

## **“I am not a Crook”**

This past week, I had the privilege of attending the New Clergy Orientation and the Persons in Ministry retreats, held at the Arrowhead Resort, Lake of the Ozarks. Mapquest routed me there via the back roads, through Fredericktown, Farmington, Potosi, Steelville, St. James, and many other small towns. The roads were curvy and the views were scenic. The retreat was very well planned and conducted, and I got to know my fellow pastors and the staff of the Missouri Mid South Conference of the UCC. They are good people, dedicated to serving the congregations of the conference. I had a feeling that I was among the “children of light” referred to in today’s Gospel story.

Today’s Gospel is confusing, because it involves two crooks—the rich landowner and the dishonest manager. To Jesus and their audience, they were crooks because their wealth was based on exploiting poor tenant farmers. The dishonest manager forgives a portion of the tenant farmer’s debts without the authorization of the landowner. What the parable seems to be saying is that forgiveness is always good, even when money is involved and the reasons for the forgiveness are selfish. The parable is a challenging illustration of the Lord’s Prayer-- *And forgive us our debts, As we forgive our debtors.* Forgiveness is always good.

Without intending any criticism, I found there was a somewhat disquieting undercurrent to the discussions at the retreat. The UCC has always prided itself on the autonomy of the local congregations. But in the discussions I participated in, I noticed that there was a widespread perception that many of our congregations are so independent of the conference and denomination that they might as well not belong to them at all. One discussion was on holding local pastors accountable to the UCC pastor’s code of conduct. Another discussion was on the draft manual for churches, which lays out expectations that UCC churches will participate in UCC programs and missions. In another discussion,

fears were raised that congregations were choosing to raise up licensed ministers rather than recruit ordained ministers trained at UCC seminaries, further reducing the denomination's impact on local congregations. I tried not to take this discussion personally. However, it looks like some forgiveness is in order.

There were complaints that some congregations only seem to contact the conference when they need help, for example, when they are looking for a pastor. Otherwise, they do not participate in programs, attend meetings, or contribute money to "Our Church's Wider Mission," referred to as OCWM. The conference encourages congregations to contribute 10 percent of their annual expense budget to OCWM. Only a handful of congregations do so. As a result, the conference continues to run a substantial budget deficit, which has only been made up through a bequest from a "rich landowner." Echoes again of today's Gospel story!

Unless the conference receives another large bequest or more churches begin tithing to OCW, the conference will have to substantially cut its budget starting in 2008 or 2008. As one participant pointed out, all we have to do is get rid of Camp Mo-Val, Shannondale, and the association ministers, and we can easily balance the budget. It seems like the children of light have truly not been very shrewd in dealing with the children of this age.

Of course, in the words of Pogo, "we have met the enemy and he is us." The conference is not a foreign body imposed on us by the denomination. At the New Clergy Orientation, the staff spent a lot of time explaining the structure of the conference. The structure is complex and sometimes confusing, but the upshot is that the conference is designed as a grassroots organization, where pastors and lay people from local congregations serve as delegates on boards and committees. I believe I heard that 140 delegates are needed to keep the conference going. Much of the business of the conference carried out at meeting like the upcoming Biennial Meeting during October. Although the conference ministers

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and other staff do play a significant leadership role, I heard hints that sometimes they are leaders by default, taking over when there is a lack of participation by representatives of local congregations. Again, maybe some forgiveness is needed.

The retreat I attended was made of pastors who support the conference, as well as those who like to play golf at Lake of the Ozarks! I would assume that the majority of pastors present came from congregations like us, who give significantly to OCWM and support Camp Mo-Val and Shannondale. A small number of large congregations in the St Louis Association provide a substantial share of the conference budget. Together, congregations large and small, we are supporting the conference generously. Nevertheless, there are not enough congregations providing support to balance the conference budget without cutting expenses deeply, not just fat, but into the bone and muscle of the conference. What would be the point of having a conference if it meant selling off Camp Mo-Val and Shannondale?

