

June 1, 2003
Eastertide
David L. Edwards

Being a Sent Community:
Reflections after Three Months

John 17:6-19 *As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them
into the world.*

This morning I want to share with you some reflections on our first three months together. For me, this has been a very full time of listening and learning, of getting to know each of you and getting a sense of who we are together. I am learning what my “niche” is, as Elaine Prevallet says in her book *In the Service of Life*.

We just completed a four-week class on the covenant life and the spiritual disciplines that are part of the membership and life of the Church of the Covenant. By the class and the accompanying sermons, I hoped to offer us a time of re-visiting the basic structure and vision of the church. After Bev Cosby’s death and a year in which you pulled together to take on so many responsibilities left by his passing, I think it is now a season for re-rooting ourselves in the basic vision of the Church of the Covenant. This so that current members and those considering membership, as well as all who are part of the Church of the Covenant community, might together re-center our lives in the inward and outward journeys so central to the vision and mission of the church.

Our reading from John’s gospel this morning offers us just such a re-focusing on who Christ calls us to be. It is part of Jesus’ prayer for his disciples, for us. There are two important petitions that he lifts up to God on our behalf. First, Jesus prays that “they may be one, as we are one.” The unity of the Christian community is a unity in Christ and his love, thus in God and God’s love. It is not a unity of opinion or political ideas or even theological understandings. To make such things a basis for our unity is to create just the opposite—a divisive and inhospitable environment. Our unity is a way of being together that is infused with the self-giving love of God in Christ. Our corporate inward journey has as its goal our growth in this love for one another, a love that goes deeper than any differences we may have, a love that sees through to the gift that each person is. It is a unity that embraces the different ways in which Christ calls us to serve and the diversity of gifts he gives us.

The second petition that stands out in Jesus’ prayer is his calling on God’s protection for the disciples as they live their life in the world. “I am not asking you to take them out of the world,” Jesus prays. Our place is in the world, but as a different kind of people and community. Christian faith is not about longing for a world beyond this one. We are to live in the world as those who know the world is God’s creation and is the object of God’s continuing concern, care, and redemption. Therefore, Jesus prays, “As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.” We are a sent people, a sent community. Our life is not haphazard. It is not a fluke or a meaningless accident. In Christ we see that life is not simply to be endured or tolerated. Life is the field of our work, our mission, the garden we are given to cultivate and till so that the harvest of God’s steadfast love might grow up and bear fruit. This is the outward journey to which we are each and all together called. I learning how my work with you must focus on both these dimensions of our life—the inward growth in love and faith; the outward movement of those who are sent into the world.

One of the needs I've seen is a strengthened School for Christian Living/Servant Leadership School. If we are going to ask of ourselves and others the kind of commitment embodied in the spiritual disciplines, we need on-going opportunities for deepening and broadening our faith through study. I have planned a series of classes through December for this purpose and have placed a schedule of those classes in your bulletins for today. I think of the School for Christian Living/Servant Leadership School as our "seminary," offering opportunities for building up our knowledge of scripture, spirituality, theology, and matters of important ethical concern. I will be meeting with some of our members in the coming weeks to begin planning for next year's classes, and would welcome any input you have as to the kinds of classes you think we need in order to continue to grow in faith and mission. Besides the classes themselves, we can create other opportunities and events for learning. For instance, on October 12, Jan Linn, former chaplain at Lynchburg College and a close friend of this community, will be bringing the sermon. He and his wife Joy will be with us for lunch afterwards and a time of sharing about their community, Spirit of Joy Christian Church in Minneapolis-St. Paul, and our community. There is a new church structured around spiritual disciplines and ministry groups. I think that our sharing together will be beneficial for us as well as for Jan and Joy in their ministry.

I want to lift up four groups meeting currently as mission or ministry groups. We need to keep these groups and their missions in our awareness and prayers as they follow God's call to particular ministries.

The Jubilate Mission Group supports the establishing of two L'Arche communities in Lynchburg. L'Arche is a movement to establish small, spiritually based communities consisting of "core members" and "assistants." Persons with disabilities (core members) live in community with those who feel called to share life with them. The emphasis is on mutuality and friendship, the building of a community of love and mutual service. If you are interested in exploring life with this mission, talk to Mark Russell.

The Children's Ministry Group has been meeting to provide for children a church school experience as well as other opportunities for learning and service. At this point in our life as a community, we have few children among us. Yet we hope and believe that this will change, and we want to be ready and to begin now the spiritual search for what God calls us to do with and for children. A part of this group's concern is also the Children's Defense Fund's call to "leave no child behind." If you wish to explore the life and emerging mission of this group, talk to Will Cardwell.

