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Guilt moves man to life's mission

The Rev. Chuck Currie, interim pastor at Parkrose Community United Church of Christ in east Portland, gained national attention recently over the controversy surrounding the Rev. Jeremiah Wright's remarks to his congregation.

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Clergy members often describe their ordination as "receiving a call from God," sketched by cartoonists as the average Joe on the street under the enormous pointer-finger of God parting the clouds on his chosen.

As a student at Sunset High School in Beaverton, the Rev. Chuck Currie, now the interim minister at Parkrose Community United Church of Christ in east Portland, found himself at the end of such a finger. The director of homeless shelter Baloney Joe's had spoken to Currie's class a year earlier, recruiting student volunteers. Though Currie had pledged to aid, he had not followed through.

When the returning director asked students if they knew why poverty and homelessness had increased since his last visit, he raised his finger across the crowd at Currie and said, "Because people like that don't keep their commitments to help." The guilt drove Currie to volunteer that weekend. He would stay for four years.

In the two decades since, Currie has held staff and board positions with poverty and homeless relief groups Outside In; Transition Projects, Inc.; Burnside Advocates Group; Multnomah County Community Action Commission; Oregon Housing NOW Coalition and the office of City Commissioner Gretchen Kafoury. He also served on the board of directors of the National Coalition for the Homeless from 1998 to 2002. Today, in addition to his ministry at Parkrose, he continues to sit on the Public Policy Committee for Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon, a collaboration of Catholic and mainline ministries tackling a wide range of issues including homelessness, poverty, health care and the environment.

These efforts would merit him the title of one of the Best People in Portland by Willamette Week and earn him the Community Harmony Award from the City of Portland Metro Human Rights Center, the Vollum Ecumenical Humanitarian Award by the Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon and the Blessed Are the Peacemakers Award by the World Council of Churches.

At Baloney Joe's, Currie discovered a compassionate community devoted to restoring civic responsibility, a principle he later described as, "This issue that people shouldn't be left out and left behind, that there is more to us than that." Though Currie "learned a lot from the

people who lived there about how difficult life can be," he echoed the testimony of many volunteers "about how you can sometimes find hope in the most tragic of circumstances."

From 1997 to 2002, Currie ran the Goose Hollow Family Shelter as director of community outreach for the First United Methodist Church. At the largest emergency winter shelter for homeless families in the Portland area, he witnessed a demographic shift in the homeless population. "When I started, the majority of people were homeless single men," Currie said. "Today the majority of people in Multnomah County who are homeless are families and single women with children."

He cited a statistic that counted 13,000 homeless children in Oregon schools last year. At Goose Hollow Shelter half of their parents held full-time jobs, but at salaries inadequate to support a family.

In 1998, Currie independently authored a homelessness and civil rights report for Oregon Housing NOW Coalition. The article examined the obstruction of voting rights, public education and the effect of anti-camping ordinances on the indigent. At the time he also considered running for county commissioner. But though he had briefly studied political science at Pacific University, Currie questioned whether politics provided the best outlet to address the root causes of the issues that most troubled him. Seeing babies and toddlers of working parents in homeless shelters struck Currie as downright immoral, indicative of a greater divide in our society.

"Jesus says in the Bible that how we treat the least of these in society is akin to how we treat God," Currie said. "So if we step over somebody on the street or ignore a family with a kid who needs food or medical attention, that's the same thing as denying that to God. And when you have that kind of broken relationship, it's hard to fix it through a political system or any other system. I wanted to pursue these issues both on a public policy level and also on a religious, spiritual level, and it was at that point that I decided I did want to go to seminary so I could more clearly articulate those issues from a theological framework and not a political framework."

Currie pursued his Master of Divinity degree from Eden Theological Seminary in Missouri, graduating in 2006. Though he worked at the United Methodist Church at the time, he transferred his membership and sought ordination in the United Church of Christ because he was attracted by its stand on justice issues.

The UCC Web site describes itself as "a united and uniting, multiracial and multicultural, accessible to all, open and affirming, and peace with justice church." With roots in the Congregationalist tradition, the UCC has no hierarchy to impose doctrine on its members, leaving the floor open for dialogue and debate.

Per its Web site the UCC proclaims, "From the beginning of our history, we were a church that affirmed the ideal that Christians did not always have to agree to live together in communion." The UCC has a history of advocating freedom and equality within and beyond its congregation. The church ordained the first woman pastor, the first black pastor and the

first openly gay pastor in the United States.

Currie praised, "Members of our churches fought against slavery and spoke out in favor of the civil rights movement and against the war in Vietnam, and those are all — from my perspective anyway — good, solid gospel positions to take."

