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Friending As it Has Been

Ken Briggs | Jun. 20, 2013 NCR Today

Four of us who studied and shared parish duties together at Yale Divinity School -- and their wives -- just spent three days together on what seemed to us the reasonable assumption that friends ought to get together every 50 years or so.

Actually it was 46 years. Curiosity, of course, was a chief motivator. What would? How would? Why would? By the end, the old bond not only manifested itself but in stronger fashion than when we were dashing about as students.

My three male colleagues had all served as parish ministers for a combined total of around 100 years. Two are United Methodists, one a Mennonite, making them all part of solid traditions that were all much more visible in American life than they are in the wake of evangelical movements.

They had followed the Reformation "call" to ministry in circumstances that have been difficult. Mainline Protestantism has been in decline as "born again" conservative churches have undergone revival. The post World War II culture that cheered religion changed into a more secular, skeptical society that challenged the pastor to justify the Christian faith as a way of life that sometimes rubbed against popular and political movements. The easier alternative would have been to cave in to what was once defined as the "cultural captivity of the church."

These three pastors had accepted those conditions even as they devoted themselves to accompany parishioners through thick and thin, come up with weekly sermons that had substance, conduct endless meetings and act as drum majors for spiritual causes that could transform congregants into something more like what the Gospel had in mind for us. They had experienced but had also been bolstered by that humble church member who happened to be a saint. They were regretful about some things that might have been done -- or not -- but blessed by what they had been given by those they served.

Catholic readers who favor optional celibacy can take heart from their marrried-up families. One friend had lost his wife to illness a year ago; the other two were there as witnesses to what clergy spouses have become: ministers in their own right. Charlotte has been a nurse, a teacher of nurses and a marriage counselor. Cathie had taught school until her job was eliminated, whereby she decided her ministry was to attend to the practical, human and soul needs of elderly people by cleaning their houses either without charging anything or next to nothing while keeping them company. Before her final illness, Charlene's artistry as an organist had for decades filled the sails of worshipers' hymns and ennobled the anthems of choirs, the Word made music.

Their children, without exception, had gravitated to work in service to others. Two had had become ordained ministers, others did a variety of things from teaching poor kids to guiding the care of disabled people. They had learned from example and what an example they'd obviously had.

While my reunion partners still stand on the veritable Promises that steer seekers toward salvation and works of justice and peace, they remain apostles of the intellectual approaches that Yale provided. They speak as

Christians who have faith but not all the answers, allowing those around them space to come to their own convictions.

Parish ministry strikes me as an extraordinarily complex and demanding role. In the Protestant realm it carries respect but little pay, standing but nothing of the "indelible character" that elevated priests, by nature, above the community of Christians (Vatican II began disassembling the pedestal but it remains), and is subject to the judgment of the congregation. There was no drama of a media-capturing organization or much of any incentive to "get ahead" in a power grid. Parish ministry essentially meant just that; your ability might take you to a bigger congregation but the task of making headway against the prevailing material, status driven trends could grow even stronger.

My friends Joe, Frank and Mel would tar and feather me for idealizing them; by contrast, they hasten to emphasize their fallibility. And that to me is the point. These were people of common background (farmer's son, agricultural agent's son, radiology technician's son) and uncommon intelligence who took heed of their vocational call to accept relative obscurity (though great local acclaim) and meager financial rewards to work in the vineyard from which the gifts of grace have always come.

I therefore salute them for tending that garden with insight, wisdom, artfulness and, not the least, humor.

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