

A MUTUAL ADMIRATION SOCIETY

Earlier this fall I had the opportunity to participate in an ordination service held at the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine in New York. It was a very impressive liturgy, complete with elaborate rituals, beautiful music and the smell of incense. There were close to one-hundred clergy who were part of the ceremony, and the whole affair was presided over by the Bishop of New York, who was all decked out in golden splendor.

It all reminded me of an old story about the young priest who had been recently assigned to the Bishop's staff at the cathedral.

One day, shortly after beginning his tenure, he came running into the Bishop's office.

"Your eminence," he said, "A woman praying in the sanctuary just told me she had a vision of our Lord and Savior in one of the side chapels. What should we do?"

"Look busy," said the Bishop, "Look busy!"

Whether they are presiding over the great rites and rituals of the church, or offering up advice to novice priests, one of the key roles of bishops through the years has been to guide and encourage the clergy and lay people in their care. That is why the main symbol of the Bishop's office is the shepherd's crook. Like a good shepherd, a bishop is to urge along the flock, encouraging them as they go about their work.

We don't have bishops in the United Church of Christ, but we do have Conference Ministers. And while they do not have the kind of power that bishops have in the Episcopalian, Methodist or Catholic churches, Conference Ministers in the UCC do share in common with them the task of providing guidance and encouragement for the clergy and congregations in their area.

I've been very fortunate over the years to have very caring Conference Ministers, including Davida Crabtree and Suzy Townsley right here in New York. Before I even started my tenure here at Saugatuck, the then Associate Conference Minister for this area, Joe Neville, took time to meet with me and answer all sorts of questions that I had. But the time I most needed the support of a Conference Minister was over twenty years ago when I went through my divorce.

I had only been in my new church in Gloversville for about four months when my ex-wife left me and our daughter Elizabeth. My support network was just getting established so I felt quite alone.

It was a dark and sad time in my life, and I was very discouraged. I seriously questioned my ability to be effective as a pastor. I had failed at my marriage, my wife had left me, I was headed for divorce and I had to tell all this to my brand new congregation. How could I do that? How could I tell those in my care that I was so flawed? And how could I continue my work? How, for instance, could I possibly offer pre-marital counseling? How could I preside over weddings? How could I call on folks to examine their lives and confess their brokenness when I was so broken myself?

So I went to Ron Kurtz, my Conference Minister, for advice and counsel.

Ron, who is now retired on Cape Cod, is a very wise soul. That day when I went to his office he got me a cup of coffee and then had me sit down in a comfortable chair. And then he listened to my story, heard out my concerns. He didn't act shocked. He didn't pile on more guilt. I'd done a pretty good job of that myself. He didn't label me a sinner. But he did remind me that though I am a pastor, I am also a human being. And we human beings, he said, we *all* make mistakes.

But he didn't leave it there. He didn't leave me to wallow in guilt and anxiety and fear. For he also reminded me to think of the gospel message, to remember that God stands ready to forgive us when we need forgiveness. He urged me to remember that God stands ready to help us learn from our mistakes, and start all over again.

I don't remember Ron's exact words, but in no uncertain terms he told me not only could I continue serving as a pastor, but also that the experience itself might give me a new sense of identification with my parishioners as they faced the problems in their lives.

Looking back, I have no doubt that at least in part, it was Ron's encouraging words which allowed me to go on. His wise counsel helped me work through the pain to an eventual place of healing and growth. And in time, I came to realize he was right. While I certainly don't recommend divorce to anyone, ultimately, the experience made me a better pastor. And to think I had been ready to give it all up!

That's often how it seems to work. We never know, when we offer words of encouragement, how or if they will make a difference. But often, very often, they do.

Our lesson from First Thessalonians includes powerful words of encouragement for a church that was most anxious and facing some real difficulty.

Paul had founded the church in Thessalonica around 50 AD. But he had only been able to stay there three weeks before he was run out of town by those who opposed his teaching. As a result the new congregation had either heard only a part of his message—or they had misunderstood it. Either way, there were real divisions developing in the church. The good work they were doing was at real risk. But the

opposition made it impossible for Paul to return in person to set things right, so he writes this letter, not only to give them further instruction in the basics of the faith, but also to encourage them to continue growing in goodness and grace.

“We always give thanks to God for all of you,” he writes, “and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering . . . your work of faith and labor of love” (I Thessalonians 1:2-3a)

High words of praise! And he continues to pour it on! In Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase we read: “Do you [Thessalonians] know that all over [the area] . . . believers look up to you? The word has gotten around. Your lives are echoing the Master’s Word We don’t even have to say anything, you’re the message!” (*The Message*, 2152)

In retrospect we know these words of encouragement did have an effect on this small, young, struggling group of Christians. We know Paul’s praise and wise counsel made a difference to this congregation—because they survived! The church in Thessalonica hung together, and continued to live out the gospel. In part, due to the fact that Paul was there to offer them encouragement and hope.

But St. Paul is long dead. And bishops and conference ministers have more churches than they can really keep up with. So what’s a congregation to do? Turn to its pastor or pastors for words of encouragement, right? Well, yes, of course. But here at Saugatuck there are just two of us—and over five hundred of you! We’ll do our best, but it still won’t be enough.

