

**Executive Presbyter's Report to the Presbytery of Grand Canyon
Northminster Presbyterian Church, Phoenix, Arizona
April 24, 2004**

Our Moderator, Gale Watkins, suggested the topic of pastoral ethics for an executive report. It was a timely suggestion, since many of the difficulties we face today in the denomination are exacerbated by differences in ethical standards as we attempt to deal with differences in doctrinal positions. I will expand upon Gale's suggestion to consider church related ethics that include everyone, not only pastors.

Before I dive into ethics *per se*, I want to say a few things that relate to money. Earlier this month I advised the Council about yet another reduction in General Assembly Mission Partnership Funds for 2005. These mission dollars are distributed from GA to certain synods.

In the case of the Synod of the Southwest, these funds are divided among the four presbyteries, with the synod retaining none for its own mission. In fact, in recent years the synod has supplemented these funds with additional dollars to help the presbyteries. Grand Canyon Presbytery has relied on these Mission Partnership Funds for decades to support our aid-receiving congregations.

I want to explain why this mission support from General Assembly is declining. The money available to aid-receiving synods each year comes from undesignated General Mission Giving from congregations. There was a time when 70% of General Mission giving was undesignated. In recent years, however, more churches have decided to designate their General Mission gifts to specific mission projects. Today the undesignated giving is only about 30%. Therefore, the pool available for GA to give back to the presbyteries and thus to the congregations is considerably reduced.

The presbyteries that receive Mission Partnership Funds, like ours, have a large number of former National Mission congregations. This is the reason these funds are given back to us from the General Assembly's share of General Mission gifts. In line with the law of unintended consequences, however, the reality of the current situation is that every time a church designates its General Mission gift to GA, it reduces the mission dollars available to churches in Grand Canyon and other presbyteries. As long as the trend toward restricting General Mission gifts continues, the Presbytery of Grand Canyon will suffer reduced partnership funding from General Assembly. Elder Commissioners, please explain this reality to your sessions when it's time to discuss your mission pledges for next year.

The other money item has to do with the needs of pastors. For a variety of reasons, this presbytery has not increased the minimum salary requirements for pastors in five years. Pastoral ministry is one of the lowest paid careers in the nation that requires a graduate level education to pursue. Many pastors come out of seminary with tens of thousands of dollars in educational debt. In years past, this presbytery has had two funds to assist pastors with financial emergencies. Because of pressure to reduce the presbytery budget, the Committee on Ministry's emergency fund has been eliminated. This leaves only the Extra Commitment Restricted Fund called Clergy Supporting Clergy. This is a fund that was created with contributions from pastors to help their colleagues in financial

difficulty. This fund has been used heavily in recent months, and as of today there is only \$840 left in it. When that goes, there will be no money to help pastors in crisis.

Therefore, if any of you here –not only pastors- are inclined to contribute to this fund, I encourage you to do so soon. Contributions from sessions would also be most welcome.

Now, on to the main theme of my report. Ethical behavior may be informed by theological understandings and doctrinal positions but they are not the same thing. Ethics has to do with how we live and deal with one another, our personal conduct, our philosophical codes, our moral standards. To say God forgives sinners is to make a theological statement. To say people should treat sinners with respect is to make a statement about ethics. Ethical behaviors are based on values. The problem is many of our values are conflicting, and people derive opposing ethical views from the same doctrines.

Let's consider, for example, the theological proposition that human beings –male and female- are created in the image of God. There is certainly biblical warrant for this assertion. You'd be hard pressed to find someone in this room who disagreed with that statement. But what does this mean in terms of ethical behavior?

One person might say that since humans are made in the image of God, they are sacred and therefore it is unethical to do anything to harm another person. This ethic would include opposition to all wars and opposition to capital punishment. Another person might say that the image of God imprinted in humans is not a bodily one, and therefore it is ethically acceptable in the proper circumstances to kill deliberately another human being.

Within the Christian family historically we've had a continuum of ethical views concerning the use of violence against other people. At one end of the continuum is absolute pacifism. People at this end of the spectrum would count as unethical all wars, capital punishment, corporal punishment, torture, and physical intimidation of any kind for any reason. At the other end of the continuum would be the view that use of violence as an instrument in support of true doctrine is fully acceptable ethically.

These opposite poles are not either/or propositions, however. There are nuances and relative positions between them. Among those who have identified themselves as Presbyterian through the centuries are people who have adopted both these contrasting positions. Most Presbyterians today, however, would place themselves somewhere in between. But it was not always so.

