

Faith & Action: 'This is life and death work we're doing'

[Maureen C. Gilmer](mailto:maureen.gilmer@indystar.com), maureen.gilmer@indystar.com 6:04 a.m. ET March 19, 2017

'Poverty is not an abstract idea; there are real lives at stake'



Gregory Ellison II, professor and theologian at Emory University in Atlanta, speaks to a crowd at Christian Theological Seminary. They were gathered to discuss poverty as part of the Faith & Action Project. The measuring tapes were designed to get people thinking about how they see the people who enter their orbit every day. (Photo: Carrie Hettle/Christian Theological Seminary)

The speaker began his presentation in silence — nearly three full minutes without a word after the welcoming applause died down. He paced the stage, looking from person to person in the audience of more than 400 as they shifted uneasily in their seats.

Finally, he spoke. Actually, he shouted.

"It's good to finally see you!"

As if on cue, laughter filled the lecture hall.

Author, teacher and theologian [Gregory Ellison II](#) uses this exercise to make a point: Take the time in your daily life to see those who may feel invisible, unworthy, forgotten.

"Whenever I have the opportunity to stand before a group of God's people, I look every single person in the eye and say, 'It's good to finally see you!' I have been praying for you for many months now," he told the crowd. "I know full well the pain, the heartache, the torment of being unseen. Today, we will work to see the unacknowledged who are all around us."

Ellison, who spent some of his formative years in Indianapolis "in the shadow of the MLK Center," is associate professor of pastoral care and counseling at the Candler School of Theology at Emory University in Atlanta. He was a guest speaker at [Christian Theological Seminary's](#) Faith & Action conference last week at its northwest-side campus.

The [Faith & Action Project](#) is a multiyear effort, supported in its first year by a grant from the [Mike and Sue Smith Family Fund](#), to identify collaborative approaches to address what some have called a poverty "pandemic" in Indianapolis. It will award cash prizes to encourage collaboration among faith communities, nonprofits and government agencies.

"Poverty is corroding the foundations of our city," seminary President Matthew Myer Boulton said when the project was announced, and he called on people of faith to play a "galvanizing, sustaining role."

Last spring, a [Brookings Institution nationwide study](#) singled out greater Indianapolis for growing rates of concentrated poverty. Neighborhoods with markedly higher percentages of impoverished residents have, not surprisingly, more negative outcomes — crime, physical and mental health challenges and higher school dropout rates.

"In the work we are doing to address poverty in our communities," Ellison said, "we must recognize the psychological poverty that comes from systematic oppression."

Dressed in rolled-up jeans, sneakers and a ball cap, he challenged the hundreds of nonprofit leaders and pastors at the daylong conference to "wake up their souls" and really see the people they are serving.

Humans, he said, have four fundamental psychological needs: a sense of belonging, a feeling of control, positive self-esteem and a meaningful existence. When those needs are threatened, a person feels devalued and may choose a course of self-destruction.

"This is life-and-death work we're doing," he reminded the crowd. "Poverty is not an abstract idea; there are real lives at stake when we do not create spaces where people belong. When we

do not think creatively of how we can give control to people who have resources deep within ... we are creating atmospheres where people question their meaningful existence."

Ellison, author of "Cut Dead But Still Alive: Caring for African American Young Men," read literary pieces by William James, Kipling Williams and Howard Thurman to illustrate the power of connecting with those that a community seeks to serve.

He leaned on his friend and mentor the late poet Mari Evans, sharing her words in the poem "Let Us Be That Something."

"They need something to believe in the young

That is only part of the truth

They need a map and a guide to the interior

If we have the word let us SAY IT

If we have the word let us DO IT

If we have the word let us BE IT

They need something to believe in."

Ellison may have been preaching to the choir in this room, but they were moved all the same.

Phil Ewoldsen, a retired therapist from Terre Haute, came to the conference to get new ideas in his work leading Head Start workshops. [Head Start](#) offers early education opportunities for children from low-income families.

"In working with families, we've really got to see them and listen to them if together we're going to be able to address issues," Ewoldsen said.

In closing the conference, Boulton brought it all back into focus.

"There's a beautiful idea in the Jewish tradition of [hesed](#) — all of human life ultimately comes down to hesed, to loving kindness. In the Christian tradition, Jesus boiled it all down for us. He said (to) love God with everything you've got, love your neighbor as yourself. The Quran puts it this way: If you want to be a true believer, you have to love for your brother and sister, for your neighbor, what you love for yourself.

"If we can come around one word for today, let's come around love," Boulton said.

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