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Picture the Homeless Members Address Alumni at Union Theological Seminary

 In a recent Friday, Picture the Homeless leaders Jean Rice, Owen Rogers, and William Burnett joined the Rev. Dr. Hal Tausig to address a gathering of alumni of Union Theological Seminary during the seminary's annual Union Days. Under the title, "Do This in Memory of Me," they spoke about the work that Picture the Homeless, Union's Poverty Initiative, and faith leaders had accomplished together to ensure that homeless people have access to Potter's Field in order to remember the indigent or unknown people who are laid to rest there.



Recounting the history of Picture the Homeless' Potter's Field Campaign, Owen Rogers noted that it grew out of the loss of their co-founder, Lewis Haggins, in December 2003. Under the leadership of the organization's Civil Rights Committee, members had made attempts prior to Haggins' passing to gain access to this City-owned cemetery on Hart Island, in Long Island Sound in order to commemorate the countless homeless people buried there. But Haggins' passing and internment in Potter's Field brought home, in a very personal way, how important it is for the poor to have closure in their relationships and to know that they, themselves, will be reposed in dignity.



The Potter's Field Campaign goals fell into three major areas of concern: 1) Access for the homeless to Hart Island so they can mourn the loss of their close friends who pass from their community; 2) Use of technology to ID people more quickly so family and friends can be notified of their passing in a more timely fashion; and 3) Engagement of faith communities to pursue alternative burial sites to Potter's Field.

So far, the campaign has gained the right to hold interfaith memorial services on Hart Island six times a year and has moved a significant number of New

York City's faith leaders to create the Interfaith Friends of Potter's Field. Another great victory was that on September 30, 2005, several members of Picture the Homeless, Lewis Haggins' family and four faith leaders were allowed into Potter's Field to celebrate a memorial for Haggins – the first time ever that the homeless gained access explicitly for such a memorial.

The Rev. Dr. Hal Tausig, New Testament scholar at Union Theological Seminary, spoke of how the Potter's Field Campaign caused him to reflect again on the meaning of Jesus Christ's Last Supper. Tausig said that there was already ample evidence of parallels between the Last Supper and common movements among the poor in Greco-Roman society of that time who worked to ensure that members of their movements would be buried with dignity and remembered. But Tausig explained that he couldn't put the pieces together and truly understand the significance of those parallels until Picture the Homeless invited members of Union's Poverty Initiative and other faith leaders to join them in their Potter's Field Campaign. Tausig is currently writing a book about the significance of the Last Supper in light of the new insights he gained from this campaign.

In his address to the alumni, Jean Rice asserted that the work of Picture the Homeless and their allies in the faith community on the Potter's Field Campaign was part of a greater struggle for justice for the homeless and the poor against a social backdrop of polarization, apathy, and indifference. He pointed to the ongoing necessity of learning from history so that it does not repeat itself, and he concluded by saying, "We at Picture the Homeless look forward to continuing to work with the Union community in the ongoing quest for truth, justice, and the common good."

Following up on Rice's broader theme about justice for the poor, William Burnett said that Picture the Homeless first engaged faith leaders around the Potter's Field Campaign because homeless people were asking, "Where are the pastors?" "Through this campaign," Burnett stated, "homeless New Yorkers found pastors. Now they are asking, 'Where are the prophets in the Christian community who will stand with us in denouncing unjust economic policies that allow a few to become exceedingly rich while forcing so many others to beg for housing, food, clothing, and medicine?'"



For further information about Picture the Homeless, call (646) 314-6423 or visit www.picturethehomeless.org.

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