

New Lesson 11: Insert for PA 222 Evangelists: Sharing a New World of Blessing

Evangelists as Ministers of Sanctuary

By Danny A. Belrose

God's love is a circle without a circumference. No one is on the outside looking in. *Everyone* is accepted. Unfortunately, some have not found their place within that circle. Many wounded souls are in search of hope, solace, and sanctuary. Their search is not primarily for *places* of sanctuary (important as these are) but for a loving community where acceptance and sanctuary rule. More particularly they seek "ministers of sanctuary"—persons in whom they can unreservedly place their trust. They yearn for someone who will not judge them but who will befriend, defend, and understand them. Evangelists are uniquely positioned to respond to these needs as *ministers of sanctuary*.

A Safe Harbor—A Safe Person

Professor John Cobb said, "If the Christian church does not provide sanctuary in the twenty-first century, it will cease to exist." *Sanctuary* is more than a sacred place—it is a sacred condition, process, and relationship—a ministry rooted in compassionate care that provides a *safe* harbor from life's stormy seas. A minister of sanctuary is a safe person whose high moral character and ethical lifestyle is consistent and transparent. Marshall McLuhan said it best, "The medium *is* the message." In other words, ministers of sanctuary carry a warrant of trust that says, "Do not be afraid, you are *safe* with me!" It is a moral mandate wrapped in the wardrobe of day-to-day actions, reactions, and responses. People see *who* you are as well as hear who you *say* you are.

Shared Fields of Experience

Ministry occurs within shared fields of experience. Ministers of sanctuary stand for those who cannot stand, and they speak for those who cannot speak. They do not minister from the sidelines but engage those they help *where they are*. Theirs is a ministry of presence. The Prophet Elijah's situation in 1 Kings Chapter 19 provides an example. Less than forty-eight hours after defeating 450 priests of Baal in a contest that saw him call down fire from heaven, Elijah hides in a cave awaiting God's word in the dark. It is the bizarre story of a hero on the run. In just a few verses he leaps from courage to despair, from mountaintop experience to the dark night of the soul.

Elijah's story is not as strange as it appears. Like most, if not all scripture stories, it is not about *Elijah*—it is about *you and me*. It's *your story* and *my story*. Everyone knows what it is to be on the run. Everyone knows what it is to be confused—to face doubt, fear, and uncertainty. Everyone knows what it is to confront insurmountable challenges one day and shrink from lesser trials the next. No one is immune to despair despite past or present victories. It is estimated that one in four worshippers are in crisis each Sunday. Crisis, is of course, a relative term; it runs the gamut of a child anxious about tomorrow's math exam to someone contemplating suicide. Crisis frequently hides behind plastic smiles, desperate to hear God's word of hope.

Elijah's sanctuary was not the cave. Sanctuary came in the form of a question that reawakened his fading faith. God's still small voice asked, "What are you doing *here*?"

and hope sprang anew in the revelation that Elijah's God was not external to his plight. God was not "out there" but "here"—*with him* in the dark.

I Am You—You Are Me

The root of compassionate ministry is *one-ness*! Despite our individuality we inexplicably are connected. When others cry, we taste salt. Compassion arises from a mystery unexplained, yet intuitively understood, that "I am for you, because you *are me*, and I *am you*."

Though we cannot experience the unique pain or joy of another, we are fellow citizens of life's triumphs and tragedies. Ministers of sanctuary, therefore, do not sit at the opening of the cave enticing people to come out—they enter into the dark to be with those wrapped in the ink of confusion and despair with the message, "What are you doing here? Let's walk out together." They enter into life's caves of captivity because they, too, have trembled in the dark of uncertainty. They go on behalf of others because someone, somehow, at some time, came for them with the good news that, "It's not as dark as you think it is!"

Sacred Community

Ministers of sanctuary are ministers of sacred community. They are not solo acts who simply offer a one-to-one relationship with another in good times and bad, but strive to remind persons of their ultimate worth and to reconnect them to the source of abundant life—the body of Christ—a company of believers where there is community without conformity and diversity without division.

Sanctuary often is defined as "sacred space" or as "asylum." These metaphors are helpful in understanding sanctuary as a focus of ministry.

