Kurtz Wins Bi-National Peace Speech Contest

By Michael J. Sharp
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Like many EMU students, Junior Zachary Kurtz has a lot to say about the Christian peace position, but unlike most people's words, Kurtz's earned him $300. The words were in a speech about war tax resistance entitled "A Taxing Dilemma," which Kurtz wrote for the 2003 C. Henry Smith Peace Oratorical Contest.

"What to do about war taxes, spiritually and economically, is one of the most relevant problems in Christianity today — a problem that even most peace churches have expertly ignored," Kurtz said in his speech. "The taxes Christians pay are essential to the military."

As the winner of the EMU competition held in March of this year, Kurtz's recorded speech was submitted to be judged against the winners representing the other Mennonite and Brethren in Christ colleges in the U.S. and Canada. He was then announced the overall winner at the beginning of this month. The speeches were judged on topic, content, delivery, creativity, and originality.

Kurtz addressed the hopelessness some Christians feel in trying to go against the "huge powerful system in which we live" by not paying war taxes. While Kurtz acknowledged the difficulty, he said, "for us to say, 'Oh, forget it,' is dangerous … How can we right the hypocrisy of preaching peace while paying for war?"

The annual oratorical contest is sponsored by Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) and designed to provide students with the opportunity to compose and deliver a speech that applies Christian principles of peacemaking to contemporary social issues. The contest was established in honor of C. Henry Smith, a Bluffton College faculty member from 1914-46 known for his books on Mennonite history and peace commitments.

The agencies' displays were set up in the Campus Center from Monday to Wednesday morning. Some representatives were surprised by how few students stopped by the displays to talk to representatives this year.

"Other years, there were so many I could hardly keep up with talking to all of them," said Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) representative Goldie Kuhns. She speculated that more students may come to the displays during the spring semester when students are usually thinking more about what they want to do during the summer or after graduation.

When asked about the benefits for college students of getting involved in service and missions, MCC campus representative Elaine Zook Barge said, "It expands your worldview, and everyone needs that whether they’re in college or not. You realize that you’re just one small part of the population on earth." Other benefits may involve room and board, a stipend, help paying off college loans, and possible Cross-Cultural credit, depending on the organization and term of service.

"You learn and receive so much, and hopefully you’re able to give in the process," said Barge.

John Gill of Paxton Ministries explained what he sees as the difference between secular organizations and the kinds of Christian service ministries represented during the Mission and Service Days:

"People ask us about our incredible success rate and we give a lot of advice to other organizations. When people ask us how we do it…" He pointed to the words "Spreading Christ's love" on the display. "That’s the secret…just lovin’ on them."

Barge wants to "encourage people to take advantage of this resource that’s on campus twice a year."

"The [representatives] value this as much as the students do, just being able to come down and talk to people," said Gill.