

Ministering to the 1%

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Jesus wasn't a "sociological revolutionary," says the Rev. John Buchanan, longtime pastor at Fourth Presbyterian Church on Michigan Avenue.

The Christian savior counted the affluent and respectable among his friends and followers, as well as the despised and destitute. The congregation at Fourth Presbyterian is likewise mixed. It's a place, says the 73-year-old Rev. Buchanan, where a CEO and a homeless person might share a pew.

But outside the church doors, the gap between the wealthy and the rest of society seems wider than ever, as the after-effects of the worst recession in a generation ravage the middle class. Stubbornly high unemployment and home foreclosures stoke anger against the fortunate few, while President Barack Obama calls on the rich to "pay their fair share" and street protests vilify the "1%."

In places where the well-to-do gather to pray, clergy and congregants are grappling with the spiritual implications of these events, and the religious obligations that come with wealth.

"We can't ignore there are so many people who are underemployed, out of work in Lake Forest, losing their homes," says the Rev. Christine Chakoian, 54, pastor of First Presbyterian Church in the North Shore suburb that's become synonymous with affluence and comfort. "So what is our Christian responsibility to that?"

The Bible is riddled with references to poverty and wealth, greatly outnumbering passages pertaining to hot-button social issues like gay rights or capital punishment. Prominent Christian and Jewish leaders alike have remarked that cutting out references to the poor would leave the Scriptures in tatters.

Even as Jesus mixed with all types, he also was clear that the rich must help those who have less, Rev. Buchanan says. So when Americans received tax rebates during the Bush administration, he suggested during a sermon that, as long as social services remained underfunded, the money should be donated. A few congregants later sent him letters expressing their disagreement, which he took in stride.

'HIGHER GROUND'

"I don't think it's appropriate for ministers to take a specific ideological or political stance on partisan issues," Rev. Buchanan says. "I do think it's our job to say this is a moral issue, this is an issue of value, and as Christians, we're responsible to think our way through this, to be guided to a higher ground, to be guided to do what's good and just and helpful."

The key, Rev. Buchanan says, is to avoid alienating worshippers by moralizing. When disagreement seems likely, he acknowledges that and owns up to his personal struggle to interpret the demands of religion in daily life. This straightforwardness sometimes allows for a hearing he wouldn't necessarily get if he "simply stood up on Sunday morning and said, 'Thus says the Lord, the minimum wage ought to be such and such.' "

But it's hard to preach the Gospel without offending people, says the Rev. Brett McCleneghan, 57, pastor at Park Ridge Community Church, an independent Christian congregation with ties to the United Church of Christ. It's "good news to the poor" and a challenge to those who enjoy privilege, he says.

Yet Rev. McCleneghan points out that the Bible doesn't actually say "money is the root of all evil." Rather, "it's the love of money that's the root of all evil," he says. And when Jesus says it's harder for a rich man to enter heaven than for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, it's a commentary on idolatry, on valuing money above the grace of God.

Rev. Chakoian says she encourages worshippers to engage with the biblical text; her role is to ask questions, "to meddle," as she puts it, and let them find their own answers. For example, if she preaches on the dissatisfaction that has stemmed from the economic downturn, "I would raise the question, 'How do we address the dissatisfaction and what, if any, are Christian responses?'" "

Merely feeling guilty about it isn't good enough. "If people feel guilty but haven't thought, then it can become easy to have the feeling of guilt be enough of an expiation," Rev. Chakoian says. "I think we rob the Gospel of power if we let people off the hook simply by feeling guilty."

She says she feels called by God to help members of her congregation, which includes venture capitalists, political leaders and executives at companies like Boeing Co. and Wal-Mart Stores Inc., be good stewards of their wealth and power. About a year ago, First Presbyterian formed an exploratory committee to examine creating a Center for Faith and Leadership, where people can turn for a faith-based perspective on questions they face in the worlds of business and politics.

Members of wealthier congregations sometimes must come to terms with their own roles in the dislocations causing so much economic hardship. Often they're the decisionmakers behind layoffs, foreclosures and evictions.

Bruce Webster, 54, a regional vice-president at Dallas-based Lincoln Property Co., says his experiences as a member of Park Ridge Community Church have helped him appreciate the human element of his dealings with clients, employees and tenants in the buildings his company owns and manages.

He realized he'd changed when he took a call a few years ago from an unemployed tenant who had fallen behind on rent and faced eviction. The man was desperate to keep the apartment so his daughter could stay in her school. Dealing with residents isn't Mr. Webster's

primary responsibility, and he used to view such calls as a “nuisance.” But he listened, and found a way for the family to stay in the apartment a little longer. The man eventually was able to pay the back rent and didn't have to move out.

“Jesus was very clear that we are to care for the least and the lost,” Mr. Webster says. “I can't walk away or treat with disregard the obligations I have to my company or to my client, but I can, within my realm of interaction or within the boundaries that I have to work with, be compassionate.”

MIDDLE GROUND

In 1986, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a statement on the human aspects of economic matters, titled “Economic Justice for All.” The thrust of the document, says Sister Dawn Nothwehr, 60, a theologian at the Catholic Theological Union in Hyde Park, is that the economy exists for the individual, not the reverse. All creation, including earthly riches, is a gift from God. Wealth isn't bad in itself, but Catholicism demands that the basic needs of all community members be met before any single person accumulates excess. It goes back to the idea contained in the Hebrew Scriptures that “I am my brother's keeper.” Yet Catholics aren't always conscious of the faith's demands, Sister Nothwehr says, noting, “It's real easy to live in the middle ground.”

“We are custodians of our means, not hoarders or owners of it,” says Rabbi Michael Zedek of Emanuel Congregation in Edgewater. Photo: Stephen J. Serio

Fair taxation comes up when considering Catholicism's requirement to care for the common good, since common good tasks like providing education or building bridges fall outside the capabilities of individuals, Sister Nothwehr says.

“If we don't have sufficient funds, then we need to tax the wealthy, if that's where the money has gone and there's disproportionate wealth there,” she says. “We need to adjust the laws, the systems, so that the common good is served. And that, conceivably, would be one way to do it.”

MATERIAL WORLD

Another theme is the spiritual emptiness of material wealth. It's an idea echoed in a story told by Rabbi Michael Zedek, 65. In it, a rabbi tells critics who say he spends too much time with his wealthiest congregants, “It takes me very little time to convince the poor members of the congregation they're poor. It takes much more time to convince the rich members of the congregation they're also poor.”

Rabbi Zedek ministers at Emanuel Congregation, an Edgewater synagogue that encompasses families with limited or middle-class incomes, as well as members of the billionaire Pritzker clan. He says Judaism's most important teachings on wealth are summarized in the concepts of “tzedakah” and “tikkun olam.” The first is often translated as “charity” but actually comes

from the Hebrew word for “justice,” he says. The latter means “repairing the world.” Giving is woven into the fabric of communal life, from the teens who pledge 10% of their bar and bat mitzvah gifts to charity to a membership structure where wealthier members subsidize the synagogue dues of the less affluent. Tzedakah is a privilege, Rabbi Zedek says, but it's also an obligation.

“Is (giving) praiseworthy? Sure. But is it, ‘Wow, aren't I special?’ No,” he says. “You're doing what a person should be doing here. We are custodians of our means, not hoarders or owners of it.”