Sanctuary as Sacred Space

The Greek word *temenos* (translated as sanctuary) means "an area cut off." A *temenos* was a piece of land marked off by a wall or boundary stones, reserved for sacrifices and dedications to a god. The term sanctuary not only differentiated sacred from the secular, but segregated the holy from the most holy. The Hebrew Bible is replete with gradations of sacredness distinguishing that which is holy, profane, pure, and impure.

All enduring religions recognize sacred space. *Community of Christ* theology maintains that all things are spiritual, that is, the universe (meaning *one-reality*) is undivided and essentially sacred. This suggests that any fence between the sacred and secular is of our own making. Consequently we find ourselves dancing back and forth from one side to the other.

How does the metaphor "sacred space" shape ministries of sanctuary? It reminds us that we continually must examine our own dance between the sacred and the secular. It reminds us that we must evaluate our personal strengths and weaknesses honestly. It tells us that the space and place for effective ministry is as broad or narrow as mutual receptivity permits. In brief, ministers of sanctuary must know who they are, that venues for ministry are varied, that symbols are important, and that the ministry we offer must not be centered in self:

- 1. Know Who and Where You Are.** We must have a clear sense of our personal sacred space and place—our failings as well as our graces. Ministers of sanctuary are not spiritually enlightened gurus who dispense wisdom to the great unwashed; we are mutual

travelers on the path of discipleship who offer help and *seek help*. We continually must strive to create sanctuary within ourselves.

2. Venue Matters. Ministers of sanctuary must discern where, when, and how best to bless those in need. *Does the venue for ministry permit time to listen intently—time to think before speaking, deciding, and acting?* Even when time and place provide a sense of the sacred, we must monitor our spiritual readiness, or lack thereof, and respond accordingly.

3. Symbols are Important. Ministers of sanctuary actively listen, observe, and honor the symbols and sacred stories entrusted to them. These may be cultural, generational, religious, political, vocational, gender-based or unique personal ways of perceiving reality (e.g., family narratives, rituals, unique idioms, etc.). We must know what music moves those we help, what words and expressions mean the most to them, what memories and places have shaped and sustained them, what victories they have won, and what hurts they have endured. Whenever someone invites you into the private sacred space, the holy of holies of their personal story, it is a rare privilege that weaves you together in a fabric of confidentiality and trust. In such a relationship we create sanctuary.

4. It's *not* About You! We are not the means of another's sanctification. Ministers of sanctuary remove themselves from center stage. Our ministry must be transparent. It must always point beyond self to the true source of all blessings.

Sanctuary as Asylum

English law from the fourth and seventeenth century designated the sanctuary of a church or temple as a place of asylum wherein one was safe from arrest.¹ Asylum is not an outdated term. Our borders remain open to those requiring political asylum and the concept of sanctuary as a place of refuge is lived out in a variety of settings where desperation drives persons helter-skelter in search for any port in a storm.

Some ports are more damaging than the storm itself. Denial, “acting-out,” drug abuse, and other addictive behaviors promise short-term relief and long-term misery. We need not look beyond church doors to discover people who are lost and don't know it. Preachers and penitents alike find themselves running on the spot—aimlessly going through the motions, unsure why the sun is not as warm as it once was or so cold inside that it no longer matters. Many silent souls yearn for asylum, while their cries, hidden by smiles, go unheard.

Crossing Jordan

“The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the Israelites, and say to them: When you cross the Jordan into the land of Canaan, then you shall select cities to be cities of refuge for you.”—Numbers 35:9 NRSV

Many in need of refuge are unable “to cross the Jordan”—they neither see the Promised Land nor know how to get there. Their private hells include myriad forms of physical, mental, and spiritual distress, not the least of which is discrimination. The banks of the Jordan are crowded with people marginalized because of race, height, weight, gender, sexual orientation, ideology, physical and mental deficiencies, etc. Pain is not discriminatory. Millions go to bed hungry, the affluent spend themselves on that which does not satisfy, and unhealthy addictions subtly destroy lives behind closed doors.

The Map Is Not the Territory

The aforementioned needs demand skilled ministry. Ministers of sanctuary know when assistance is beyond their territory of expertise. We can serve as a safe bridge paving the way to professional help. The importance of competent referral cannot be overemphasized (a current contact list of competent professionals is a must). We also must be conversant with laws mandating the reporting of certain actions to legal authorities.

