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Legal Eagles Ponder Unearthly Issues Over Breakfast at Church (Times Union)

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Members of the Bar of St. Peter's gather in downtown Albany parish

By JOHN CAHER
Staff writer

ALBANY — Once a year, a small clan of attorneys and jurists gather for breakfast in Albany, where they ponder the great legal issues of the day and pay homage to a higher authority.

No, not the Court of Appeals.

"I think it is appropriate for the bar and the bench to demonstrate their commitment to the highest authority," said retired attorney Richard E. Bolton, a charter member of a group that calls itself the Bar of St. Peter's.

Bolton figures it's healthy for the legal eagles to occasionally ponder more divine revelations than those found in case law.

Over the last eight years, the group has met annually at St. Peter's Episcopal Church, although only a few are active members of the State Street church. They share prayer and breakfast, and along with the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John usually hear a few words of Cardozoian wisdom from a legal luminary.

Former Chief Judge Lawrence Cooke of the Court of Appeals has spoken to the group twice and Associate Judge Joseph W. Bellacosa also filled the role of featured speaker. One year, U.S. Supreme Court hopeful Roger Miner, an entertaining and provocative pub-

lic speaker now on the Second Circuit federal bench, addressed the group, and another time Presiding Justice Leonard A. Weiss of the Appellate Division had the honor. Former Administrative Judge Edward S. Conway and State Supreme Court Justice Lawrence E. Kahn is also on that list.

Last week, it was Howard A. Levine's turn.

The former Schenectady County district attorney who, after repeated attempts, was rewarded for a lifetime of public service with an appointment two years ago to the state's highest court, spoke of hope and promise at a time when the legal system is mired in the Simpson quagmire.

"I remain optimistic that the legal profession will, as it always has in the past, rise

constructively to the present challenges," said Levine, an associate judge on the state Court of Appeals. "We are the most diverse society in the world, a rich mosaic of different races, religions and ethnic backgrounds. We have managed to live together and come together in the time of crisis."

Levine attracted much of the local legal hierarchy — Presiding Justice Anthony V. Cardona, U.S. Magistrate Judge Ralph W. Smith Jr., Albany County Family Court judges Beverly Tobin and Gerard Maney, District Attorney Sol Greenberg — with a speech that was in part historic and in part reflective.

Levine revisited the concept of equality and reminded the audience that the Jefferson-

nian ideal espoused in the Declaration of Independence was left out of the Constitution. Mentioned by Lincoln at Gettysburg, the idea that all people are created equal didn't make an appearance in the Constitution until the 14th amendment was passed in 1868.

The jurist acknowledged that the Simpson spectacle has cast a terrible aura on the judicial system, but he has said the Los Angeles trial may lead to some necessary reforms. But Levine cautioned against knee-jerk change for the sake of change.

"Beware of the quick fixes, the facile solutions to problems by Congress and our own state Legislature," Levine said.