**A Campus Engagement Story**

It began with a mistake. Several years ago we co-hosted a Veritas Forum at Ohio State at which we had invited a philosophy professor who is chair of the department at Indiana University. Only after the event did we learn that the then chair at Ohio State, “Dave”, had attended the event, and mentioned to one of our philosophy students that he wished he had known about this sooner as he would have liked to host the chair, with whom he was acquainted.

Dave left this position a year later to launch a new effort at Ohio State which he and others hope will one day become the Center for Ethics and Values. Each year, they hold a series of lectures and events throughout the academic year on a particular theme that they title Conversations on Morality, Politics, and Society.

Dave’s name kept coming up and a year ago, we decided to ask him if he would consider participating in a conversation on miracles and faith with Ian Hutchinson. To enhance the likelihood that Dave might say yes to our invitation, we asked our faculty advisor and good friend Terry Gustafson if he would invite Dave. Terry had worked with Dave on various academic committees over the years and they respected each other. We also asked Terry if he would serve as moderator for the discussion. Dave said yes, and afterward told us that, while he had appreciated the quality of previous events, and liked the videos he watched of Ian Hutchinson, it was the fact that Terry had invited him that persuaded him to trust us and participate.

On one of the coldest nights of the winter in February 2015, Dave and Ian, after a delightful dinner together, had a great and spirited conversation before a standing room only crowd of 1500 students. Dave is an atheist who quite honestly thinks material explanations still furnish the best explanations of reality. Ian argued the case for miracles quite well and both engaged with student questions.

Afterward, I invited Dave and Terry to have lunch with me to debrief the Forum. We talked about everything from mikes to pacing to question sequencing and got some very helpful feedback. We also learned a few more interesting things about Dave It turns out that while he has never been convinced of the claims of Christianity, he has deep respect for many of the Christians he has met, from philosophy students, to faculty like Terry he has worked with, to Alvin Plantinga, with whom he has rock-climbed in the southwest, and who, unrequested by Dave, wrote a letter of recommendation when he was a candidate for his position at Ohio State. We also turned to the topic of his current project with the Conversations on Morality, Politics, and Society. We learned that the theme for this year was going to be sustainability and that among the speakers was Roman Catholic Cardinal Peter Turkson, who is thought to have heavily contributed to Laudato Si, the pope’s encyclical on the environment. One of our good faculty friends, Greg Hitzhusen, a lecturer in environmental science was helping in the planning of the event. Greg teaches one of the most popular courses in his department on Religion and the Environment. As the conversation came to a close, I offered that we had so appreciated his contribution to the conversation we hosted in the Veritas Forum and that simply said we would be glad to return the favor if he felt we could contribute to one of his conversations.

We were driving home from the Midwest Faculty Conference last summer when Dave called us midway through Michigan. He wanted to know if we would be interested in helping continue the conversation he thought would be sparked by Cardinal Turkson’s upcoming visit. I wasn’t sure what this would look like but said I’d get a group of our students together to meet with him when I got home. What we landed on was that we would host a multi-faith panel conversation responding to the encyclical and Cardinal Turkson’s conversation. One of our students, an environmental engineering grad served on point in putting the event together. He recruited four grad students, a Christian in the Au Sable fellows program at Ohio State, and Jewish, Buddhist, and Atheist grad students who agreed to read the encyclical, attend the event (and meet Cardinal Turkson), and give a response to the encyclical, and their own perspective as it was informed by their faith. And we asked a philosophy faculty member, “Pete” who had moderated another COMPAS event to moderate.

We had a great conversation. Half the crowd was not a part of our group. Afterward, “Pete” told me that this was the highlight of his day, and he thought it was better than the other panel he had moderated. And he said he would like to work with us on future events.

You remember these things, so when we were looking for a moderator for this year’s Veritas Forum, held two weeks ago, we asked Pete to serve in this role, which he happily agreed to. As co-organizer Aaron Badenhop and I met with him, he discussed his own background. Both he and his wife grew up “social activist” Catholics, who loved the social action but could not believe the doctrine of the church. You can imagine that has sparked some prayer!

We received this note from him afterward:

*Aaron and Bob,*

*Just wanted to write a quick note to say thanks again for inviting me to moderate last night. There was a great energy in the room -- what a crowd! -- and I felt very well taken care of by you both. I went out with some graduate students from Philosophy afterwards and while out I met some undergrads who had attended the event. They were very appreciative of the event, saying it was such an important topic and that they learned from both speakers. One student told me he has struggled between belief and non-belief and valued the opportunity to think these things through. When I arrived the students were all talking about the presentations. I was impressed by the students' engagement with the topic, and pleased to have been a small part of an event that had clearly had such a good impact on them. Thank you for including me!*

*Bob you had mentioned debriefing at some point--I'd be happy to do that. And to both of you, I plan to touch base again to see if there is something we might do together related to our COMPAS program next year.*

The program next year focuses on issues of inequality. I and one of our students are joining Pete for lunch a week from Monday to explore how we might collaborate next year.

All this has me asking, how many other Dave’s and Peters might there be among the faculty and staff at Ohio State, and how many other conversations might this open up?