

Executive Presbyter's Report February 2010

I have recently heard a variety of speakers say, "The church is the only army that shoots its wounded." I have searched in vain for a source of the quote and an original context. So, it is possible that it resonates with me in a way doesn't fit its original use. That said, it does resonate with me.

I was very surprised early in my ministry to discover that the church which had taught me to "do to others as you would have them do to you", often did not treat its own very well. I am not talking about recognizing that we embrace a theology of total depravity and must always help each other test our perspectives against the perspective of Christ. I am not talking about assisting one another when find ourselves, like Paul, doing not the good that we would. Rather I am talking about discovering that the church is often very quick to assume and to believe the worst about its own.

When I was in my first call, I had opportunity to be the president/treasurer for the Otterville Ministerial Alliance. This was not so much an honor as a mark of longevity. There were three churches in Otterville and in my time never more than two had resident pastors. The Ministerial Alliance sponsored two services a year, Thanksgiving and Easter sunrise. There was an offering taken from among the 100 or so who might gather for the Thanksgiving service. The money was carefully counted and the dutifully deposited in the Bank of Otterville. It was available for the Ministerial Alliance to minister to the needs of the transient and indigent within our community, whose needs were not met by the benevolent ministries of the three churches individually. There was never a balance above \$300.

In the hottest part of the summer there came a stranger into downtown Otterville, a young woman and two small children. Now in Otterville a strange car passing through raises curiosity. Three actual strangers walking in and out of the grocery, bank, Post Office and gas company caused real alarm. The woman said that they were stranded and needed help. I received calls from all the downtown merchants asking that the Ministerial Alliance help these folks. They were coming into the shops several times every day, telling a sad tale, disturbing the locals and disrupting routines. They wanted the Ministerial Alliance to get them out of town. The woman and came to the manse and Malinda and I set about finding out how the Ministerial Alliance could help. They wanted a ride home Shelbina, Missouri, three hours from Otterville. She was insistent that someone drive them there in a car. She was adamant that they not have to ride a bus. I called the Baptist minister. Calls were made around town. No one was going anywhere near Shelbina. We agreed that the Ministerial Alliance could buy a bus ticket. Now, buses do not

run through Otterville or Shelbina. The nearest bus route would be Booneville to Macon. The Baptist minister arranged for one of his deacons to take them to Booneville and we arranged for the Presbyterian minister at Brookfield to meet the bus at Macon and take them to Shelbina. It was an afternoon of phone calls, promises and the purchasing of money orders for the bus tickets. On the day arranged, the three refused to take the ride to Booneville. It was all set up for another day. Again the three refused to go. They continued to hangout downtown and generally disrupt the residents and to tell everyone who would listen that the Ministerial Alliance had refused to help them. The calls from the merchants began again. This time they were accusing, "What had the ministers done with all that money from the Thanksgiving service? Why was the community making all these contributions if the ministers weren't going to help the needy?" In the course of a week the strangers became at once a dreaded local nuisance and a reliable source of information on the two resident pastors. Although we lived in the fishbowls of the Presbyterian manse and Baptist parsonage and ministered to the needs of the community day in and day out, the town was quick to accept the stranger's assertion that we would not help.

I have continued to see this assumption of the worst about our own repeated in conversations within congregations, presbyteries and the denomination. In Heartland Presbytery, we have adopted Covenantal Values by which we have covenanted to do better by each other. "3. Respect one another as sisters and brothers in Christ. • *Let us no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another.* [Rom 14:13] 4. **Care** for one another through mutual prayer and the sharing of our needs and concerns. • *God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. . . . We love because he first loved us.* [I John 4:16b-17,19]"

As we do the work of our Lord together let us strive to assume the best about one another. Let us seek to assume good intentions and prayerful deliberations. Let us put our energy into taking Christ to the world, rather than quarrels to each other.

Charles Spencer