

The Oregonian

New minister hopes for balance in world

Thursday, September 21, 2006

By Erin Hoover Barnett
The Oregonian

Chuck Currie worked for 17 years as an outspoken advocate for the homeless in Portland. Three years ago, he and his wife, children's advocate Liz C. Smith, moved to St. Louis. At Eden Theological Seminary, Currie earned his master's of divinity. His wife gave birth to twins Katherine and Frances. Now the family has returned to Portland. On the eve of his ordination, which was Sunday, Currie, 37, reflected on his career, his faith and a broader call to action: You started out, at 17, as a volunteer at Baloney Joe's, a since-closed shelter and service center on East Burnside.

What made you dedicate your early career to homelessness?

I had, growing up, just about every advantage. My father was a successful television producer, my mother was a certified nurse midwife. But I also, unfortunately, had a father who was addicted to alcohol and prescription pain killers -- he eventually died from it in 1998. So I grew up in a house that was always chaotic. Working at Baloney Joe's gave me a sense of direction and purpose.

While in St. Louis, what were your ah-ha moments?

We had babies. That was my big ah-ha.

One of the things that I keep reflecting on is that each night at the Goose Hollow Family Shelter (which he ran in Southwest Portland), there were babies as young as my babies. My kids have every opportunity -- well- educated parents, a nice house in a good neighborhood. . . . and they thrive.

Sometimes I was amazed at how well kids in the shelter thrived. But it breaks my heart that they don't have the opportunities that my girls have. My girls don't have anything special. They've just got what every kid should have. It makes me want to work even harder to make sure kids don't live on our streets.

Will you continue your advocacy work as a minister?

I've been called to serve as the interim minister for Parkrose Community United Church of Christ. But I'll also be continuing my involvement with church members on issues such as homelessness and poverty. The state also has asked me to serve on the governor's new advisory committee on ending homelessness.

Society is becoming more materialistic. Does that make it harder to do what you do?

All of us want stability and happiness. We also want all the extras. I love my iPod. But do you try to spend all your time acquiring things versus loving people and building up your community? We fall into this trap of equating material things with love. The biggest mistake societies can make is when they replace love with desires for conquest and power. When they do that, societies crumble.

So it's an issue of balance?

Yes, but also we can't sustain America's standard of living and still have the world be a peaceful place. We are consuming too much of the world's resources. . . . So we have to make very difficult decisions about who we are as people if we want this world to thrive.

But is anyone still listening to a message like yours?

I'm hopeful there are still people who will listen. . . . I don't mind if my church or my message is in the minority opinion as long as I'm preaching what I hope is a truthful message of change. My hope is that one day, the things I believe will be the majority position, that every child should have a doctor, that every person should have a home, that the genders should be equal, that we should take care of the environment, which is God's gift to us.

How do you view your new career as a minister?

It's just another step in my life path. I'll be ordained on Sunday and some people will think of me differently once I'm ordained. They'll think I've been called by God and put on a pedestal. It's just one type of calling. I've been called to be a pastor. But all of us are called to be in ministry to one another at all kinds of different levels. We all just have to listen to what that call is in our lives.

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