

OPEN FORUM

Thank you for your issue on death and dying (Sept/Oct, 2005.) Overall it was a very fine issue that called to the church's attention its responsibilities and opportunities in the care of the dying and the bereaved.

As a member of the Board of Directors of ADEC (Association of Death Education and Counseling) and one who presents on these issues throughout the United States and internationally, I know the importance of keeping these issues in front of religious leaders and congregations. We don't have the best record in these matters and have lost ground to many others who have usurped our role and responsibility. It is a very good wake up call!

The article, "Four Myths about Christian Funerals," had one section that, at best, was worded poorly and could do considerable damage to the already strained relationship between many clergy and many funeral directors. It shows a total lack of regard for funeral directors, certainly a lack of respect for their part in the care of the grieving, and presents itself as arrogant. ("Only faith communities that have lost their way theologically and liturgically about death require commercial vendors . . .") Apart from the legal responsibilities placed upon funeral homes and the practical issues necessary to provide comfort and avoid chaos, the funeral director has the responsibility to see to the various arrangements and details so that everything is in good order. Some funeral directors overstep their bounds. Usually it is the simple matter, and it is rudeness, of scheduling the funeral without asking the minister if this time slot works for him or her.

I work with funeral directors all over the country and I have never met one that was concerned with running a church, picking hymns or selecting the readings.

They do have to deal with the realities of traffic to the cemetery, requirements of the cemetery or other burial space, their schedule and staff needs, etc. The funeral directors seem very pleased when I am doing the service. They get some preliminaries or concerns from the family and then I work with the family. The funeral director generally asks only about music needs (if in the funeral home), special arrangements, announcements and other concerns.

Overall this was a very good issue. It does not excuse carelessness that inflames rather than engages.

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Editor's Note: Rev. Gilbert is an Episcopal priest.

I am attempting to sort out my feelings about the use and appropriateness of communion as a tool in conflict resolution (cf. Thomas W. Porter, Jr. "Conflict in Holy Communion" (Nov/Dec, 2005).

In Matthew 5:23-24, Jesus says, "So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gifts." In 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 Paul wrote about sacramental, or the supposedly sacramental, occasions in the congregation in Corinth. Each brought their own food, according to their own resources, and they did not share. Even if they offered the proper words accompanied by the ritual actions, Paul said whatever they were doing was not sacramental. And, of course, at the "last supper" Jesus used the occasion not to bring his disciples together, but to announce how he knew all

would betray him. It seems to me Scripture indicates the sacrificial death of Christ Jesus does not bring peace so much as it exposes our sinfulness.

Yes, John Wesley early in his career did speak of communion as a converting ordinance. And he took that very seriously! If communion as a sacrament is one of those ways God most truly becomes present to our souls, who may God be seeking each time the sacrament is celebrated more than sinners? The conversion Wesley sought or at least felt communion offered, is between a human soul and God, not between conflicted lives.

I guess I worry about using communion as a tool for any human agenda, even something as exalted as peacemaking. I recognize it comes with enough spiritual power to transform, but is that something we can rightly use, or is it rightly used only by God and in God's time? But thanks for Thomas Porter's article on "Conflict and Holy Communion." It has given me much to ponder.

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Health and Wholeness

An interagency "Health and Wholeness Committee" is working to build awareness, action, and advocacy for health-related ministries across the United Methodist Church. Initial emphases will be clergy wellness, eradication of malaria, children orphaned by HIV/AIDS and access to health care. The general secretaries of the General Board of Church and Society, the General Board of Global Ministries, the General Board of Pension and Health Benefits and United Methodist Communications created the "Health and Wholeness Committee." Publications across the UM connection are working together to support this effort. See "Ministries of Health: Our Tradition and Our Challenge" by Deborah White in the electronic edition of this issue at www.circuitrider.com