

Mass compassion helps create a community



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Guest columnist

Admittedly, I was a rather strange seminary student. Though sensing I was being “called” to be a minister, I became convinced my ministry would take a non-traditional path. I was most drawn to teaching, as well as service outside the church. This less denominational path became more evident in the communities I was drawn to. My position as an instructor at a nearby residential school for adults with disabilities, presented a hint at the direction I was headed. On Sunday mornings, I would walk with a group of residents to a local Catholic community which was radically different than any Catholic – or Protestant – church I had experienced. I also began attending a progressive synagogue that met in the seminary chapel, and then joined an interracial Protestant congregation. Here I want to spotlight the Catholic community, since it left an impact on me that shaped my entire seminary experience and subsequent chaplaincy work.

I should explain that the neighborhood where the school and church were located was a very wealthy area. The main Catholic parish was a beautiful architectural building with a large, mostly upper class membership. This was not where I walked my students on Sunday morning. A group of families had permission from the local priest to open the gymnasium at the parochial school across the street from the parish to hold a separate mass. As I understood it, the reason they chose to do this was primarily to include resi-

dents from our school! A remarkable thing to do. It didn’t take long to see why they would make this rather radical move. Some of the residents I brought to the “gym mass” were Catholic, others simply wanted to attend. I went merely because it was part of my job, but I soon found the experience – the community itself – so amazingly accepting of our odd group, I looked forward to the services.

The mass was led by younger priests who practiced a style of leadership that greatly impressed me as a future minister. They, along with the rest of the congregation, embraced my students as if they were their own family. Disruptions were common during services, yet members were gentle and compassionate. Several of our “higher functioning” residents were invited to read scripture or even hold the Eucharist chalice. I was also asked to participate, though I was not Catholic. At the time, I was studying the “Liberation Theology” of Latin American priests. What I was witnessing here, in this wealthy suburb of San Francisco, seemed to make what I was learning about in seminary very practical and personal.

The families and the priests were aware I was a Protestant seminary student, but that didn’t make a difference. I came to believe their radical inclusion, based on a belief that everyone, Catholic or Protestant, abled and disabled, or whatever the differences, made this an exemplary Christian community. Moving forward, I held this model in my mind when attending or eventually leading services in other churches. After graduation, I carried my “gym mass” experience throughout my chaplaincy years in jails and shelters. No one was excluded from full participation in any gathering. The guiding principle, gleaned from those years at the Catholic community, was driven by one central question: Who are we to exclude anyone?

The ecumenical (“belonging to the worldwide fellowship”) movement has been active in many churches in the past century. Originally focused primarily on a sense of unity between Protestants and Catholics (and Orthodox Christians), the movement has expanded in some locations to include people who don’t necessarily hold traditional Christian beliefs. The circle has grown and expanded to encompass other faiths as well—ecumenism evolving into inter-religious or interfaith cooperation. This can be enjoyed on various levels, from educational events centered on discussion and dialogue between diverse believers, to cooperative endeavors that may include collaboration in service to the wider community. This was the foundation of the chaplaincy programs I worked in for many years.

For several years, during and following seminary, I taught courses on World Religions in churches that were open to stretching the mind along with the spirit. Opening conversations often led to more open thinking and even open believing. For a Christian to read the Qur’an or the Tao for the first time, with a willingness to learn and understand, can be transformative. The next step beyond merely reading the texts, or learning about another faith tradition, is to meet the people, experience that tradition on a more personal level. Attending a mosque, a synagogue, a temple, can provide an opportunity to cross the fences of faith that so often divide good people, each building community around shared beliefs.

I learned all those years ago, even a gymnasium can offer deeper exercise in community.

Chris Highland was a minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. His books and blogs are presented on “Friendly Freethinker” (chighland.com).