Asylum with Limits

Asylum can be productive and counter-productive. Asylum is shelter from the storm, a safe place to re-group and to consider options, while temporarily protected from life's whirlwind. It is not a permanent residence. Ministers of sanctuary provide *asylum with limitations*. We must recognize when safe harbor threatens to become the only harbor and when desire to help the wounded moves from triage toward co-dependency.

Cries for help are not always obvious. People disguise pain when disclosure of their situation may prove embarrassing. When they do turn for help, they seek someone they respect and in whom they place unwavering trust. Usually, this is a confidant who has listened to them without judgment in the past and who also has shared confidences with them. Although friendship generally is the first locus for help, frequently someone neutral is sought. It is here where one's warrant as a minister of sanctuary rises or falls. The cry, "Who can I trust and to whom can I turn?" seeks someone whose reputation for fairness and compassion is unquestioned.

There are countless situations confronting those in need. We will look briefly at ministries of sanctuary for (1) children, (2) youth and young adults, (3) family fragmentation, (4) the elderly, and (5) victims of sexism.

1. Ministries of Sanctuary for Children

The spectrum of children and youth desperate for asylum ranges from the extremes of poverty, physical battering, sexual abuse, drug addiction, and mental mistreatment to the plight of affluent children who engage in self-destructive behaviors. Many of these issues beg for in-depth professional assistance. As stated earlier, an effective minister of sanctuary can provide a safe bridge to those uniquely trained to help.

Caring's "Library Life"

Bridges are not built overnight. Children relate to people they like and who like them—people who have taken time to single them out with a special hello, a friendly ear, and a word of encouragement. In times of trouble they remember adults who have *remembered them*, who have cheered for their home team, taken them fishing or dropped in when they were sick. The simplest acts of kindness and caring register with children and young people. Care's library life extends for decades and often is not only a link to help in present circumstances, but in the distant future.

Never Treat Confessions Lightly

Ministry with children and youth requires meaningful investment in their lives. It requires treating them as equals. It requires taking their failings, mistakes, and concerns seriously—neither blowing them out of proportion nor minimizing their import. Children never have small problems. Their tearful confessions never should be taken lightly with comments such as, "Oh, that's not so bad," or "That doesn't matter." Regardless of how insignificant a child's issue might rank on an adult scale of importance, it might be earth-shattering in the mind and heart of the child.

Abuse and Neglect . . .

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reported that an estimated 896,000 children were determined to be victims of child abuse in 2002. (An estimated 1,400 children died because of abuse or neglect.) Canadian statistics are no less encouraging.

Child abuse occurs among all social strata, including those who sit in our pews. Child safety is an absolute priority. All ministers of sanctuary should be “Registered Youth Workers.” *Community of Christ* policy states that “Only registered youth workers will be used in the church’s children’s and youth programs and ministries. Registered youth workers’ assistants, persons fifteen to twenty years of age, will only be used under the supervision of a registered youth worker.”

Ministers of sanctuary heighten their awareness of children needing refuge and safety. They sharpen their powers of observation and listen more intently for subtle cries for help. They tactfully probe for information when children “act out.” They note when physical damage seems unusual and stories of accidents are suspiciously frequent. The principle of sanctuary draws no lines of exclusion—perpetrators of child abuse and neglect also need help and ministry.

2. Troubled Teens and Young Adults

Youth and young adults are not the church of tomorrow—they are the church of *today* and tomorrow. Their world is radically different than that of their predecessors. While they enjoy instant access to vast stores of knowledge and are educationally advanced, today’s youth, according to some researchers, are less socially mature than previous generations.

Our high-tech age may provide libraries of data at the click of a computer mouse, but it also has seen a decline in day-to-day family communication. Whereas their parents and grandparents strengthened relationships within shared household responsibilities (now mainly automated) and developed communication skills over the supper table, today’s over-scheduled families seldom share a meal together. Even the simple chore of washing dishes was a venue for social development. Technological advancement is a blessing, but it exacts its own price, including a reduced sense of community. For some young people, social exchange and reality have shrunk to a computer screen, a PDA, a cell-phone, or the ear-buds of an iPod.

