

*From the President's Staff to
Sunday School Superintendent*

Servant Leadership

Mike McCurry

Rev. Kirk is anxious to speak with you,” the message went. So I dutifully began a journey that would awaken in me surprising new ambitions. Rev. Chet Kirk was not a guy easy to avoid in 1999. He was nearing the end of a successful tour as senior pastor of St. Paul’s UMC in the suburb of Kensington, Maryland—just a stone’s throw outside the famous Washington Beltway.

I was just coming off a tour as a minor celebrity inside that Beltway. Four years of daily briefings for the national press at the White House and two years of briefings before that at the State Department had given me my own claim to fame. St. Paul’s United Methodist Church was my very own sanctuary, where I worshipped and spent most Sunday mornings away from pagers and cell phones. The congregation there knew me as a dad and a quiet guy in the pews. Rarely did anyone ask about my own take on Monica Lewinsky, Bosnia, or balanced budgets.

Rev. Kirk was getting ready for retirement and he was preparing his congregation for the future. We had a significant gap in our Christian education program and its lay leadership. There had been no Sunday School Superintendent for some time and Rev. Kirk, prodded by our long time youth and education minister, Rick Buckingham, was determined to repair that breach.

Called to Serve

“Why don’t you consider,” Rev. Kirk asked when he tracked me down, “whether or not you can serve the Church by helping run our Church School.” My wife greeted the question with some wry amusement. “You’ve been doing presidential briefings for all these years, why shouldn’t you figure how many orders of curriculum we will need to make from Cokesbury?” Talk about missing weapons of mass destruction. My wife (a veteran Sunday School teacher) knew what happened in a class if the lesson had not been prepared and ordered in

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advance.

With no credentials and with less appreciation for what it takes to run a good Church School program, I said yes to Rev. Kirk. Then I commenced to learn what politics is really about.

We had long time teachers who were set in their often-admirable ways. We had young parents attracted to our church because they could worship while Sunday School unfolded upstairs. We had teachers, classrooms and supplies that were plain

worn down from overwork and under-appreciation. There was no one who did not raise a skeptical eyebrow when I was introduced as the new Church School “super.”

They were dubious because being a lay leader of a Sunday School program involves many things that are pretty mundane. Do we have enough glue sticks? Who will lead opening worship in the elementary section? Who is in charge of the nursery, the Church School Board or the Congregational Care Committee?

After many years of dealing with gridlock and partisanship in our nation’s capital, I found it refreshing to tackle problems that you could define and solve in a week (okay, sometimes a month) or so. I think many members at St. Paul’s were surprised at my enthusiasm in digging in to my new responsibilities.

I was, of course, discovering new things about leadership. As the prophet Micah admonishes of mortal humans, what the Lord requires of us is to “do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6: 8) Justice, kindness and humility are not exact qualities in abundant supply around our nation’s capital. To lead as a servant with a “bended knee” and to empty oneself of all pretension so that the spirit of the Lord can fill an empty vessel with the new wisdom of Christ’s good news (Phil 2:6-9) was something outside the usual thinking of a veteran Washington political strategist. It sure

beat watching the yack-yack shows on Sunday morning.

Send Me

Beyond leading and administering the Church School program, something else stirred and warmed my heart. I love to teach. We set as a goal bringing middle school students back to Sunday School. When there weren't any volunteers to teach 7th/8th grade Bible Lessons for Youth, I said, "send me." It took only one semester for me to discover what I did not know about the Bible. If you are not the beneficiary of seminary education or *Disciple I or II* training, try staying ahead of a demanding group of teenagers and their questions about the Gospels. I began to look forward to ending each "work" week so I could begin to prepare the Sunday lesson (even when it meant some bleary-eyed Saturday nights or Sunday mornings).

I can imagine knowing pastors, considering my experiences, chuckling and saying "well, of course." But awakening the powerful urge to teach is one of ministry's most

important God-given responsibilities. I write in the Easter season and I was struck this time around by the age-old story of Mary Magdalene's encounter in the tomb with the risen Christ she does not at first recognize. "Mary!" the Christ says, calling the first Christian Educator by name. "Rabbouni!" she answers in Aramaic which means, literally, "master Rabbi, master teacher, master giver-of-law." The first and most profound recognition of the risen Lord does not reflect a perspective of him as Messiah or Son of God, but merely and profoundly as "teacher."

I know a lot about political campaigns and what moves people to think one way or another about the future. In some ways, I think all presidential campaigns come down to making the best case about how the future will be better if one candidate or the other gets elected.

I have graduated from presidential politics this campaign year in order to pursue things more important to me, but I know this: framing an argument about the future, lighting a candle of hope for people who barely know the meaning of the "good

news" and driving bitterness and despair out of our lives is something that Sunday School and politics should have in common.

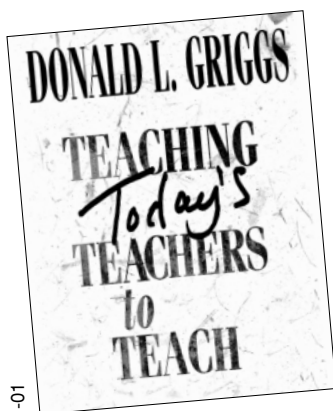
Were it not for a wise and gentle pastor, Chet Kirk, I might not have discovered these things about myself. But I know that our Church can create many more moments of awakening for servants like me. We are seeing a new program for commitment to Sunday School launched at General Conference this year, "Sunday School—It's for Life!" For me, I know that Sunday School can be powerfully life transforming. Therein lies many tales about how the Church itself can seek renewal. □



Mike McCurry is Partner, Public Strategies, Washington, DC. He served as Press Secretary to President Bill Clinton.

Books For Today's Christian Educator

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New! Teaching Today's Teachers to Teach: Revised Edition, by Donald L. Griggs. A revision of *Teaching Teachers to Teach* (1974), this comprehensive manual offers practical guidance to help teachers learn the art and practice of teaching. Throughout the book, Griggs identifies the basic elements of the teaching process and outlines the essential ingredients needed for effective teaching.

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