

Thoughts from Cindy Sojourner from Perspective of Biblical Analysis and Church History – Church's role or identity.

On our church's role or identity: How much of it is prophetic so we should take stands on issues and how much of it is nurturing and thus we should avoid taking stands on issues (because if we do we will likely alienate people with a minority view)?

Some people will feel alienation and hurt if we take stands on certain issues and some people will feel alienation and hurt if we do not take stands on those same issues. Feelings of alienation and hurt will occur if people remain deeply and honestly committed in covenant relationships with church, family, marriage or Godself or choose to leave such relationships. The church's decision to take stands on issues and nurturing people is not a matter of choosing one or the other. One without the other provides neither nurturing or prophetic justice. We need both to be held in tension and balance in what the Old Testament calls mercy and the New Testament calls compassion.

In the Old Testament, there are entire books devoted to prophecy. The Books of the Prophets, including Jeremiah, Isaiah, Amos, Daniel, Malachi, Ezekiel, Habakkuk, Jonah and Micah and prophetic teaching make up a large portion of the Old Testament. The place of prophecy in the Old Testament is a sacred trust. It is how God communicates what is right and good for the people of God and all the world. If we take prophecy out of the Old Testament, God's faithfulness and nurturing care would be empty Hallmark sentimentality for a people crumbling under repressive governments, war, slavery, starvation and greedy exploitation of the poor, unhealthy and foreign born.

In the Old Testament God and people nurture others with food, comfort, safe shelter and healing, but also with words and actions of prophecy demanding these provisions be made available for people by others. The stories, wisdom and laws in the Old Testament contain both prophetic justice and mercy and nurturing too. The year of Jubilee is a time when land was redistributed to people who had lost their land. It was a time of forgiving debts and giving people another chance to earn a living. Laws about taking care of orphans and widows are both nurturing and prophetic. Stories in Genesis and Exodus about taking care of the earth, family and strangers contain important nurturing and prophetic elements. Prophecy and nurturing are God's way of caring for us and the world. Moses was as concerned about manna from heaven to eat in the desert as getting Pharaoh to let God's people go from slavery and find a home in the promised land.

In the New Testament, Jesus embodies prophecy and nurturing in his miracles of healing, feeding and forgiving. People believed only God could forgive, but here was Jesus forgiving and healing people in miraculous ways. Here was Jesus crossing cultural and religious lines and laws of purity, separation and Sabbath rest. The words and actions of Jesus were both prophetic and nurturing. He had compassion on people and fed them, healed them, forgave them, and called them to sin no more, to go out and perform greater works than his own. Jesus combined the roles of priest, prophet, shepherd and king traditions from the Old Testament. He did them all and called his disciples to do likewise.

The church is called to provide nurturing and prophecy in words and deeds, both immediate and long term. We are called to challenge power structures like Jesus. He broke Sabbath laws in order to nurture people and stay true to the intent of law, rather than the letter. He broke purity laws when he ate with people who were considered unclean. He challenged Roman rule and Temple rule when he encouraged people to share their resources and question the fairness of Roman taxes and Temple fees. He challenged the fairness and power of religious and Roman rule when he went to the cross, died and then rose from the dead with words of nurturing, forgiveness and paradise on his lips. If this church is going to answer the call to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, we need to be both nurturing and prophetic.

Niles Congregational Church has a history of being both nurturing and prophetic. This church has taken stands as a church, as a specific group within the church, and as individuals. This church voted to be an open and affirming church for all God's people, including the gay and lesbian community. This church has been active in

the Interfaith Alliance, which seeks to bring people of faith into better understanding and fellowship of love. This church has taken a stand to help homeless families find shelter under our roof for one month every year. This church has decided to take up collections to support a Cause, issue, every month. This church has decided to teach our members and the community about good stewardship of the earth to help stop global warming. This church has decided to support efforts to stop the genocide in Darfur. This church decided to devote time in worship to unlearning racism.

This church has a long history of taking stands on matters of justice in the local community and world. We have a Board of Social Concerns built into our power structure, because prophecy is integral to our faith, identity, work and existence in the world. In addition to all the work we have done together, many members of this church have devoted many hours to nurturing widows, family, neighbors, strangers and co-workers. Many members have also been active in efforts to change power structures of injustice in this world as well. We have been doing the work of nurturing and prophecy together for years. Unfortunately, the church has not established any formal process for making decisions about taking stands on issues, which leads us to the question that this church really needs to address. How would we make decisions on taking stands about pressing issues in a way that is both compassionate and prophetic for our congregation and the world?

Thoughts from Cindy Sojourner on Process for Church Decision Making for Statements on Pressing Issues and/or Endorsement of Actions

On decision-making: We currently decide things by majority vote (with only a few exceptions noted in our by-laws). Could moving to another model, such as formal consensus, for some of our decisions allow us to take stands while minimizing the chance of alienating people?

Decision making at Niles Congregational Church has not been strictly majority vote. We have a pastor, moderator, council and committees who are delegated power to make decisions all the time. These groups and individuals are always making decisions about curriculum content, worship content, and church activities. Our confusion and conflict about how and whether to make decisions about pressing issues is the result of there being no clear guidelines in our bylaws or other documents for making formal statements and participating in formal actions in relationship to pressing issues. Recently, members of the congregation have expressed discomfort with any individual or group making formal statements from the church without a church approved process or formal vote. Criteria needs to be established for the church to develop a formal process for making formal statements and/or endorsing actions about pressing issues.

Suggestions For a Formal Process on Decision Making about Pressing Issues

- 1) Any statement the church makes about a pressing issue does not mean every member is in full agreement or required to come into full agreement. There is always room for disagreement.
- 2) Groups and members in the church are free to make their own decisions on statements and actions to endorse. For example, individuals, Sunday school classes, men's and women's fellowship, the choir and boards may make their own decisions to support an AIDS walk, cancer run, Habitat for Humanity workday, ditty bags for SAVE, letter to the editor condemning the death penalty, petition to the president encouraging his help in preventing global warming or other causes they deem appropriate. Each member and group within the church fully retains the right to speak and act independently.
- 3) The Pastor, Council and Board of Social Concerns will determine if a pressing issue needs to go to the church for a formal vote and/or formal study once a formal request form for making a church statement and/or endorsement of action has come to their attention.

- 4) The Pastor, Council and Board of Social Concerns will determine if the current pressing issue falls under previous decisions upon which the church has already reached agreement. If the decision has not been addressed, the formal process for reaching agreement will continue. If the pressing issue is already covered by a previous decision, the current pressing issue will be granted or rejected, accordingly, unless a formal request for reconsideration has been requested.
- 5) A meeting will be called to discuss and vote on the pressing issue in one of three ways:
 - a) Formalized study before actual vote on pressing issue
 - b) Actual vote and further study after vote for those interested
 - c) Actual vote and no further formalized study afterwards
- 6) The actual vote on making a statement and/or endorsement of an action could be by super majority or consensus, depending on whether time urgency or church unity is more compelling. Council or church will vote on whether consensus or super majority is appropriate in each given cases.
- 7) The church and any formal group within the church may not make any statement or endorsement of any action that is partisan and therefore violates separation of church and state law.