Their world is not shaped solely by technology but by the shift from modernity to *postmodernity*. Postmodern youth are not governed by yesterday’s expectations and norms. If we are to help them in troubled times, we must understand the times in which they live.

From Factuality to Experientialism

Marcus J. Borg in *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time* argues that modernity has led us to be preoccupied with *factuality*, whereas postmodernity is marked by a turn to *experience* and a remarkable resurgence of interest in spirituality—the experiential dimension of religion.²

The move from factuality to experientialism has positive and negative outcomes. Experientialism, which denies dogmatism and frees people to pursue positive spiritual formation and embrace levels of truth beyond literalism, is enriching. Conversely, experientialism that surrenders to unhealthy “privatism” (i.e., life is all about *me*, and I alone determine what is *true*”) denies community and becomes destructive to self and others.

Postmodern young people tend to be more subjective than their forbearers. Their thoughts, trends, convictions, and worldview lean more toward moral relativism—the philosophy that there is no truth with a capital T. This is not to suggest that young people are morally adrift, but rather that they weigh ethical issues upon a scale which has fewer pre-accepted rules. They

are spiritual but not necessarily religious and do not have the same loyalty to institutionalized religion as their parents.

Will You Be *There* for Me?

Volumes have been written about postmodernity in which youth and young adults are labeled “boomers,” “busters,” “gen-Xers,” etc. While this material is helpful, we must guard against stereotyping. We minister to individuals whose unique gifts, perceptions, and attitudes do not fall neatly into slots of generalization. That being said, there is sufficient warrant to suggest that the core relationship question young people are asking is not “What do you believe?” but “Will you *be there* for me?” To this question, ministers of sanctuary must echo a resounding, “Yes!” We turn now to some of the challenging arenas where this question is being asked.

Chemical Abuse

Many youth fall victim to chemical abuse, alcohol being the most readily available and most popular. A recent study reveals that underage drinking costs the United States more than \$58 billion annually, enough for a new, state-of-the-art computer for every student. Alcohol kills five times more teenagers than all other drugs combined (usually through accidents). We delude ourselves if we think alcohol abuse is not a problem within our denomination. It may be that the church’s historic stand against alcohol has placed this practice behind closed doors and distanced some young adults from our church doors.

Drinking’s inherent problems will not be solved by moralistic arguments. Certainly, the dangers implicit in social drinking cannot be minimized; however, its practice must not be viewed as a test of fellowship or faithfulness. In his 2005 World Conference sermon, President Stephen M. Veazey called for the church “to stop defining each other in divisive ways,” reminding us that we are sisters and brothers in Christ.

We place a higher premium on being “right” than on being “in relationship,” truly reconciled in Christ. The walls of hostility and division that Christ has torn down are being rebuilt by us because of our suspicion of others who are different from us. Here is the truth: We are much more alike than we are different: our destinies are intertwined.

Moral superiority has no place in the *Community of Christ*. We cannot help those who need help with self-righteous subtleties that imply people who choose *not* to drink are on higher ground than those who do. Youth struggling with chemical abuse will turn for help only to those who will not turn from them. Sanctuary provides understanding and compassion, not estrangement and harsh judgment.

Shifting Sexual Mores

Young people confront a host of sexual issues ranging from sexual orientation, pornography, promiscuity, prostitution, sexually transmitted disease, and the blurring lines of sexual mores. Pre-marital sex has become a misnomer. Sexual activity no longer is linked intrinsically to marriage (or commitment), and co-habitation has become socially acceptable.

Many young people define “having sex” as sexual intercourse, while petting, mutual masturbation, and oral sex fall outside this definition. The greatest threat to today’s shifting sexual standards may not be unrestricted sexual activity, but the death of intimacy. Ministers of sanctuary must be sensitive to the times and be prepared to offer realistic, healthy guidance free of punitive “Thou shalt nots.” We must provide sound moral guidance rooted in Christian ethics that champion mutual respect, responsibility, intimacy, and the blessing of loving commitment.

Children Having Children . . .

More than 800,000 teens become pregnant each year in the United States. Teen pregnancies are much higher in this nation than any other developed country—double that in Canada and at least four times France and Germany. Although having a child outside of marriage no longer is a stigma, the challenges that it presents to the young couple and their immediate families are numerous. Obviously, each situation is unique, and ministerial support must be offered tactfully and not intrusively.

