

CONFIRMATION – MONTHLY MEETING

Sunday, February 21, 2010

Session 6 – Notes

Justice and service often get used interchangeably. It's certainly understandable because people interested in justice are also usually interested in service. Conversely, people interested in service are usually interested in justice. But the two are not identical. I'm a big fan of Susan Guy's characterization of how the two often get confused, "In churches many people think that if you pile up enough service it will eventually lead to justice." Sadly that is never the case.

In a nutshell, service is what some people do for other people to help them when they are in trouble. At Walnut Hills this includes:

- Work trips
- Charitable gifts of money, clothing, food, etc.
- Habitat for Humanity
- Interfaith Hospitality Network (IHN)
- Service at Churches United and Children & Family Urban Ministries (Trinity)

Justice requires that people ask questions about the laws, policies, practices and systems that result in other people needing services and help. This includes:

- Writing letters to elected officials
- Voting
- Learning about the root causes of injustice
- A Mid-Iowa Organizing Strategy (AMOS)
- Civil disobedience
- Other organizing efforts through the church and other organizations

When Walnut Hills raises money and goods for the victims of Haiti or if we send a work group to Louisiana or Cedar Rapids, that's service. When we demand that Homeland Security, FEMA, the current administration, Congress and other elected officials direct more money and services to areas devastated by floods, hurricanes or tornadoes, that's justice. Both are necessary.

In his book *The Heart of Christianity* Marcus Borg makes this distinction clear. Referring to the work of Christian activist Vida Scudder, Borg reminds his readers that "charity [service] never offends; a passion for justice often does." He goes on to say that giving money to those who are suffering and creating/supporting organizations

for their care are examples of service. Changing society so that systems, policies and rules do not favor some and cause suffering for others is the work of justice.

Both service and justice require “intentionality.” This means that they don’t just happen. It took a long time for Walnut Hills to come up with our mission statement, “A place to call home where we are welcomed and sent forth to *serve*.” Likewise, it took well over a year to be clear about our Next Big Thing vision themes: interfaith, *social justice*, and spirituality. Walnut Hills has to be just as intentional in keeping service and justice before all our people. When I came to this church in 2002 I knew I wanted someone on the staff who would give primary leadership to both service and social justice. On January 1, 2006, the Rev. Susan Guy was appointed by Bishop Palmer to Walnut Hills as Associate Minister of Service, Social Justice and Adult Ministries. Susan has had many years of active ministry in these areas, most recently as the director in a seven-state area for the ONE Campaign dealing with DATA (Debt, AIDS, Trade in Africa). She has taken on more responsibilities with children and is no longer overseeing our work in the area of service.

Every four years the United Methodist Church decides at our General Conference what will be contained in our Social Principles. The delegates to the General Conference vote on matters of social justice and what we will support and oppose as a denomination. These Social Principles are “a prayerful and thoughtful effort on the part of the General Conference to speak to the human issues in the contemporary world from a sound biblical and theological foundation as historically demonstrated in the United Methodist traditions.”

But General Conferences and denominations are human attempts to understand and to follow the will of God. This means that there will be times when individuals disagree about a part of the Social Principles. In past decades, for instance, some within the Methodist tradition believed that slavery was not offensive to God. In the year 2007 no one would support any principle condoning slavery. What people disagree about today may not be among the contested issues 100 years from now. God journeys with imperfect people, helping us understand a deeper way of spiritual living. So it is important to question everything. Be sure a social principle is your principle. If you disagree with another person or if you disagree with the United Methodist Church on some principle about social justice, think and pray about it. Be clear about what you believe and also about what others believe.

Sometimes it is very appropriate to take a stand, even when that stand is unpopular. The Hebrew prophets stood against the kings of their day in order to support God’s justice. Jesus was put to death because he sided with the poor, the sick, the outcast, the oppressed and stood up against the religiously corrupt and the Roman

Empire. Sometimes the entire church stands against injustice; sometimes only one person stands alone. What is sure is that one day you will be faced with decisions about service and social justice. The decision to serve others will probably be met with admiration. The decision to stand against injustice will probably be riskier and perhaps even dangerous. But we never stand alone. God stands with us. We stand with the prophets, with Jesus, with Gandhi, with Martin Luther King, Jr., with all the unknown people of faith who have refused to worship money, power and prestige and have made their lives count for those who suffer.