

Religious Leader's Roundtable

by Henry Hancock, Rice University '13

At the Religious Leader's Roundtable with John Evans, a diverse group of community leaders, scholars, and students from Rice University thoughtfully considered the divide between religion and human reproductive genetic technologies. The discussion centered for some time on why local religious leaders tend not to focus on these issues. Evans noted that since the average size of the American congregation is around 100 congregants, religious leaders have more pressing issues to think about than human reproductive technologies, such as funding and outreach. He postulated that some of the more abstract questions behind the science of genetic engineering, such as the idea of being "co-creators" with God, are "luxury thoughts" for pastors engaged in the trials and struggles of daily ministry. One participant, Dr. James Furr, President of the Houston Graduate School of Theology, wondered if there was some way to relate these issues to more relevant theological questions about the meaning of being human.

One of the suggestions was to help religious people see the immediate relevancy of the issue, such as in encouraging pregnant women who have concerns about religious issues to meet with chaplains specifically trained to understand genetic technologies

from a religious framework. Evans said that it was important to make these issues "relevant to people, not just public policy." He also focused on how religious awareness of genetic technologies could best be created by fostering discussion and thought at the highest levels, noting that for most congregations, theology and ethics tend to trickle down from academic institutions through pastors to the layperson. Another suggestion was to establish specialist counselors at seminaries and other theological schools who could be available to talk to religious people from across their region, giving laypeople with questions an expert to whom they could go for advice. The RPLP Fellows present agreed that there was general interest about such topics among their peers, as shown by the high attendance at certain campus events, but that on the whole conversations about such issues tended to be focused less on subjects like reproductive technologies and more on controversial topics like education and public policy.

Although solutions to problems as important as the gap between religion and genetic technologies are hardly simple, the thoughtful discussion between diverse groups of attendants at The Religious Leader's Roundtable revealed the importance of continued dialogue. Progress requires that religious leaders grapple with how best to move forward.



Dr. James Furr, President of the Houston Graduate School of Theology