Where family support is lacking, the couple will turn to persons who provide a safe harbor where feelings can be vented and realistic counsel offered. The minister of sanctuary's task is to help them discover their full range of options and to support them in the decisions they make.

Young Adult/Adolescent Suicide

Signs forewarning suicide often are hidden. How frequently have we heard, "He always seemed happy. Why he's the last person I thought would ever do this!" A U.S. study conducted in 2001 revealed that suicide was the third-leading cause of death among young adults and adolescents fifteen to twenty-four years, following unintentional injuries and homicide. What has been said before about investing ourselves proactively in the life of young people and the need for us to sharpen our powers of observation and listening cannot be overstated. Ministers of sanctuary must be aware of suicide warning signs:

- Suicide threats, direct and indirect
- Obsession with death
- Poems, essays and drawings that refer to death
- Dramatic change in personality or appearance
- Irrational, bizarre behavior
- Overwhelming sense of guilt, shame or reflection
- Changed eating or sleeping patterns
- Severe drop in school performance
- Giving away belongings.

Who is Accountable for What?

Do not do for young people what they can do for themselves, and do not make promises you cannot keep. Broken promises break relationships. Effective helping relationships are contractual, and accountability is crucial. Both parties must have a clear understanding of who is accountable for what, when, where, and how.

Telling it "Like it Is!"

We have never been *their age*. We may know what it was to be a teenager decades ago, but we have never been a young person in today's complex world. Effective ministers acknowledge this gap and admit it honestly. Young people respect ministers who "tell it like it is." They will not respond to bromides such as, "This is the best time of your life" when they know that it isn't. That is like saying, "It's all downhill from here—you have nothing to look forward to." If here and now is filled with frustration, misery, and confusion—the future holds little promise.

Young people know we do not have all the answers. They are looking for guidance that is shared, rather than prescribed. They want help in sorting out issues, identifying priorities, and broadening their alternatives. Ministers of sanctuary can tactfully help young people explore unseen alternatives with questions such as *What would be the very best outcome in this situation? What would be the worst? Are there any outcomes in between? What prevents their*

achievement? What can we do to make possible your most-desirable and reasonable outcome? How can I help?

Theological Sanctuary—Giving Permission to Doubt

Theological sanctuary exists when people have permission to doubt. The opposite of faith is not doubt—the opposite of faith is fear. Young people frequently seek refuge from belief systems they no longer hold. They must come to terms with what Marcus Borg describes as “the domesticating lenses of childhood faith.”³

Regardless of religious upbringing, young people test theological waters. They may respect what dad and mom believe, but they invariably will ask, “What do I believe?” We must assure them, “It is not only OK to question what you believe—you must challenge what you believe. If you need someone to bounce your ideas off, I am here. I will listen and share my thoughts and my faith, and you can decide their worth.”

A rabbi once said, “The essence of spiritual maturity is the refusal to shut doors.” The heart of openness is *exploration*. Ministers of sanctuary help young people understand that openness doesn’t mean we must drop everything near and dear. Its mandate is not “anything goes.” Sound theological exploration does not embrace every wispy wind of doctrine or cutting-edge philosophical idea. We must not abandon tried and true universals—the ethical imperatives that hold us firmly to the ground of being. In effect, the doors of inadequate and unhealthy theological perspectives swing shut themselves in the wake of enlightenment.

Ministers of sanctuary help to open doors. We provide refuge for those who feel inhibited in sharing their faith journey. We work with congregational leaders and members to create communities of acceptance wherein traditional and non-traditional viewpoints can be shared without hesitation or fear of alienation.

3. Family Fragmentation

The pain of family fragmentation affects extended family members, friends, the workplace, and their faith community. Ministry is needed on several fronts. Couples often wait too long before seeking help. Children frequently are treated like possessions. Confused and torn by competing loyalties, they often see themselves as the cause of family break-up. Women (and men) find themselves trapped in abusive situations and see no way out. The scenerios are endless. Ministers of sanctuary must tactfully address such issues as: *How do family, friends, and church members respond sensitively without taking sides? Who in this tragedy feels abandoned and forgotten? Who has not been given voice or ear? Who will take advantage of whom? Who has not sought legal, moral, and spiritual counsel? Is reconciliation possible? Advisable?*

Those on the verge of separation need refuge in the form of someone who will hear their hurts and concerns, help point the way, refer them to professional assistance and assure them that they are part of a sacred community willing to bear their pain in compassionate ways. They need guidance before things are said and done that should not be said and done.

