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Sunday September 2, 2018

Sermon title: The Congregation's Ministry to the Congregation: Four Essential Aspects

Reverend Shepherd described four key roles of a congregation of Christ followers. The first is to serve as a "nursery for the newborn". Matthew's Gospel describes Christ denouncing those who make it difficult for the "little ones". We may have assumed that he is talking about babies but, in fact, the little ones being referred to are adult men and women who are new in the faith. Old chronologically, they are spiritual neonates and these "babes in Christ" have to be nursed within the nursery of the congregation. The nursery provides a safe place – safe from political forces and safe from unholy spirits. The congregation as nursery also provides nourishment, which needs to be frequent, almost constant just as for babies. With this feeding from the congregation will come an increased capacity to absorb God's Word. Finally, there must be affection within the nursery, so within the congregation the newborns need to be cherished.

The congregation is also a school. Although it is often said that "faith is caught not taught", this is only half true as it is essential that people be taught about the person about whom the truth is described in the New Testament. Otherwise, He will never be known and hence it would never be possible to have a personal relationship with Jesus. That is why Jesus both before his death and afterwards taught anyone who would listen what the meaning was of his death. If he hadn't taught his disciples about the significance of his death, we might assume that his death meant nothing more than the deaths of the two criminals who were crucified with him. Although actions testify to beliefs, it is not always self-evident to others and so there is a need to be taught. The congregation is a school in which Christ's people are taught.

The congregation also needs to be an army that fights. This is an uncomfortable concept to many Christians but much is at stake when the truth of Jesus Christ collides with the falsehoods of the evil one. The metaphor of soldiering is evident in Paul's words to the congregation in Ephesus who are encouraged to put on the whole armour of God: shield, shoes, helmet, breastplate, sword (Ephesians 6:10 – 17). Paul also reminds Timothy that soldiering entails hardship, sacrifice and training in godliness. Training may seem a strange concept to the church but Jesus leaves us no choice. If we are going to be disciples, then we're inevitably going to be soldiers in a conflict within the world. Spiritual conflict is inevitable because of love's energy. God is love and Jesus is the incarnation of God's nature. Even the most love-filled heart knows that there is a place for godly resistance. Martin Luther recognized this as he observed the abuses of the Church of the day and he finally was compelled to act. "To live in the company of Jesus Christ is to share love's struggle in the face of unlove's aggression".

The congregation is also meant to be a hospital for the wounded. The fact that members of the congregation are wounded simply confirms that they are soldiers in Christ's army and have recently been on the front lines. Spiritual conflict is no less debilitating than any other kind of conflict. Jesus invites us to "Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:30). Rest in the context of Scripture really means restoration and Jesus' statement is a command that we are to come to him for restoration. So providing hospital care for Christ's wounded is as important to a congregation's ministry as being a nursery for the newborn, a school for learners and a place where soldiers are trained for the good fight of faith.

## Precis for Facebook

Reverend Shepherd, Professor Wickliffe College Toronto spoke of the four essential aspects of the work of a congregation of Christ followers of Christ followers. First, the congregation is to be a nursery for those who are new in the faith where they can receive constant feeding so that they can increase their capacity to absorb God's Word. Secondly, the congregation is a school in which Christ's people are taught. Third it is a training ground to prepare for the inevitable spiritual conflicts of the real world where God's love struggles with unlove's aggression. Finally, a congregation of God's people is a hospital for those wounded in the spiritual conflicts. We were reminded that Jesus commanded us to come when we are heavy laden so that he can restore us.