

## Faith in public? You better believe it

By Francie Healy



Bishop George Bruce shares a moment with broadcaster Eric Friesen.

Photo by Francie Healy

It was easy, listening to Eric Friesen. Maybe it was the voice. Many people in the room would know it from years of listening to CBC Radio. Or maybe it was his easygoing demeanor, his short, strong sentences, and his bright sense of humour.

Eric Friesen was the speaker at the annual Bishop's Dinner held at Kingston's Portsmouth Olympic Harbour in May. Every year the dinner raises money for the bishop's "discretionary fund".

Mr. Friesen lives on Amherst Island with his wife, artist Susan Friesen. He has had a long and notable broadcasting career in Canada and the United States. However, he was probably most remembered by his Kingston audience as the host of *Studio Sparks*, *In Performance*, and *Onstage at Glenn Gould Studio* – all well-known CBC Radio programs. He is a member of St. George's Cathedral, Kingston and also St. Alban the Martyr on Amherst Island.

Bishop George Bruce had asked him to discuss the question: Is there a place for faith in public discourse?

Yes, said Mr. Friesen. Most definitely.

It was, perhaps, a surprising answer from a man who has been a "lifelong public broadcaster". He recalled a conversation he had had with a newspaper publisher who said a journalist must be objective and must not show a personal bias.

But that approach is dishonest, Mr. Friesen said. "Every journalist has a point of view. To pretend objectivity is nonsense. And every reader knows it."

It's better, he said, to expect subjectivity but to make sure there is a balance of points of view. "It's harder, but it's the honest way."

He hadn't always stated such an opinion. In his earlier days in radio, he remained, at least in public, neutral – not ever taking sides. But then he had the great experience of getting to know Garrison Keillor of Minnesota Public Radio (MPR). The much-loved Garrison Keillor spoke openly about God and Lutheranism “as if they were everyone’s core values”, and it only increased Mr. Keillor’s popularity. Garrison Keillor might not have been a journalist, but, with his openness about faith, said Mr. Friesen, “he was still bucking a big taboo in public broadcasting.”

Mr. Friesen broke his own taboo when he decided one year to introduce Christmas music – Christmas carols – into radio programming. The radio station (MPR) didn't like it much, but he did it anyway. Low and behold, he said, “There was a huge positive response... nobody sued...”

On CBC, he played sacred music – not exclusively, but often.

“If I was presenting the *Messiah*,” he said, “I made sure that the listener knew where the music came from. And who was the central character.”

During his last years at CBC, he became increasingly annoyed with “all the atheists who were suddenly publishing ‘down with God’ books” – for instance, Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins.

“Is there a place for faith in public discourse? Hell, yes. The atheists are having a field day. Do we just let them prevail without putting up counter arguments?”

If one is a Christian, he said, isn't the workplace the first place, after home, to bring your Christian faith? In fact, isn't it an obligation, if faith is an important part of who you are?

“If I reveal myself to be a baseball fan, a lover of good food and wine, a lover of John Le Carré novels, why wouldn't I also own up to my Christian faith?”

He admitted it's not always easy to do that, however. Sometimes there can be consequences. Sometimes you might lose friends or regard.

Eric Friesen was born a Mennonite, and some of the things he learned as a child are still with him.

Being religious, he said, doesn't necessarily make you a better person.

“This is a sad truth,” he said, “A truth which we have to put the lie to as people of faith. Not only talk the faith talk, but walk the walk, the faith walk.”

He also learned that words are important, but not as important as actions.

“Being Christian means getting involved in disaster relief. In bringing agricultural development to the Third World. In feeding the hungry.”

He pointed to the Salvation Army.

“They’ve got street cred, the Sally Ann,” he said, “because they stand on street corners in freezing weather in their uniforms, ringing bells and collecting money for soup kitchens and homeless shelters.”

But still, there are words, too, and Christians live by the word. Christians need to talk about their beliefs, about their own personal experience. They have to do their own storytelling. And they have to speak to all the major issues of our time.

If there’s no room for faith in public discourse, he said, faith will die.  
“We have to declare and show by our own lives lived, that our faith – with its core message of grace and love offered unconditionally – is still the best hope for this world.”