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JustFaith program promotes compassion, social justice

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When Jack Jezreel graduated from Furman in 1979 and headed to divinity school at the University of Notre Dame, he did not know that he would ultimately dedicate his life to serving others. Thirty years later, Jezreel is the founder and executive director of Faithful Ministries, a social justice program based in Louisville, Ky. Now in its 20th year, Faithful offers workshops and programs that focus on preparing people of faith “to become prophets and dedicated servants of God’s compassion” by empowering them “to develop a passion and thrust for justice.”

Jezreel, who started Faithful Ministries while working at a Louisville church, returned to Furman in February for a presentation sponsored by the Lilly Center for Theological Exploration of Vocation. As an undergraduate, Jezreel, who was then Jack Jones, played on the tennis team and graduated summa cum laude, Phi Beta Kappa, with a double major in philosophy and religion. He took five courses in religious studies but was having trouble hashing them out because of the strong Protestant environment that surrounded him at the time. “He was trying to understand various religious issues and was having trouble putting them in a Taoist context,” Jezreel says. He adds that he did not become aware of the true meaning of his personal ministry until the time he was homeless in a Catholic work community. Even after he gave up all of his possessions and dedicated himself to his life of service, though, he says he still longed “to desire for recognition by others” for his good deeds.

Eventually, he realized that true compassion emerges once we stop seeking recognition for our efforts. As he told the audience at the Lilly program, “We discover who we are by giving ourselves away. We don’t do the work of compassion to get rewards. We do it so we can be changed. We are changed by putting ourselves in the presence of those who are in crisis.”

Jezreel also suggests that any authentic act of love requires a degree of sacrifice. To better understand this idea, he and his family lived for four years on a farm in Kent, Ohio, where he raised his three daughters without electricity, running water or plumbing. They lived off the land. As a result, he says, his children realize “that they can make it do well and know what it means to live simply.

During its early years Faithful essentially targeted Louisville’s Catholic parishes, but its impact grew as it reached across denominational and state lines. For his efforts, Jezreel received the Catholic Church’s 2006 Harry A. Fagian Roundtable Award for social action leadership, which he has described as the “Oliver” of social ministry. He has called the honor “a de facto award for Faithful. I haven’t done anything extraordinary. But Faithful has.”

Hearing a walkout with a borough colon cancer 40 years ago (“I’m probably healthier now at 52 than I was as a tennis player at 22”), Jezreel makes it clear that he will continue to share his message of social justice and faith-based service for as long as he can. To learn more, visit www.justfaith.org.

KATE HOFLER ’09

The author is a political scientist who earned her Ph.D. in International Relations from Dartmouth.