Cries for help, before and after family dissolution, frequently are subtle and indirect. These may be expressed by decreased church attendance or a sudden withdrawal from participation in a committee, choir, priesthood responsibilities, etc. We must know those in need well enough to hear dissonant notes and detect unusual behaviors, which signal that help is needed. We must strive to prevent impending damage and mend damage done. Such ministry calls us to continual self-evaluation:

- Do we love the people we serve, and do they know it?
- Do they know that we cherish their ultimate good?

- Have we enabled them and supported them?
- Have we helped them set realizable goals?
- Do we give them the freedom to fail and the grace to begin again?

4. Sanctuary for the Elderly

The elderly in many ways have become the forgotten generation. They face skyrocketing pharmaceutical and medical expenditures, out-of-reach assisted-living and nursing-home costs, loss of life partners, declining abilities, dependence on others for personal needs, and physical and mental abuse—to mention but a few. Compound this list with feelings of detachment and loneliness and it is little wonder the elderly are in dire need of refuge.

Ministers of sanctuary, skilled in money management, can help seniors to stretch their money. They can link them to trained financial planners, tax and investment consultants, and local and federal assistance programs. Proactive financial guidance as people approach retirement provides sanctuary from future monetary problems.

Elder Abuse and Neglect

It is estimated that two million elderly Americans residing at home are victims of mistreatment or neglect every year. They often are reluctant to report abuse because they depend on those who abuse them and are ashamed to admit their plight. We must heighten our powers of observation and engage them in tactful, yet probative, dialogue, alert to body language, facial expressions, and repeated themes that may be cries for help. The following characteristics of abusive households are used by health-care professionals to evaluate the possibility of mistreatment:

- Evidence of alcohol or other substance abuse
- Actions that are overly attentive or aggressive toward the elderly person
- Social isolation
- Lack of family or social supports
- High stress
- Financial or marital problems
- Past psychiatric history
- Family history of abuse, neglect, or mistreatment
- Dependence of abuser on the victim

Congregations should ensure that listings of local and federal help-giving agencies are readily available in high-traffic areas (bulletin boards, restrooms, etc.) and frequently inserted in Sunday worship bulletins. Ministers of sanctuary can help arrange family support groups, meal services/support, housekeeping support, adult day care, and respite care.

Vicarious Death . . .

The elderly suffer “secondary loss” or a *vicarious death of the self* when their contemporaries die. In a sense, they die with them. Colleagues, who knew them in their youth, take these living memories with them to the grave. Few friends remain who remember who they *were* and truly *are*. They no longer can relive their past through mutually shared experiences. Their stories fall on young ears that do not fully understand. Younger generations see only old men and old women who, in their experience, have always been old and with whom they share little in common.

Acting “On Behalf Of”

Ministers of sanctuary should be prepared to help family members who must act on behalf of older loved ones whose self-reliance is detrimental to their well-being and the well-being of others (e.g., decreased physical and mental acuity, nursing-home care, power of attorney etc.).

Helpful Ministries to the Aged

Ministry is extended to the aged through regular phone contact, cards and notes of appreciation, and personal visits filled with conversations that ignite memory and recognize their achievements. Many seniors have productive years ahead of them and wonderful contributions to make but are waiting to be asked.

The elderly want honest relationships that neither exaggerate their limitations nor minimize them. They do not want to be patronized and should be treated with respect. “Wisdom comes with age” is not just an expression. We have much to learn from those who have traveled over paths we have not. Ministers of sanctuary encourage the aged to tell their stories, to remember, to relive, and to share lessons learned and knowledge gained.

Children often relate well with seniors and can be a source of refuge and sanctuary for the forgotten generation. We can be instrumental in fostering these mutually beneficial relationships. We can encourage seniors to mentor young leaders who need encouragement and counsel.

