



# A Congregation in Process

By Charlotte Johnstone

It's been a busy couple of weeks at Forbearance Presbyterian Church. Rev. Hustisford, fortified with his new Doctor of Ministry degree and alarmingly fired up with new ideas, announced at a Sunday service last month that the congregation was to embark on a six-week emphasis on spirituality, which he explained as an attempt "to integrate individual and social ethics into a Reformed theocentrism through which we will merge the pervasive dichotomy of pious individualism with the wholeness of corporate metaphysics," which hardly anyone understood, except for Sally McIntosh, who already thinks she's pretty spiritual because she once spent some time at an ashram and, as a result, never ate meat products again. Everyone else just sort of sat there trying to grasp what he was talking about.

Rev. Hustisford instructed everyone to stay in their pews after the service for a discussion, in preparation for what he called "Our Journey to Spiritual Renewal," adding that he would be most interested to hear what spirituality means to

Forbearance's members. So that's what happened, except that the suggestions offered were perhaps not exactly what he had in mind.

Sally, of course, was the first one on her feet and went on and on about the benefits of yoga and vegetarianism and meditation rituals involving atonal chants, until her husband said, "Give it a rest already, Sally," after which she sat down and glared at him. She was followed by one of the younger deacons saying something about guardian angels waiting around in the wings, so to speak, to protect and guide everyone, which, she said, happened to her personally and was "like totally awesome." Then, getting into the spirit of the moment, Curly Rumbaugh, who'd gone on one of those men-only things in the woods, extolled the virtues of beating drums in a sweat lodge.

Claire Flannery said she swore by the power of crystals to harmonize the soul, and Jack Brannigan stood up to declare that there was nothing like a good hike in the open air to contemplate God in nature, but since everyone knew that was how Jack

justified playing golf on Sunday mornings when he should be in church, no one took him seriously. As for Rev. Hustisford, he was beginning to look like he smelled disaster in the air.

Then, Geneva Rademacher, Forbearance's director of religious education, tried to get things back on track by announcing that the youth group was going to paint a labyrinth on the dining room floor, so members could "walk in silent reflection to get in touch with the eternal," which is when Yvonne Pouchert, president of the Woman's Association and strict guardian of what she calls "proper ecclesiastic ambience," sternly cautioned Geneva that any alteration to the dining room décor would certainly have to be approved by her Decorating Committee, which already had enough to do, thank you very much, what with the on going debate about artificial flowers on the Communion table and the controversy concerning the color of the new choir robes.

Ethel Ralston, who's 82 and always ready to try something new, said she'd like to walk the labyrinth, although she wasn't sure her husband, Earl, would be able to get it right since, she added sarcastically, Earl was dead set against asking for directions under any circumstance. Then Earl didn't help himself at all when he cackled to people in his pew that "Ethel should be right at home in the labyrinth thing, 'cuz she's always running around in circles," but that's Earl for you—his principle occupation since retirement has been finding new ways to annoy Ethel.

Anyway, Rev. Hustisford, hoping to get the ball back in his court, stated that silence and listening would be key elements of the Journey to Spiritual Renewal. He would be shortening his sermons, he said, to allow for five minutes of silent meditation with his wife, Camilla, providing background music on her flute, which caused a few snickers here and there, because the last time Camilla played her flute at the church's annual variety show, it took her seven minutes and three tries to get through Chopin's "Minute Waltz." That may be why Lewis Radtke, director of music, who is notoriously protective of his artistic authority, stood up to protest that any music performed during services would need advance approval from the Music Committee. All of which prompted the chairwoman of the Worship Committee, Lois Borman, who doesn't like to be

trifled with, to warn that "the Reverend's proposed five minutes of silence is an unprecedented departure from how we've always done things around here and will need to be studied in depth by my committee to ensure that it complies with instructions contained in the Directory of Worship." Then Lois' husband, Tom, started in on his perennial complaint about the removal of the American flag from its customary place next to the pulpit, declaring that "if we're going to discuss spirituality, we ought to address the need for patriotic reverence for the sacred symbols of this great country of ours, founded by God as his spiritual legacy for all right-thinking people."

At that, everyone started talking at once, until Parker Buckhouse, president of the Board of Trustees, attorney and stickler for due process, rose to say that "due to the disparate elucidations expressed today concerning the meaning of 'spirituality,' I propose that a task force be formed to study the ramifications of any and all changes that would impact the life of this congregation vis-à-vis the adjudication of the efficacy of this alleged spiritual renewal," which is how he has always talked, since he's the kind of lawyer who never met an issue he couldn't complicate. Rev. Hustisford protested that, as a duly ordained minister, he didn't think he needed a task force to tell him how to direct the spiritual life of Forbearance's congregation, but Parker persisted, mostly because he's been suspicious of what he has called Rev. Hustisford's "leftist leanings" ever since Rev. Hustisford once referred to God as "she."

Well, in the end, what it all boiled down to was the indefinite postponement of Forbearance's Journey to Spiritual Renewal until three different committees and a task force decide to stop talking. And, considering what people call "spiritual" these days, that may take a while. Rev. Hustisford, who's taken to muttering that he needs a sabbatical, keeps saying that spiritual renewal doesn't have to be this complicated, but apparently—at least, around Forbearance Church—one can't be too cautious about a thing like that.

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