But God has provided for that reality, for God has called us *all*, clergy and laity alike, to engage in the ministry of encouragement. It is not the sole province of saints like Paul. It’s not simply the responsibility of judicatory officials like Ron or Davida. It’s not just the work of pastors like Susanna and me. In the end the ministry of encouragement belongs to the whole church. Each and every one of us is called to celebrate one another’s gifts, to be a mutual admiration society, if you will. Each and every one of us is called to applaud the efforts of the other. Each and every one of us is called to stand by our brothers and sisters, urging them on, lending a hand, reminding them of the goals we strive to achieve and the gospel that gives us hope.

Robert Neff tells of visiting a church once where he saw such ministry in action.

It was not one of the tenor soloist’s better days. Even though he was singing an arrangement of a familiar hymn, he struggled mightily with the first stanza, he was way off key.

Suddenly, though, Neff realized that all around him people were pulling out their hymnals from the racks, and as the second stanza started a few of them began to

sing, and then more and more, until the entire congregation was supporting the struggling tenor with their voices.

As the third stanza began he was able to correct his pitch, and the fourth stanza proved to be a mighty chorus topped by his beautiful voice. Finally, in the fifth stanza, the congregation grew quiet, and listened as the tenor soared. It was, by all accounts, the most exquisite solo he had ever sung.

That my friends, is what it means to encourage one another. It means to sing along when needed, but to step back when the other is on pitch. It means to resist the tendency to offer hurtful criticism (“Boy, did you hear how awful he was this morning?”) and rather, to offer help and hope. When we do that we can, and do, make beautiful music. We soar to newfound heights!

Will Willimon is one of the best known Protestant preachers in this country. He served for many years as Chaplain at Duke University. His preaching, his teaching and his writing have encouraged countless thousands.

Willimon is a Methodist and just this last year he took up a new position as Bishop of Alabama. It is a rather daunting job. He oversees some eight-hundred-twenty-nine congregations and well over six hundred pastors. Like much of mainline Christianity his new Conference has seen slippage in membership, some two thousand members a year for a couple of decades now. It is a poor conference, materially, and it has its share of incompetent pastors and stubborn lay leaders. It is a tough place to work, and a tough job to manage.

Willimon recently wrote an article reflecting on his first year in Alabama. He tells a number of stories about his work—I was especially struck by this one.

It seems that one day, at the end of eight hours filled with difficult appointments, Willimon was visited by two elderly women from Cullman, Alabama.

One of them, named Sarah, started things off by telling Willimon how Gladys’ grandson had been arrested for driving while intoxicated, and subsequently thrown into the youth prison camp. So Sarah and Gladys went to visit him there.

“We were appalled by the conditions,” said Sarah, “those young men [were] packed in like animals . . . [Did you know] only 10 percent of them can read?”

“Well,” picked up Gladys, “we began reading classes. Sarah [here] taught school before she retired.”

It seems that in time they were also able to start a Bible study, and then another, and even a third. They enlisted two others, both nurses, to help the young men tend to their health, for many of them had contracted venereal diseases. They even got two of their friends who are shut-ins to bake cookies for the

prisoners.

“Some of them,” Gladys said, [told us] those cookies were the first gift they’d ever received.”

Willimon listened, but he was tired, he didn’t have much to give. And he wanted to get home.

“[So],” he asked, “you want the conference to take responsibility for this ministry?”

“No,” said Sarah.

“You need me to come up with some money for you?”

“Don’t need any money,” she said, “If we need something we get it from our little church.”

“Then why have you come down here to tell me about this?”

“Well,” said Sarah, “we know being a bishop must be one of the most depressing jobs in the church—too many things that we are not doing that Jesus expects us to do. So Gladys thought it would be nice if we came down here to tell you to take heart. Something’s going right . . . up in Cullman.” (*The Christian Century*, 9-20-05, 31)

That’s what it means to offer encouragement! To speak the powerful truth that even in the midst of hurricanes and earthquakes, mudslides and governmental incompetence, even when wars drag on, even when the church itself seems racked with controversy, take heart, something’s going right in Cullman. Something’s going right in Gloversville and Thessalonica. And something’s going right here in Westport. Little kids are making health kits for children they’ll never meet. And adults are raising funds for flooded out folks they’ll never know, and cooking meals for the homeless. Those who mourn are being comforted, and the sick are being blessed with hand-knit shawls. A dozen men and women are spending countless hours preparing to be Stephen Ministers, and others are teaching the little ones, or singing the songs, or ringing the bells or restoring our beautiful cemetery.

Yes, something’s going right in Westport, and when you see it, whether you are a bishop or a conference minister or a pastor or a person in the pews, it is your job, your calling is to encourage those who are struggling and to applaud those who are trying to make a difference. It is your calling to shout it out loud and clear: “Take heart, world! Something’s going right! God is at work! Grace still abounds!” Sisters and brothers, something’s going right in Westport, here at Saugatuck.

Alleluia! Amen!

John H. Danner