5. Sexism and Gender Issues

Sexism continues to plague us. Although both men and women may suffer demeaning gender-profiling, women share the brunt of abuse. Misogyny (“hatred of women”) may sound grossly overstated in a church where women are ordained and occupy leadership roles, but misogyny (subtle and otherwise) stems from patriarchy within and beyond church doors. It is the root cause of battered women, rape victims, sexual slavery, pornography, the ever-present “glass ceiling” with its unequal pay for equal responsibility, the dominance of *theistic masculinity* (i.e., God is exclusively male), and a host of overt and subtle inequities that see many women hungry for solace and sanctuary.

Certainly, societal and theological questions swirling around sexual orientation (e.g., bisexual and homosexual rights, ordination, and marriage, etc.) find many church members abused, confused, and in opposite camps. Ministers of sanctuary must study these issues with an open and prayerful mind. Regardless of personal views, we must comfort and minister to all who struggle with these questions and do so without *imposing* our personal agendas. Confidentiality and sensitivity are vital. We talk about sexuality as if sexuality isn’t present. Human sexuality is not a “subject” or “topic”—it is *people*.

Hospitality and Blessing

Ministers of sanctuary serve as hosts where strangers and outcasts, once relegated to the outer tent, are welcomed and accepted free of judgment. As hosts, our personal agendas and biases must not assume prime residence.

Hospitality is the act of bringing people home when home seems far away. Hospitality creates an atmosphere of openness, comfort, and freedom—a freedom where both minister and friend are “confessee” and confessor. Hospitality is welcoming the stranger free of being a fixer, and fraught with being a friend! Hospitality has to do with being authentic. It has to do with recognizing the worth of all souls and erasing lines between:

- The pure and the impure
- The loved and the unloved
- The accepted and the unaccepted
- The witty and dull
- The learned and unlearned
- The beautiful and ugly
- The weak and the strong
- The fat and the thin
- The powerful and the powerless

Sacrament and Sanctuary

Perhaps, the most obvious ministry that evangelists offer to those in need of sanctuary is the ministry of blessing. The sacrament of an evangelist's blessing is unique and central to our calling. In a very real sense it is an ordinance of hospitality that brings the evangelist and the candidate to a lively awareness of God's ever-abiding presence in our lives.

People in search of refuge frequently are not *at home* with themselves and not *at home* with their God. The evangelist's blessing is not a "catch all" answer to all who seek our ministry in times of need, but it may well serve as a prelude or benediction to those we strive to serve. As ministers of blessing and sanctuary we are called to be competent, contextual, confident, confidential, courageous, congruent, and committed. We are called to *be at home* and to call other to *be at home*. We are called to welcome all who abide within the circle of God's love—a circle without a circumference—where all life is sacramental.

Endnotes

¹ Many ancient peoples, including the Egyptians, the Greeks, and the Hebrews, recognized a religious right of asylum, protecting criminals (or those accused of crime) from legal action to some extent. This principle was adopted by the early Christian church, and various rules developed for what the person had to do to qualify for protection and just how much protection it was.

In England, King Ethelbert made the first laws regulating sanctuary in about 600 A.D. By Norman times, there had come to be two kinds of sanctuary: All churches had the lower-level kind, but only the churches the king licensed had the broader version. There were at least twenty-two churches with charters for that kind of sanctuary, including Battle Abbey, Beverley, Colchester, Durham, Hexham, Norwich, Ripon, Wells, Winchester Cathedral, Westminster Abbey, and York Minster.

Sometimes the criminal had to get to the church itself to be protected. He might have to ring a certain bell there, or hold a certain ring or door-knocker, or sit on a certain chair (“frith-stool”), and some of these items survive at various churches. In other places, there was an area around the church, sometimes extending one mile, and there would be stone “sanctuary crosses” marking the boundary of the area; some of those still exist today, too.

As it came to be codified in England, a felon who claimed the right of sanctuary could remain in the sanctuary area for thirty to forty days and then had to leave England (“abjure the realm”) by the shortest route and never return without the king’s permission. Anyone who did come back could be executed by the law and/or excommunicated by the church.

² Marcus J. Borg in *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*, HarperSanFrancisco, 1989, p.17

³ *Ibid.*, p. 120