



Sharing the Good News!

Penn Northeast Conference of the United Church of Christ

It might be the only fight that Christians should be allowed to have!

by Alan C. Miller, Conference Minister

A number of years ago I was flying across the country to attend a church meeting. A businessman was seated next to me; a nice man who was quite extroverted. He asked me what I did for a living. I told him that he would not believe it. Now he was really interested and pushed me for an answer. I told him that I was a conference minister in the United Church of Christ. "What's a conference minister?" he asked. I responded: "It's a bishop without any power."

At this point he was practically leaning over me (I knew because it was apparent that he was on his second or third drink) and asked: "What does a conference minister do ... I don't mean the ceremonial things ... I mean the day in and day out normal things?" "Well," I said, "I spend a lot of time going to church fights." "What do they fight about?" he asked. "Some fight about whether the new carpet in the sanctuary is going to be red or blue, others fight about which new hymnal they are going to use, some fight about which family is going to control the church, some fight about the pastor, and almost all of them fight about money." "I know," he said, "that's why I stopped going to church."

About a year ago the Pew Foundation conducted a poll asking the question, "Why don't you go to church?" People responded that they find American Christians to be: quarrelsome, rigid, judgmental, and exclusive. The people who gave these responses identified themselves as being spiritual and having a belief in God.

What does it say to the world when people seeking to know God see our churches as quarrelsome, rigid, judgmental, and exclusive? And we wonder why our churches are not growing.

In the 6th Chapter of Acts we find the early Christians quarreling. (There are a lot of stories in the book of Acts about quarrels in the early church, but this one is particularly interesting.) The Greek-speaking Jews are arguing with the native Jews, claiming that their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of funds. Both groups were followers of Christ and both groups believed in helping the poor. (In Jesus' day widows and orphans made-up a good percentage of the poor.) The Disciples got together to discuss the problem. They said: "It is not right for us to neglect the preaching of God's word in order to handle finances." So they told the community to select seven persons (who were full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom) to handle the distribution of finances so that the Disciples could devote their time to prayers and the work of preaching. They believed that all of the concerns were important: taking care of the poor, being diligent in prayer, and preaching the Gospel. Their argument was about how they could better do God's work of caring for the poor and spreading the Gospel.

I once worked with a congregation in North Carolina that was arguing about building an addition to their church. This congregation had a history of social justice ministries aimed at the poor and a number of their members felt that they were being selfish by spending the money on the addition. They finally resolved the issue when they realized that the additional space would give them more room to do good things for their neighborhood such as after-school tutoring programs and starting a food bank. Their argument was about how they could be better witnesses for God, both in their care for the poor and in their spreading of the Gospel.

Disagreements about how we can do it all for God, care for the poor and spread the Gospel; they might be the only church fights that Christians should be allowed to have!

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