

Gathering lifts up six faith leaders who exemplify hand-to-the-plow activism

by Toya Richards

Martin Luther King Jr. ... Abraham Joshua Heschel ... Dorothy Day ... Fannie Lou Hamer ... Thomas Merton ... William Barber II.

They are past and present religious and social icons who each individually made and are making an impact on the world. Together, however, the group of American faith leaders is a collective example of hand-to-the-plow engagement the Church could and should learn from.

That was the message shared by practical theologian Stephen Sprinkle during the Alliance of Baptists' Regional Gathering Jan. 13 in Dallas, Texas. Held at Royal Lane Baptist Church, the daylong gathering brought together chaplains, pastors, lay leaders, students and others committed to being a progressive voice for Baptists in the world.

Under the backdrop of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution, the biblical text of Luke 9:62, and the lives of each of the six noted subjects, Sprinkle invited attendees to consider how separation of church and state and the faith imperative of action on behalf of justice are complementary.

"King's spirituality formed and informed his practices. ... Study, prayer and discovery of wonder motivated Heschel," Sprinkle shared. Dorothy Day, "found her salvation with poor people," and William Barber staunchly believes "it's not a matter of left and right, it's a matter of right and wrong."

Videos clips on each of the subjects helped illuminate their lives and ministries, and throughout the day gathering attendees were asked to break off in small groups to wrestle with questions on topics ranging from voucher-based schools to charity and justice.

All of these leaders root their moral vision in spirituality, and marinate their action in prayer, said Sprinkle, professor of practical theology and director of field education and supervised ministry at Brite Divinity School in Fort Worth, Texas.

"What then shall we do?" he queried the group. "Put your hand to the plow."

Alliance members and friends will meet as a body next at the 2018 Annual Gathering April 26-29 in Dayton, Ohio. For more information, go to www.allianceofbaptists.org.