The Haven Mission Group has as its mission the providing of housing and support for those who have been in recovery from addictions and need long-term support as they continue to meet the challenges of their lives. The Haven Mission Group meets weekly for prayer, study, personal spiritual support, and the work of the mission. If you would like to explore this mission group, talk to Vince Sawyer.

The Lodge Support Group meets twice monthly on Sunday afternoons for prayer and personal support, and for the work related to the Thursday night dinner at the Lodge of the Fishermen. This group not only works with the nuts and bolts of all that it takes to make the Thursday night Lodge happen, but also takes a personal and caring interest in the persons who come to the Lodge each week. Special things happen in the Lodge because people feel welcomed, cared about, and celebrated. Many people beyond our church community find special meaning as they serve each week. Last Thursday, for instance, the Lodge was filled with celebration. P.G. found a surprise birthday party waiting for him, a room full of people rejoicing in the gift of P.G.'s life and ministry. At the second seating, twenty-five young people from Pennsylvania and their teachers

enjoyed the meal and showed their gratitude through songs they shared with us. It was a beautiful thing to see, as extra Lodge support people showed up to make sure that everyone was caringly served and welcomed. What looked to be an overwhelming evening with so many people to serve ended up being, I'm sure, one of the most extraordinary and delightful evenings the Lodge has ever seen. If you want to explore being part of this mission, talk to Paul Henderson, Helen Papayanis, or Jane Butler.

I want to share with you a kind of three-part vision for the church that has been emerging in my mind and heart. As I share these visions, perhaps someone will feel called to them. Or in my sharing, perhaps your own vision will be stirred in the direction of missions arising out of your own gifts and call.

Susan Henderson and I have formed a mission group to work with the vision of a retreat ministry here at the Church of the Covenant. This forty acre area, with beautiful woods and trails, places for walking and meditation, with the Lodge and Church house for meals, potential space for lodging, meeting places, and worship, with this community and its commitment to prayer and service—with all of this, we have already the ingredients for offering a retreat place and program for our own community and others. A place where individuals can come for silence, renewal, and rest, where small groups can spend time together for whatever they need for their own lives and work. We plan to begin offering this summer half-day silent retreats for this community and others who wish to come. These would be times for quiet and the centering of our lives in God, for reflection on our personal spiritual lives and for deepening our connection with one another and the creation itself. Our group will be meeting on the first and third Sunday evenings of each month, from 7:00-9:00 p.m. here at the church house. You are invited to come and explore this as a possible mission to which you might be called.

When I was a college student, I spent many evenings at the Lodge coffee house, not only playing music but also simply being in an environment that kept me connected to the church and my faith. It was a welcoming atmosphere for conversation and being in touch with values of human and spiritual concern. It is not out of nostalgia that I envision a revival of the Friday night coffee house. There is a need today more than ever before in our society for places where people can meet each other at a deeper level, and feel welcomed and treated as special. I lift up this vision that someone might be called to it and gather a mission group to make possible once again the Lodge of the Fishermen coffee house.

The Church of the Covenant, under Bev's spiritual leadership, has always had a particular commitment to being in community with and serving those who are poor or otherwise on the margins of society. The central city of Lynchburg has always been a focus of the church's life and mission. The question has been in my mind and heart: How can we as a faith community be with those we desire to serve, opening ourselves up to learn from and simply share life with them? Can it be that we could find a place that would be a kind of center where people from differing racial, economic, social, and religious backgrounds could meet and know each other as people? The Western Hotel, a place dear to the heart of Bev Cosby, Barbara Holdren, and others, came immediately to mind. In recent weeks, spontaneous conversations around that place have emerged among Irma Seiferth, Executive Director of Lynchburg Covenant Fellowship, which owns the Western, P.G. Cosby, and me. We will be holding our summer Servant Leadership School class at the Western, as a way of making a little step toward this emerging vision and mission. The other day, Rachel Wilson called me to say that out of her personal worship that morning she felt as though she wanted to spend some time at the Western Hotel and "get the feel" of the place. She suggested that we have lunch there one day. So, this Wednesday anyone interested is invited to bring your bag lunch to the

Western Hotel at 12:15. We'll eat together and share thoughts and interests related to a possible mission in the Western Hotel. Is God calling us to establish a kind of "festival center," similar to that of the Church of the Saviour in D.C., a place for service, study, and prayer in the center of the city? What needs of people might be met in that place? I invite any who are interested to join in this exploration.

To be at one with each other in Christ, growing in love and in community. This is Jesus' prayer for us. To live our lives as those who are sent bearing good news. This is also Jesus' prayer for us. For me to be a servant-leader in a community devoted to these two life-giving dimensions of the spirit is a blessing beyond measure. May we each and all together pray diligently that God's spirit continue to enliven and deepen both the inward and the outward journeys of our life.