From the Director

THANKS AND CONGRATULATIONS TO
BREANNA HORN AND VICKY LIU

— John Merkle

As this academic year draws to a close, I am pleased to publicly express, on behalf of everyone associated with the Jay Phillips Center, deep gratitude to the center’s two student leadership coordinators, Brenna Horn and Vicky Liu, for their outstanding work in promoting interfaith learning, service, and friendship at CSB/SJU. This has been an immensely fruitful year for our center, and many of its successes have been the result of the dedication and creativity of these two graduating seniors.

Along with providing invaluable help to Hans Gustafson and me in promoting the Jay Phillips Center’s public events, Brenna and Vicky created and led the center’s student group, Interfaith Leaders (IFL), which met weekly for interfaith conversations and planning sessions for all sorts of interesting interfaith activities for students, and they spearheaded the CSB/SJU chapter of the national Better Together Campaign with programs such as Eat Better Together (interfaith meals) and Watch Better Together (the viewing of films followed by interfaith discussions about them).

Brenna and Vicky have been exemplary interfaith leaders, inspiring others to get involved in interfaith activities and working collaboratively with them. By generously cultivating leadership among younger IFL members, they have created a sustainable future for their own very important initiatives. They will be greatly missed by everyone associated with the Jay Phillips Center, but their legacy as CSB/SJU interfaith leaders will undoubtedly endure.

Congratulations, Brenna and Vicky, on your immensely successful college careers, and thanks again for the inspiration you’ve given to us all!

From the Editor

INTERFAITH CUES AND ENCOURAGEMENT FROM POPE FRANCIS

— Eric Christensen

The election of Pope Francis, formerly Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio of Argentina, is good news for interfaith dialogue and learning. By all accounts, he is a humble and holy man who puts service to others, especially the poor and the marginalized, at the forefront of the Christian life and message, and he leads by example. Throughout his life, he has insisted on the importance of upholding human dignity and respect, no matter a person’s ethnicity or religious affiliation. And one important theological and pastoral commitment of his is the centrality of dialogue among religious people, both within a given tradition and among the various traditions of the world. In fact, when he was a cardinal in Argentina he co-authored a book with Rabbi Abraham Skorka called Sobre el Cielo y la Tierra, now published in English as On Heaven and Earth (Image, 2013). Furthermore, he has also affirmed that people with no religious affiliation can and must be allies in the search for goodness and truth.

Personally, the pope’s example of respect and openness toward people of other religions or no religion at all is inspiring and gives me great hope. I trust that in the coming months and years Catholics will be reinvigorated to seek to engage more deeply in interfaith dialogue and learning, just as people of other religious traditions can approach that same dialogue with a new confidence, boldness, and energy. And while it is possible and even downright essential to learn about other religions on the level of theology and philosophy—through books or films, for example, or from people in leadership positions like the pope—person-to-person interaction and friendship is necessary for mutual respect, understanding, and peace to flourish among religious believers. So, to truly make manifest the ideals expressed by people such as Pope Francis, I encourage you to take advantage of any interfaith opportunity that crosses your path, such as Jay Phillips Center events and everyday conversations with friends, colleagues, and professors.
In the early spring of 2010, midway through my first year at Saint Ben's, I was guided by these words of the great comparative mythologist Joseph Campbell: “Follow your bliss and the universe will open doors for you.” In the late spring, I accepted a position with the Jay Phillips Center for Interfaith Learning. My academic focus shifted from healthcare to a peace studies major with a concentration on interfaith cooperation. This spring marks the end of my four years at Saint Ben's and Saint John's, three years at the Jay Phillips Center, and an amazing year with our team of Interfaith Leaders (IFL).

I’m grateful for this opportunity to reflect on my experience and share my appreciation of the Jay Phillips Center, with particular thanks to Professor John Merkle, Eric Christensen, Hans Gustafson, Carol Johannes, Vicky Liu, and the IFL members: Biruk Demissie, Angela Dols, Nick Hamel, Jinxn Han, Joe Nelson, Lukas Ramsey, Axel Wikstrom, Alul Yesak, and Biruk Zekewos. I have enjoyed being employed by the center in various capacities: as its very first student worker, then as student leadership coordinator, and currently also as capacity-building intern. Throughout it all, I have been stimulated intellectually and have developed memorable and enduring relationships, and my spiritual journey has been enhanced.

