

THE HOPE THAT IS IN YOU

2 Kings 5: 1-14
1Peter 3:13-16
Mark 10: 40-45
March 1, 2009 – UM

Will you join me in a moment of prayer?

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength and our redeemer, amen.

We received this letter the other day in the office.

This is how it started:

Dear Church Secretary,

Did you know that there is a church kit being test-marketed in Canada?

It contains:

(1) Perfect Minister, more details at the end.

(1) Highly efficient, totally organized, fully mature governing board, representing the diversity of the congregation;

(273) Members, divided into

(48) 55 years and older but extremely healthy

(95) ages 40-55 (they all work 60+ hours a week, but give 10 hours or more to the church)

(85) ages 25-40 (most raising bright, well-behaved children who sit quietly in worship)

(45) ages 18-25 (mostly single, but they all love (traditional music and the old hymns)

In addition, the kit contains

(27) 15-17 year-olds

(33) 12-14 year-olds

(49) 6-12 year-olds

(43) 2-5 year-olds and 32 kids in the nursery

A supplemental kit contains modular pieces which allow you to build the sort of physical plant you wish:

- a sanctuary with both immovable pews and chairs on wheels;
- a hall that can convert into a home theatre complete with stadium seating;
- classrooms which can only expand; and the minister's office has wireless internet.

The kits require some assembly.

As noted it comes with a perfect minister:

The perfect minister preaches exactly 10 minutes.

He, of course it is a 'he' ☺ condemns sin roundly but never hurts anyone's feelings.

The perfect minister makes \$40 a week, wears good clothes, drives a good car, buys good books, and donates \$30 a week to the church.

He is 29 years old and has 40 years experience.

He never forgets a name and spends most of his time praying to God.

Above all, he is handsome.

He also knows when somebody is sick and needs visitation even without anyone telling him about it.

He loves to spend time with his family and the perfect minister has no problem with you dropping in unexpectedly.

And he also spends most of his time in preparation to speak God's Word.

He remembers everyone's birthdate and of course, their anniversary dates as well.

The perfect minister always smiles and tells you what you want to hear.

The perfect minister eats nutritiously, gets his rest, exercises daily, and is always there to listen to you night or day.

The perfect minister has a burning desire to work with teenagers, and he spends most of his time with the senior citizens.

He smiles all the time with a straight face because he has a sense of humour that keeps him seriously dedicated to his church.

He makes 15 home visits a day and is always in his office to be handy when needed.

He never misses the meeting of any church organization and is always busy evangelizing the unchurched.

He meets with the other ministers in town because they all have so much time on their hands.

And he attends all the town meetings for PR's sake.

He takes family vacations and attends all the latest church and ministers conferences.

He spends all day each Saturday preparing the Sunday sermon, and he focuses on his family too.

And the perfect minister is always in the next church over!

If your minister does not measure up, simply send this notice to six other churches that are tired of their minister, too.

Then bundle up your minister and send him to the church at the top of the list.

If everyone cooperates, in one week you will receive 1,643 ministers.

One of them should be perfect. Have faith in this letter.

One church broke the chain and got its old minister back in less than three months.

None of us is perfect... not you... not me...

And not our church or the world around us...

Much like life in Biblical times... wars... disease... loneliness and pain...

Imperfect leaders and healing in unexpected places and ways.

But as people of faith, we know that healing and wholeness and community is within our grasp...

It is in our grasp when we refuse to let negativity and gloom tailor the way in which we live.

Listen to these comments which David Stevens, Leader of the Corrymeela Community in Northern Ireland, made at the Service of Dedication a couple of years ago. Here is part of what he said:

"There is a temptation or a tendency to look with morbid fascination of what has gone wrong, or what is going wrong. It's part of human life. And we in Corrymeela, which is a group committed to reconciliation and peace, are no exception in this.

There is the pleasant schadenfreude, which is a wonderful German word which means enjoyment obtained from the troubles of others.

There is a certain shadenfreude in watching things go wrong and there is the destructive tendency to encourage them to go wrong.

Our personal negativity has a wish for general negativity."

And Thom Shuman writes this: *In other words, if I am pessimistic (and part of a group), rather than letting the group lift my spirits or help change my attitude, I want the rest of the group to be pessimistic.*

When I worked in a college setting, I saw how the constant, negative sniping by one or two members of the faculty and staff "wore down" the rest of us over time.

In fund-raising, there is an "adage" that 2% of people will always, always oppose any campaign, and most efforts fail because of the desire to get that 2% on board.

In churches, most people leave, most conflict results, most ministers are "removed" not because of any one incident/sermon/decision, but because of an undercurrent of negativity.

And, according to Stevens, it can even happen in the Corrymeela Community,

It's all too true - group dynamics are often affected more by the negativity of a small percentage of people than all the positive outlooks of the majority.

So, what can a person, a group, a church do?

Not surprisingly, David Stevens turns to Scripture.

He goes on to say, "When Peter tries to counteract human weakness with words of hope, he did not encourage people to say what was wrong with the world, the church, or society.

He did not ask people to draw up a list of problems or negatives.

Instead he asks them simply to give an account of the hope that is in them: ". . . explain the hope you have in you." (1 Peter 3:15)

Explain the hope you have in you - talk about why you are a church member, or a teacher, or a police officer;

tell stories of what you see as you walk your child to school, as you ride the bus to work, as you sit in the shade on a summer's day;

write a short story about the person who rescued you when you had fallen into despair's grasp;

craft a poem about the teacher who patiently worked with you until you understood fractions;

sing a song about that special place where you can stand silent, vulnerable, obedient to God.

And don't just explain - live out that hope you have in you.

Have an honest conversation with the neighbour who troubles you; pray about that decision you wish you didn't have to make;

make a pilgrimage of trust to the refuge God provides for you, and then go back home, a changed person.

Take that hope you have in you – even if it is buried so deep inside of you that you are not aware of it - and offer it as a fragrant offering to everyone around you.

Because if you do, then slowly, tentatively, gently, joyfully, they will begin to share that hope they have deep within themselves.

And no one will be the same any more.© 2006 Thom M. Shuman

Naaman had hope of healing, the leper had hope of healing and restoration to community.

In the same way, we are called to name the hope lies within us.

No, I am not the perfect minister... ☺

You are not the perfect church.... ☺

But perhaps... just perhaps... we are perfectly suited to each other...

Suited to name the hope that lies within us, live out that hope and bring it to the world.

Thanks be to God, amen.