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JUSTFAITH PROGRAM PROMOTES COMPASSION, SOCIAL JUSTICE

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 JustFaith Ministries, a social justice program based in Louisville, Ky. Now in its 20th year, JustFaith 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 thirst for justice.”

Jezreel, who started JustFaith 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 philosophy classes with James Edwards, then in his first decade of teaching at Furman. While it is somewhat unusual for a student to have the same professor for so many classes, Jezreel says, “Jim’s teaching echoes in my life, and so much of what he spoke about became some of the touchstones of the way I have crafted my life.”

For his part, Edwards recalls the struggle Jezreel faced as a Catholic student trying to adapt to the Southern Baptist influences prevalent at Furman at the time. “He was trying to understand various religious issues but was having trouble hashing them out because of the strong Protestant environment that surrounded him,” Edwards says. “It made him a very interesting student.”

After graduating from Furman and Notre Dame, Jezreel went on to work for several relief organizations. During this time he met his wife, Maggie. Their marriage led to his name change.

“It is a cultural assumption that a woman’s identity becomes subjugated to male identity when she takes on the husband’s name in marriage,” he says. “This is one piece of the legacy of women being

somehow secondary to the status of men.”

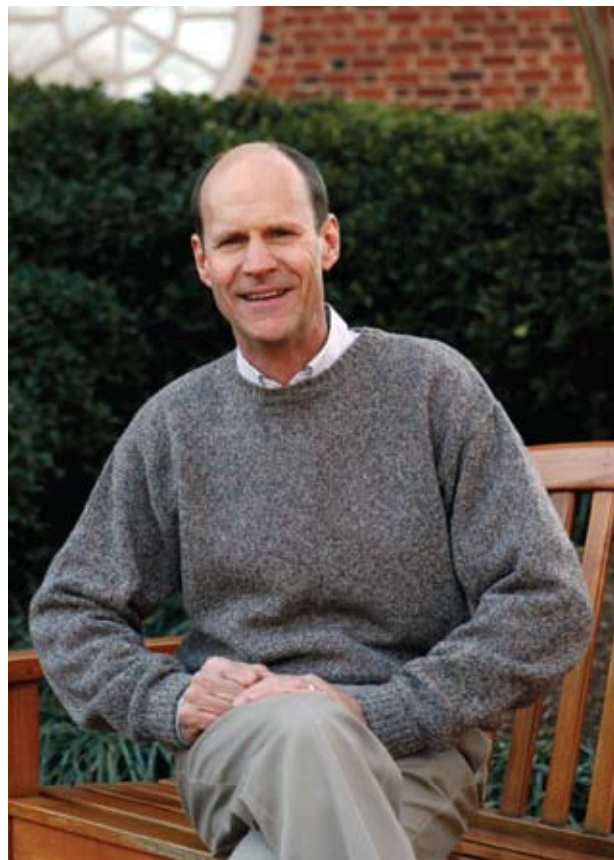
He and Maggie wanted their union to signify their future journey together. Echoing the biblical tradition of taking on a new name after being baptized, confirmed or joining a new religious community, they settled on “Jezreel,” a Hebrew word meaning “God sews.”

Jezreel says he did not become aware of the true meaning of his personal ministry until he lived among the homeless in a Catholic work community. Even after he gave up all of his possessions and dedicated himself to a life of service, though, he says he still clung to “a 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 Kentucky, 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 do with less and know what it means to live simply.

During its early years JustFaith essentially targeted Louisville’s Catholic parishes, but its impact grew as more people completed the workshops and applied the lessons they learned in assisting the poor and vulnerable. Today the ministry partners with several national and international groups, and its programs reach across denominational and state lines.



JEREMY FLEMING

For his efforts, Jezreel received the Catholic Church’s 2006 Harry A. Fagan Roundtable Award for social action leadership, which he has described as the “Oscar” of social ministry. He has called the honor “a *de facto* award for JustFaith. I haven’t done anything extraordinary. But JustFaith has.”

Having weathered a bout with colon cancer four 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 is able.

To learn more, visit www.justfaith.org.

— KATE HOFER ’09

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