My understanding of interfaith dialogue, interfaith cooperation, religious pluralism, and details of specific faith traditions has dramatically increased in my time with the JPC. Because my major is geared toward this work, I have had the opportunity to complement my coursework with hands-on experience through my work with the center. Films like Beyond Our Differences and Divided We Fall: Americans in the Aftermath and books like Diana Eck’s A New Religious America and Eboo Patel’s Acts of Faith stand out as resources that informed me and inspired me to promote religious pluralism on our campuses and when I leave. Research that I performed for the center provided scholarly resources to back my conviction that interfaith engagement can be a strong force for good, and it also provided specific information on methods for interreligious dialogue and collaborative projects. I am now aware of major interfaith actors in the country and in our own state. Through Louis Newman’s lecture on teshuvah (Hebrew for “repentance”), a reading group on Buddhist-Christian dialogue, trips to religious places of worship, and interfaith discussion circles and panels, I have taken part in true interfaith learning.

My interfaith learning has kept me accountable to my search for truth. I am an unaffiliated theist looking for affiliation. I have found meaning in and appreciation for many traditions that I have encountered and engaged. My employment has allowed me to continually look at what faith, truth, and spirituality mean in my life, and for that I am so grateful.

Describing my experience would not be complete without emphasizing how important the Interfaith Leaders are to me. I hope to maintain the ties we’ve formed beyond graduation. I have loved working with people who are as passionate about this stuff as I am, who are open to dialogue, open to growth. I know that as I leave CSB/SJU, the interfaith efforts on campus will be in good hands. I have learned much about myself and about others through the work we’ve done this year. The motto of the Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC) asserts that our campuses and beyond are “better together,” and I have been able to see that play out through the IFL.

Much has changed since my first year, but my passion for interfaith learning, friendship, and service has not. Thank you again to all who made my experience possible.
Rabbi Amy Eilberg, the first woman ordained a rabbi in Judaism’s Conservative Movement and a Jay Phillips Center rabbi-in-residence, presenting “From Enemy to Friend: Jewish Reflections on Everyday Peacemaking” at SJU on February 4, 2013.

Vicky Liu, student leadership coordinator for the Jay Phillips Center, in conversation with Rabbi Eilberg after her lecture.

Sister Simone Campbell (right), executive director of the Catholic social justice lobbying group NETWORK and leader of the famous 2012 “Nuns on the Bus” tour, presenting the “The U.S. Economy and ‘The Faithful Budget’” and Rabbi Amy Eilberg (below left) and Nahid Khan (below right) offering responses from their respective Jewish and Muslim perspectives at the Koch Lecture and Interfaith Symposium, sponsored by the CSB Koch Chair in Catholic Thought and Culture in collaboration with the Jay Phillips Center on March 6, 2013.
Avivah Zornberg, one of the world’s most renowned biblical scholars, presenting "Letters from an Unknown Woman: Joseph’s Dream" at CSB on April 17, 2013.

Avivah Zornberg in conversation with Jay Phillips Center rabbi-in-residence David Wirtschafter after her lecture, which was sponsored by the CSB Literary Arts Institute in collaboration with the Jay Phillips Center.

Maryam Yusefzadeh, David Jordan Harris, and Nirmala Rajasekar, creators of the interfaith concert “Embracing the Beloved,” which was commissioned by the Jay Phillips Center and performed at the Hindu Temple of Minnesota in Maple Grove on April 20 and at the Sabes Jewish Community Center in Minneapolis on May 1, 2013.

We invite you to join our conversations on Facebook, Google+, and Twitter. Details regarding our center and our programs can be found here: www.csbsju.edu/Jay-Phillips-Center

We bid a fond farewell for the summer to you—the students, faculty, and staff of the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John’s University—and we look forward to reuniting with you next fall, when we will resume our collaborative interfaith efforts.