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The Unfinished Sermon: A Tribute to Rev. John Vannorsdall

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The Unfinished Sermon: A Tribute to Rev. John Vannorsdall

Description

This volume is collected tribute to Reverend John Vannorsdall, who served as chaplain for Gettysburg College, 1962-1976. It includes excerpts of Vannorsdall's writings and interviews, as well as reflections from students, colleagues, and family.

Keywords

Gettysburg College, John Vannorsdall, College Chaplains, Interviews

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THE UNFINISHED SERMON

A Tribute to Rev. John Vannorsdall

Edited by Devin McKinney

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On the cover: John Vannorsdall, December 14, 1970.

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As is so often true, this sermon is unfinished,
because it can only be finished outside the chapel walls.

John Vannorsdall, 1966

Preface



Just after JV's final service at Christ Chapel, May 16, 1976.

On September 8, 1962, Rev. John W. Vannorsdall attended his first faculty meeting, and delivered his first opening prayer, as Chaplain of Gettysburg College. For the next order of business, College President C. Arnold Hanson acknowledged the death, earlier that summer, of Henry W. A. Hanson, who had served as president from 1923 to 1952.

That Vannorsdall's "debut" and the institutional recognition of the elder Hanson's passing occurred simultaneously seems poetically appropriate, as random historical confluences sometimes do. Henry Hanson, a florid Lutheran preacher of the classic stripe, and a man who had never welcomed integration, represented the College's past—a past it would need to shed, however slowly, awkwardly, and partially, in the coming years. Vannorsdall, on the other hand, incarnated the future, a new era whose demands for peace, equality, and liberation would manifest on the campus in him and through him.

Soon after arriving at Gettysburg, “JV” (as he was affectionately nicknamed) transformed a moribund Chaplain’s Office into a hub of activity. Welcoming the passions and purposes of all students, he oversaw, among other programs, the Chapel Council, students’ direct voice in campus worship; the Knoxville Exchange, a student swap with the predominantly Black Knoxville College; Peace Week, a program of activities focused on the Vietnam War; the Love, Sex and Marriage Seminar, a candid discussion of adult relationships; Communities of Risk (COR), an overnight rap session for Christian students; and recreational and tutorial programs for children of the Gettysburg community. He fought prejudice and extolled diversity in a time and place where it could be risky to do so. Much of the social-justice work that is integral to College life today (e.g., the Center for Public Service) carries on his legacy.

In his career of nearly 50 years, Vannorsdall held many offices, including those of chaplain at Yale University (1976–1985) and president at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia (1986–1990). But the present volume—drawn from JV’s writings and sermons, contemporary news reports, oral histories, and written remembrances—focuses on just 14 of those years, and on just one of those offices. The years 1962 to 1976 encompassed one of the most convulsive and challenging eras in American history; and as they pushed Vannorsdall to become the pastor he became, so he pushed his ministry, and his campus, to be what they needed to be.

These contents, therefore, reflect the times as much as they do the man. They reflect the early Sixties, with their optimism, their excitement (and trepidation) about what lay ahead, and their faith that lasting progress would be made. They reflect the later Sixties, with passions intensified by war, assassination, and the failure, not of the Civil Rights Movement, but of America itself to meet that movement’s moral and ethical demand. And they reflect the early 1970s in an increased concern for personal, interpersonal, and environmental issues—along with a melancholy awareness of all that hadn’t gone as John Vannorsdall had wished, and as he had worked so hard, in his corner of the world, to achieve.

The times helped make the man. The man, in turn, sought to make his labors matter in the context of his time. A chronicle of John Vannorsdall’s work at Gettysburg College contains the arc of an era. This volume is a testament to both.

— *Devin McKinney*