



Sharing the Good News!

Penn Northeast Conference of the United Church of Christ

And those people call themselves Christians! by Alan C. Miller, Conference Minister

I am entering my 18th year of serving in area ministry, the first 11 years as an Associate Conference Minister and the last 7 years as a Conference Minister. During that time I have worked with over 200 congregations. Most often the work has been either pastoral (serving as a pastor to the pastors and congregations of the Conference), ceremonial (participating in ordinations, installations, historical anniversary celebrations, and dedication services), or consultative (helping congregations with leadership development, stewardship education, church growth and evangelism, or long-range planning and envisioning processes). And then there are those times when I was asked to come and help because the congregation was in the midst of “a church fight.” The minority of these “fights” has been over serious theological disagreements within the congregation; the majority has been over life-threatening issues such as whether or not the new carpet in the sanctuary should be red or blue (sarcasm intended).

Often times while I am sitting in a room full of angry people who just can't find a way to work it out, at the height of the anger and frustration someone will lament about the other side: “And those people call themselves Christians!” (I first heard this accusation at an angry congregational meeting in which the members were trying to decide if the consistory should be allowed to smoke in the building during consistory meetings. --- This used to be a big issue in some of the *tobacco road* congregations in North Carolina.)

Whenever I hear that complaint (“And those people call themselves Christians!”), I am reminded and amazed at how little work most of our congregations do around the question of: *How do Christians behave?* Most often this question is completely ignored as it is assumed that just because we belong to a Christian church, everyone here automatically acts like a Christian. Well folks – that is not the case. As a matter of fact, two of the basic reasons for the existence of the early church were evangelism (taking the Good News of Jesus Christ to the world) and discipleship (teaching new believers about the faith and helping them to grow in their spirituality – their awareness of the presence of God in creation and in their daily lives). It is sad that many of our congregations have completely abandoned these two basic endeavors of what it means to be the church.

A number of years ago the Board of Directors of our Conference made a decision: *If we were going to be able to help local congregations discover their mission as the church, then we first had to model what we preached.* This understanding was taken very seriously by the Conference's Nominating Committee. The Committee studied

what it meant to be a healthy Conference led by healthy leaders. We owe a great debt of gratitude to the Rev. William Metzger who was vital to our study. Bill challenged us to ask the question: What do healthy Christian leaders look like and how do they act? With Bill's help we adopted a *Covenant of Christian Leadership Behavior* that we give and review together with everyone who accepts a position on one of the Conference's boards, teams, or committees.

I thought that you might like to see a copy of our Covenant, and then you might be in a better position during your next church fight to determine *just how those people who call themselves Christians should be acting.*

PNEC Covenant of Christian Leadership Behaviors

Relying on the grace of God, we will do our best to live the fruits of the spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control [Galatians 5:22-23a], remembering that:

- This is Christ's church.
- We are servants and stewards of Christ's church.
- Our words and our behaviors communicate many things; what we see and hear passes through many filters ... some include our faith, our fears, our visible and invisible loyalties, our sense of self, and our sense of others.

We will recognize the gifts and graces each of us bring to the table, remaining aware that healthy church leadership requires a variety of gifts and we have all been blessed in different ways. [I Corinthians 12]

We believe everyone is trying their best to have this church bring glory to God.

We will share our part in our mutual accountability for success, by actively participating in the discussion and decision-making process.

We will listen to, invite, and encourage other points of view.

We will ask questions only to clarify our understanding, not to put others down.

We will feel free to disagree with issues and methods but will restate what we are disagreeing with first, playing flat out and fully engaged - saying what is on our minds - with no hidden agendas.

We will not knowingly participate in negative or derogatory conversations about others and will remind any brothers or sisters who try to engage us in these conversations that we don't do that in the church. [Galatians 5:19-21]

We will try to avoid defensive reactions and will speak only for ourselves unless being asked to bring an issue to the Board or a committee on behalf of another person or group.

If we offend someone, or feel another has offended us, we will discuss it with them privately and not talk to anyone else about it unless we have agreed to ask a witness to be present. When we do make mistakes we will admit them and make amends. [Matthew 5:21-24; 18:15-20]

If it becomes evident that behaviors are non-productive, disruptive, unhealthy, and/or destructive -- we will address them.