John Calvin faced this ethical issue and placed himself squarely on the side of using violence as a means to support church doctrine and authority. A Spanish physician named Servetus came to Geneva. He was widely known for proposing a different model of the Trinity than was doctrinally acceptable to the Reformers. He also had heterodox views concerning infant baptism. John Calvin decided that it was ethically and morally acceptable to deal with this man violently in the name of correct doctrine. Servetus was burned at the stake for daring to speculate out loud about the nature of the Trinity. The ethical nature of torturing and executing someone for supposed heresy was under-girded

by the doctrinal belief that it was acceptable to kill a human body in order to save a human soul.

Where would you place yourself on this continuum? At one end is the belief that it is *never* ethically acceptable to kill, torture, or punish another human being for reasons related to religious faith. At the other end is the belief that it *is* ethically acceptable to punish, torture, or even kill another human being for the sake of doctrinal purity. I can almost hear your minds clicking out all sorts of rejections, exceptions, and qualifications depending on a host of circumstances. This is what makes ethics so challenging.

Some people tend to see the world in terms of black and white, either or, yes or no, true or false, right or wrong. An action is either moral or immoral. Period.

This is right, therefore the opposite must be wrong. I submit that with respect to ethics in many such dichotomies *both* an action and its opposite may be wrong while the best course lies somewhere in between. And on occasion, perhaps, both may be ethically right in distinct settings.

The reality is that in the world today, many people are tortured and killed because of conflicting religious beliefs. Some of the victims are Christian and some of the killers are Christian. For the most part, this is not a phenomenon in the United States, although in the last decade or so even in the United States some fervent Christian believers have committed violence against people whose behavior doesn't track with their doctrines. And they claim to be morally justified when doing so.

It is normal for people to act to protect their own cherished beliefs from attack, perceived or otherwise. In the Presbyterian Church we have our own precious and distinctive theological positions, which in different ways we seek to protect and maintain. Sometimes doing this presents us with ethical dilemmas, however. I've observed people, who were otherwise strongly motivated to behave ethically and morally, twist or misrepresent the positions of those with differing theological views for the purpose of demonstrating the superiority of their own positions. Is this OK? If one is defending God, does the end justify the means? Is it OK to distort the other person's views as long as you're honest about your own? Is it OK to smear or discredit people in order to defend the one true doctrine?

Personal views about what is ethical are based on core values. For me these include treating people with care and honesty. However, another of my core values is respect for people's privacy. There have been times in my life where these core values created ethical dilemmas for me. This is not unusual for pastors. There are occasions when caring for parishioners involves invasion of their privacy. Which set of values prevails in deciding what to do?

Respecting confidentiality is a core ethical standard for anyone doing ministry, particularly pastors, who are privileged to learn many intimate details about the lives of parishioners. But maintaining confidentiality might be unethical in certain circumstances and perhaps illegal. Deacons, elders, and other church leaders also encounter ethical dilemmas with regard to confidentiality.

For example, most congregations have prayer chains or other means of praying for one another. What are the ethical issues involved with disclosing information about

another person's health or family difficulties for the purpose of group prayer? Where is the dividing line that separates ethical disclosure of personal information from unethical gossip? Is it ethical to pass on second hand information without verifying it?

Many ethical issues exist that relate to evangelism. Under what circumstances is it ethical to lure members from another church to join yours? Is it OK to use guilt, fear, or otherwise manipulate people's emotions to get them to believe the gospel? Is it acceptable to take advantage of those times when people are vulnerable to gain their acceptance of a particular theological point of view? All these things happen commonly in the church, so we need clarity about the ethics of such behavior.

Well, enough of my rambling. It's time now for you to do the talking. What we're going to do is break into small groups to tackle some ethical issues that relate to our life together in the church. Gale Watkins will tell you how to divide and where to go. Thanks for listening.

Ken Moe

Questions for Small Group Discussion

1. Describe an experience where your own competing values put you in an ethical bind. How did you resolve the situation?
2. Are pastors bound to higher ethical standards than church members are? Why or why not?
3. Are there circumstances, such as in defending church doctrine, when behavior that would otherwise be unethical is acceptable? Do the ends justify the means in some cases? Do the ends partially justify the means?
4. When might violence in the name of God be ethically acceptable?
5. Under what circumstances would it be acceptable to discredit publicly someone with opposing religious views?
6. When is it ethically acceptable to initiate an invitation for a person to leave his or her church and join yours?
7. Is mental or emotional manipulation a valid tool for evangelism?