

## THE SHELTER, NURTURE, AND SPIRITUAL FELLOWSHIP OF THE CHILDREN OF GOD The Second of the Great Ends of the Church

Last week, we talked about the first great end of the church, the Proclamation of the Gospel. If you missed that, it is already on the Facebook page of the church, and as soon as I get it to Stanley it will be on the church's website.

Today, we shall endeavor to talk about three things that each ought to have a week of their own, but since there are only six weeks in Lent, and we have six great ends of the church, we will try to encompass them all today.

The first of the three things covered by the second great end of the church is the shelter of the children of God. I suppose our Scriptural warrant for the ministry of shelter might be expressed by a couple of verses: first, Jesus in Matthew 25: "I was a stranger, and you took me in," and second, from the letter to the Hebrews, about entertaining angels unawares. We could also use the parable of the Good Samaritan, and even the Old Testament story of the Widow of Nain as documentation that sheltering the children of God has been the Lord's work from Biblical times.

In the New Testament, we read about Anna, the prophetess who lived in the Temple in Jerusalem awaiting the Messiah. It wasn't just the priest and prophets who lived in the holy places of Israel, but often the poor who took shelter there. This custom continued well into the Middle Ages.

Forty years ago when I toured Yorkminster Cathedral in England, I learned that homeless people often built shacks within the walls of the church, seeking shelter from the elements.

Homeless shelters are a part of our Christian witness to the world, though we usually leave that to organizations such as the Salvation Army, or a Union Rescue Mission.

On your table is a concrete example of one way that we Presbyterians provide shelter: Westminster Communities, formerly Westminster Retirement Communities, is a ministry shared by Presbyterians across the state of Florida. John Milton chairs the board, and Chuck Morgan serves on it as well. Westminster is one of three or four Presbyterian housing ministries in the State of Florida, which provide not only quality retirement facilities, but also in some cases high quality low income housing for the elderly

Around the time of my retirement, I interviewed as a chaplain for two of our Presbyterian retirement ministries, one in Lakeland and one in Sarasota. The Pine Shores Presbyterian Church in actually sponsors a retirement community on their own.

In fact, the church I served in West Virginia sponsored a 72 unit high rise facility for senior citizens, as well as a 48 unit low income housing facility for families.

I would be remiss if I didn't mention a couple of other facilities that we are affiliated with that provide shelter for the children of God: one of these is Thornwell Home for Children, in Clinton, South Carolina. Florida Presbyterians have supported that institution for many years, and it housed orphans originally. Now, most of the children who are there are from broken homes, dysfunctional homes, or have both parents in prison or in military service.

If you watch college basketball, you may see a young man playing for the University of South Carolina who has chosen Thornwell as his last name. The story goes that when he came to the Thornwell

Home, he was not sure what his last name was, and so he chose the name of the place that was his home until he went off to college as his own.

Lesser known to most of us is the Duvall Home at Deland, Florida. Duvall is to the Presbyterian Churches of Florida what Sunland is to the State of Florida: it is a home for developmentally disabled people. From birth to death, the Duvall Home cares for those whom Dale Evans once called "angels unawares" as she described her own daughter. When I visited there a few years ago, the oldest resident was 83. The youngest ever received there was three days. We met a young lady in her forties who served as the receptionist who has spent her whole life at Duvall.

Duvall has a farm, a sheltered workshop, a health care facility, and most of the residents are sheltered in group homes.

Places like Thornwell and Duvall provide not only shelter, but nurture. Our Presbyterian colleges and universities provide nurture as well. What we do in Christian Education, not just in Sunday School but in activities like this one, and like our Wednesday evening Bible Studies, our Circle Bible studies, even our Wild Wonderful Wednesday activities, also provide nurture. Some of that nurture is spiritual, some is physical.

The Food Pantry of our church is also a way in which we provide nurture to the children of God, as are all the marvelous hunger programs in which we Presbyterians engage in worldwide. Anywhere we are feeding the hungry, we are providing nurture to the children of God.

Activities like these Lenten Luncheons, Wednesday evening potluck suppers, Circle lunches, WWW refreshments nurture spiritually as well as physically, but they also provide the third component of our Second Great End of the Church: spiritual fellowship.

Now I enjoy the fellowship of a Rotary Lunch, or a Chamber of Commerce Breakfast, or a Chipola Appreciation Club reception, but no matter how good that fellowship, no matter how great that camaraderie, it isn't the same as what we enjoy in the church, and with our brothers and sisters in Christ. There is a difference in Spiritual Fellowship.

Maybe it is the time spent in prayer. Maybe it is the songs that we sing. Maybe it is the fact that wherever two or three are gathered in His name, Jesus is present with them.

Shelter, nurture, fellowship: these are signs that we are fulfilling the second great end of the church.