

THE ORDER OF EVANGELISTS

Class at Temple, November 26, 2008

By Velma Ruch

One day in preparation for the Evangelists' In-training Event in September 1995, Everett Graffeo, Barbara Howard, and I met in an office at Herald House. There was no specific agenda, but a question was on Everett's mind: "Why are we called an Order of Evangelists?"

We have quorums and councils and orders, and I personally still am not quite sure of the difference. We decided on this day, however, to come to some conclusion.

To help us, Barbara brought in an unabridged dictionary, and I am sure we found more than a hundred definitions of "order." About half a dozen could apply to us, with definitions such as "Any of several grades of the Christian ministry: the order of priesthood," or "An organization of people united by some fraternal bond or social aim."

This didn't help us a great deal, but it got us thinking about what we considered the basic principles of our organization. I got the assignment of writing all this down. Most of what we decided appears in the article.

In the short time available today we can mention only two or three basic principles underlying our name. One that has existed from the very beginning is that the order has a responsibility for carrying on the business of the organization. That is all outlined in your book.

Not much was made of the order for a long time, and about the only occasion evangelists met as an order was at General Conference. That still holds true to a large extent today, but under the leadership of Everett we did try to expand on why we have an organization of evangelists.

A defining statement was written and appears on page 126 of your book:

The Order of Evangelists is an integrated community of persons with a rich diversity of talents, gifts, interests, and experience who by calling and ordination freely choose to come under the disciplines of the Order for the benefit of the church and the world.

A key phrase in that definition is "an integrated community of persons." As evangelists we are responsible to three communities: the

community of persons making up the order, the community of the church, and the worldwide outreach of our ministry. I would like to spend a little time on each.

First is our relationship to one another on an individual basis and to the order as a whole. Whenever I see someone ordained to the office of evangelist, I greet them with, "Welcome to the Order." That welcome has a great deal of significance. It says, "We are there for you. We support and love you, and we are sensitive to your needs." I personally have been supported this way many times. Let me give you just one example.

A couple of years ago I became ill, and I had some responsibilities I wasn't sure I could handle. Then one of our Lamoni evangelists, Marvin Lewis, came to my house, bringing a beautiful red rose to cheer me up. While visiting, he said, "I know you are scheduled to speak at Bethany next Sunday. Allow me to drive you down there.

"I will also see to it," he said, "that they will have a chair for you so you can sit while you speak." We can do such seemingly small things for one another, and they make all the difference.

The same applies to the organization as a whole. We don't know all 600 or 700 evangelists scattered around the world, but we are connected by an invisible bond.

I became very much aware of that when I was preparing my talk for the In-Training Event. Forty days before that event, all evangelists were asked to engage in special prayer in preparation. As I worked on my talk, I began with the words, "It is springtime in the Church of Jesus Christ." As the words continued to flow from that beginning, I constantly was aware that prayers were being offered all over the world. The recognition of that presence inspired me.

The second community to which we are responsible is the community of the church. The church exists for two purposes: nurture and mission. As evangelists we need to be particularly cognizant of the nurturing aspect of the congregation, for out of it grows the possibility of witness.

The Council of Twelve has the responsibility of calling persons to the offices of evangelist and seventy. Symbolically this represents the two arms of their ministry. Section 163 gives specific attention to the apostle-seventy relationship. While not specifically mentioned in the document, the nurturing element is of equal importance.

Mission is not possible without nurture. Evangelists are not the only ones who work on nurture, but as ministers of blessing it is a major part of our calling. Evangelists are free of administrative responsibility and have the

opportunity to use their specific gifts and talents in the work of blessing the congregation. How to do that is a priority that each of us carries.

The third community is worldwide in scope. We are a traveling people, and we do have opportunity to minister all over the world. We come to this ministry with experience in nurture and compassion for people in need.

I found it interesting that the first time I went to Norway as an elder my major concern was creating a cohesive group, a critical mass that could work together. The second time I was a newly ordained evangelist. Without my intending it, my interest and work shifted to the individual. So often in working with the group there can be forgotten persons on the fringes that desperately need care and attention. That is part of our calling.

Time does not allow us to discuss all possibilities for the ministry of the order, but one basic aspect underlying all the rest needs to be mentioned.

We should be leaders, not only in practicing the spiritual disciplines ourselves, but in helping others find the approach to spirituality that works best for them. This is a place where individual differences matter. We need to be conversant ourselves with the many possibilities of approaching the Divine so in relationship with others we can find what works best for them.

In that sense we serve as spiritual directors opening avenues and supporting progress. Individual spirituality will lead to social spirituality and all will be blessed

“Team games are compulsory in the school of divine love,” wrote Evelyn Underhill. In becoming a member of the Order of Evangelists, we are part of a team game.

“Welcome to the Order!”