Unfettered from government meddling by our constitution, spiritual groups have nonpartisan freedom in the realm of hearts and minds, motivating and inspiring the average Joe to question his own role. Though the government has the power to enact the will of the people, if most people focus no farther than a car in their garage and a chicken in their own pot, their policy will reflect that. By addressing the morality behind individual decisions and shedding light on the plight of the disadvantaged, Currie has taken activism into a spiritual level, and with the help of modern technology, to more people than ever before.

Currie started blogging to preserve his voice in Portland politics while studying in Missouri. "Since I couldn't actually be involved in the issues, I figured I could at least blog about them. What I didn't realize was that blogging could actually be an advocacy tool of its own." In addition to writing on www.chuckcurrie.com, Currie also edits the UCC national news blog at www.unitedchurchofchrist.blogspot.com, a forum for news both secular as well as church related, providing a national stage for the diverse congregation to sound off.

As a minister, Currie remains politically active but notes, "I keep a real strict line between that kind of activity and any church activity so I never talk about it to members and I never talk about it in my sermons." He admitted, "On my personal Web site I might write about it, but I try to keep those lines separate."

However, he believes that "many of the issues that we deal with on a political level are also spiritual issues." When prodded for his theological perspective on the current state of affairs in Portland, he cited the need to guarantee life's basic necessities, now granted only to those who can afford those necessities' rising costs.

"We need to start thinking in terms of basic human rights that people ought to have, and that includes universal health care and a universal right to housing. If we had those two things, including all the mental health and alcohol and drug treatment that we needed, you wouldn't see the number of people on the streets that you have today.

"We need increases in the minimum wage from what we have now so that people who work are not still living under the poverty level, and we need that not only for people who are working in the private sector but for all of the people working in the armed forces who are able to qualify for public assistance at the same time that we are asking them to guard our nation. In a society as rich and prosperous as ours, we can do those things with ease and still maintain the kind of quality of life that we have for everybody else."

Regarding the five-year Iraq occupation, Currie reiterated the pacifist stance shared by church founders. "Just about every single Christian church body in the United States, with the exception of the Southern Baptists, spoke out against this war from the very beginning

at a time when voices like mine were not exactly popular," he said. "It was not easy to speak out against it, but I did and I continue to because we have not concluded it. It's just gotten worse. We have lost over 4,000 Americans, and that is just the start of the story. As many as 100,000 Iraqi civilians have been killed directly as a result of the war and as many as 600,000 indirectly because of disease and the lack of food and other resources, and that is a moral issue."

The UCC not only protests war and injustice, but also helps preserve all creation, a jurisdiction no politician can gerrymander. On Earth Day, UCC churches opened a dialogue on the challenges facing a planet currently suffering from the long-term effects of human shortsightedness.

"God calls on us in Genesis to be stewards of creation, and that means protecting creation; it doesn't mean using it for our own resources," Currie said. "Right now global warming has become a big issue and talked about a lot but I don't think enough. Recycling, conserving and all of that stuff which I do think is important and I try to do, is not enough anymore. We are going to have to have government regulations on carbon emissions that we have never had before."

While heading debate on some contentious issues, the UCC and Currie have most recently received national attention, as well as much criticism, for initially defending the statements of Barack Obama's former pastor the Rev. Jeremiah Wright at Chicago's Trinity UCC.

"What is unique about the UCC is that it is not just our individual churches that take different stands on these kinds of things, but even in this congregation you will have a wide range of perspectives on an issue like Rev. Wright's preaching," Currie said. "But we are able to live with those differences because we have such a respect for diversity." After commending Wright's history of homelessness relief and HIV/AIDS advocacy, noting that Trinity unites the UCC's largest congregation of 10,000 members, Currie admitted, "I too was really surprised by his statements at the press club. I'm as confused as anybody by it all, but I still am not going to judge somebody like Rev. Wright from what I think is his worst moment. I am going to take his entire life and his entire ministry in perspective and I would hope to God that somebody will do something like that for me at some point."

Regarding Obama's relation, "I certainly hope that nobody would ever hold a member of my congregation responsible for what I preach on Sunday. The people of this church are not responsible for what I say, and I would hate to see one of them disqualified for running for public office because someone takes quotes of mine out of context from my podcast."

Roughly 500 listeners tune in to Currie's podcast; a sliver of those actually hear the sermons firsthand from Parkrose's pews. Currie accepted his interim position here in 2006 as the church reviews its place and purpose in the community. He has since agreed to serve three years total, while the church continues to address some difficult decisions. As a neighborhood church in a changing neighborhood, Parkrose UCC has suffered attrition as the area expands and immigrants bring their own churches.

"The story here at this church is not the minister but the congregation and the ministries that this entire church does," Currie said. "There have been people here all their lives doing ministry, and I'll be gone in another year and they'll still be here working at SnowCap doing good stuff to help people here in east county, working to make this neighborhood a better place, and I feel extraordinarily fortunate to have had the last two years and the next coming up to have been here."

Currie is right. This story is not about the minister.

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