



Recess for Peace

By Charlotte Johnstone

It seemed like a good idea at the time, Lois Borman thought. A small addition to Sunday services, a gesture of congregational bonding, a well-wishing, a prayer for one's neighbor—how could that conceivably be unsettling to anyone? As chair of Forbearance's Worship Committee, Lois felt the committee's decision to insert the cordial and brief ritual of "passing the peace" was utterly uncontroversial. Several people had to be convinced, but in the end, the committee enthusiastically endorsed the idea for Forbearance—so what could possibly go wrong?

After all, it was only a small supplement to the usual order of service printed in a Sunday bulletin last month—simple and self-explanatory . . .

The Peace—

**A time to exchange with one another, by words
and gesture**

a sign of peace and reconciliation:

Greeting: "The peace of Christ be with you."

Response: "And also with you."

That inaugural Sunday, things were a little rough. Some in the congregation, who had not yet read the fine print, were

thoroughly alarmed when Lois and her committee suddenly shot to their feet to dispense handshakes and, in some cases, hugs to their neighbors. Some people thought the committee members had lost their minds, and Minnie Maleska, who at that moment was taking a brief doze, was heard to emit a small shriek when Chester Burroughs jolted her out of her reverie. Only a few recipients of the peace-passing responded correctly—the rest managed only versions of "You, too" . . . "What?" . . . "Huh?" . . . although chronically acerbic Earl Ralston may have topped them all when, engulfed in Lois's copious embrace, he was heard to mutter, "What the hell are you doing? I already said hello to you once this morning!"

The truth of the matter, of course, was that Forbearance's Presbyterians were quite unaccustomed to spontaneous movement during Sunday services—standing and sitting, yes . . . moving about here and there, no—and many of them found this unstructured intermission of random greetings to be vaguely unsettling. How many people should one pass the peace with? Who says which part? Does one shake hands or is a hug required? How does one know when the peace-passing ritual has concluded?

While many of Forbearance's members eventually found themselves quite enthusiastic about this liturgical innovation,

there were, inevitably, complaints from others. Minnie Maleska, already somewhat phobic about germs, quickly abandoned her usual pew to isolate herself in a back corner in order to minimize her chances of being accosted by aggressive peace-passers. Parker Buckhouse simply refused to participate and spent his peace-passing moments glowering at Rev. Hustisford for allowing “touchy-feely nonsense” into proper Presbyterian decorum. Yvonne Pouchert, a woman who did not take change lightly, was disconcerted by all the milling about, and several teenagers were appalled to find themselves clasped to the bosoms of elderly ladies intent on thorough participation.

Anyone who thought The Peace was a one-time thing was disabused of that notion when, on subsequent Sundays, it became obvious that the majority of Forbearance’s members had replaced initial hesitation with communal exuberance. The restrained greetings between pewmates that the Worship Committee had envisioned were quickly augmented by meandering congregants eager to chat up everyone within sight. It was as if “recess” had been called in the usual proceedings and the leaders of worship found it awkward to get people back into their pews in a timely fashion.

When The Peace was placed at the beginning of the service, Forbearance’s members tended to continue conversations they had begun before they took their seats. If The Peace was inserted after the last hymn, people simply wandered about thinking the service was over, leaving Rev. Hustisford pronouncing the benediction over a general retreat. Even placing The Peace in the middle of the service was problematic when aisle-crossing peace-passers were chattily on the loose. Forbearance’s members were, for the most part, a convivial bunch, who found much to say to each other beyond the prescribed peace exchange.

“The peace of Christ be with you.” . . . “And also with you and, by the way, the Finance Committee meeting has been moved to Tuesday, so can you still make it?”

“The peace of Christ be with you and we’re going to have brunch at that new place after the service, so how about joining us?” . . . “And also with you, and we’d love to, except that we have to check on my mother first.” . . . “How is your mother?” . . . “Well, she’s coming along after her hip surgery, but we need to keep a close eye on her, so go on ahead and we’ll get there as soon as we can.”

“Hi! Peas! My name is Kevin and I’m three and I like carrots better than peas and I have a dog named Murphy and he ate some peas once, but he spit them out and Mommy had to clean it up and it was really yucky!”

“The peace of Christ be with you, but don’t hug me, because I dislocated my shoulder last week and I’ve got to be careful of it.” . . . “And also with you, so how did you do it?” . . . “I fell down the basement stairs and I’m lucky I didn’t kill myself.” . . . “Well, watch out for Lois, ‘cuz she’s hugging everyone.”

“Peace be with you, and can I exchange car pool days with you next week? I’ve got a dentist appointment that I’ve gotta keep.” . . . “I think that’ll be OK, but I’ll call you when I get home and look at my calendar, and, oh yeah, also with you.” . . . “What?” . . . “I said, ‘Also with you.’” . . . “Oh, right, peace be with you.” . . . “You already said that.”

In other words, a kind of genial babble ensued, although several people complained that all the peace-passing interrupted their meditations. Small children got loose from their parents, ran up and down the aisles, and had to be corralled back into their seats. Minnie Maleska pondered the virtues of becoming a Quaker. Parker Buckhouse continued to grouse, and Ethel Ralston, who thought the ritual was a fine idea, was overheard calling her reluctant husband “a misanthropic old coot.”

Yet, despite the naysayers and notwithstanding the undefined parameters of Forbearance’s newest liturgical invention, the handshakers and huggers, enthusiastically and volubly conferring peace upon all within shouting distance, have declared The Peace a resounding success. For the foreseeable future, it is here to stay. If you, someday, should happen to visit Forbearance Church, just go with the flow of the moment. Presbyterians unleashed from their pews during a Sunday service may be startling—and, in Forbearance’s case, a bit alarming—but they mean well. Just remember to avoid the woman in the back corner and the guy glowering at the minister.

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