It is natural to blame those congregations that year after year, fail to contribute significantly to OCWM. Why don't they support the conference? Well, since they don't show up to meetings or send delegates to serve on committees, it is not always easy to find out. There were some hints at the retreat, that some of the nonparticipating congregations in the Western Association perceive the conference as being dominated by St. Louis congregations. Our conference is subject to the same St. Louis versus Kansas City divide that affects all aspects of life in Missouri. Before the merger that formed the UCC, our parent denominations had church camps in the West and the Southwest sections of Missouri. Some congregations have never forgiven the conference for selling off those camps. Beyond these hints, I would only be speculating. Maybe we need to forgive each other.

The challenge for the conference, and for those congregations that support the conference, is how to win over enough of the nonparticipating churches to make the conference a viable institution. In

today's story, the crooked manager used his control of the rich landowner's dishonest wealth to gain friends and win their future support. For this congregation, the fact that the conference provides us with Camp Mo-Val and Shannodale may be enough to win our friendship and support. But by their absence, the nonparticipating congregations have made it clear that the conference has very little to offer them.

One of the strengths of the UCC has been the autonomy of the local congregation. Under the UCC constitution, each congregation has the power to manage its own affairs, including "the right to retain or adopt its own methods of organization, worship and education; to retain or secure its own charter and name; to adopt its own constitution and bylaws; to formulate its own covenants and confessions of faith; to admit members in its own way and to provide for their discipline or dismissal; to call or dismiss its pastor or pastors by such procedure as it shall determine; to acquire, own, manage and dispose of property and funds; to control its own benevolences; and to withdraw by its own decision from the United Church of Christ at any time without forfeiture of ownership or control of any real or personal property owned by it."

There is no inherent contradiction between congregations having both autonomy and a strong connection to the UCC denomination, including the Missouri Mid South Conference. However, several speakers at the retreat lamented that an increasing number of congregations have chosen not just to be autonomous, but to be independent, breaking the covenantal relationship which is the foundation of the denomination. The UCC constitution commits "the various expressions of the church" to relate to each other in a covenantal manner. "Each expression of the church has responsibilities and rights in relation to the others, to the end that the whole church will seek God's will and be faithful to God's mission. Decisions are made in consultation and collaboration among the various parts of the structure. As members of the Body of Christ, each expression of the church is called to honor and respect the work and ministry of each other part. Each expression of the church listens, hears, and carefully considers the

advice, counsel, and requests of others. In this covenant, the various expressions of the United Church of Christ seek to walk together in all God's ways."

At the retreat, there was a strong feeling of frustration. Naturally, this frustration leads to a search for ways to pressure the nonparticipating congregations to support the conference. The conference has few carrots and no sticks at all when it comes to pressuring congregations to contribute to OCWM. What is really needed, and this is very difficult, is to bring these nonparticipating congregations into a covenantal dialog on the fundamental organization and purposes of the Missouri Mid South Conference. The conference being repeatedly in the red may be a sign that we have not been "shrewd" enough in dealing with the needs of today's generation. In December, Rev. Jeffrey Whitman will begin serving as our new conference minister. I would suggest that anyone who has concerns about the priorities and direction of the Missouri Mid South Conference and the UCC write to him or call him to respectfully share those concerns. Maybe he can help us to forgive one another.

We all need to show ourselves to be "faithful in a very little" so that we may be "faithful also in much." We need to be faithful stewards of the worldly money that has been given to the Church, so that we will be entrusted with true riches in the Kingdom of heaven. We have been entrusted with a heritage—our congregation, conference, and denomination—that we are holding in trust for the generations that will follow us. As members of the body of Christ, we must honestly ask ourselves, "what master does our congregation, conference, and denomination serve?" Conferences, committees, budgets, and other "expressions of the church" are not ends in themselves. "You cannot serve God and wealth." Wealth takes many forms and there are many idols that we can place between God and ourselves. Maybe by forgiving one another, we can clear some of these idols out of the way. There are some tough choices ahead for the UCC at all levels, and we will need your prayers. Amen.