from B.R.H.C.R. and other community groups.

Rev. Dr. Charles T. Smith Honored

The Rev. Dr. Charles T. Smith, pastor of Shiloh Missionary Baptist Church, was honored last June at the Third Annual Mid-City Legacy Luncheon, as the third recipient of the Rev. Mary E. Moody Lifetime Achievement Award. Rev. Moody

and Mrs. Mary Frey Eaton were previous recipients of this award. All three of these honorees are members of the B.R.C.H.R. Dr. Smith has not only developed a large, well-educated, and strong congregation, he has helped bring improvements to the mid-city community. Under his leadership, his socially-conscious congregation has established a scholarship program, which awards \$50,000 yearly; a federal credit union, a program for indigents providing funds for rent, food, utilities, and medicine; a drug-abuse prevention program; an early childhood learning center; and a 180-unit apartment complex for low- and moderate-income families. The list could go on. Congratulations, and thank you, Dr. Smith! You have been a shining example of how churches can pull together for the betterment of the entire community.

Documentary on the 1960 Baton Rouge Sit-ins

An hour-long documentary film on the 1960 sit-ins by Southern University students, protesting the racial segregation and exclusion in public accommodations at Sitman's Drugstore, Kress Department Store, and the Greyhound Bus Station, will be premiered on Friday, Nov. 10th, 7:30 p.m. at the Manship Theatre in the Shaw Center for the Arts, just a few blocks from where these historic events occurred. The screening is free and open to the public but tickets are required. The Benefit Reception, which includes admission to the screening, is \$100. Call 225-771-5815 or 771-2552 for an invitation. The documentarian of Southern University Law Center, Rachel Emmanuel, wrote and produced the film.

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BLUEPRINT for Social Justice

founded 1948 by Louis
Twomey, S.J.

Published monthly Sept. to May by
the Twomey Center for

Peace and Justice

Loyola University

Editor: Bill Quigley

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7214 St. Charles Ave.

New Orleans, LA 70118

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print and electronic editions

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tions gratefully accepted

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