

## *A Few Words from the Director*

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Mainline Protestant churches in this country tend to have a distinctive ethos, and it is one that is easily criticized--and mocked. Even Garrison Keillor has gotten into the act, with an uncharacteristically uncharitable ditty about the Methodists that was aired recently on "Prairie Home Companion."

Much of this criticism (and even the mockery) is justified, needless to say. Those of us who are active members of the churches in question know that all too well. But most of us also know, I suspect, that the faults in question are not the whole story. Few of us would stick around these churches--and entrust the religious education of our children to them--if we didn't believe there was still real value in what they are trying to accomplish in their ministry.

The mainline churches are commonly characterized as liberal by their critics. The people who make this claim usually mean that the churches in question are dominated by people who are political as well as theological liberals. Especially do they have in mind the clergy, and it is surely true that the clergy in these denominations do tend to be more liberal on both counts than their parishioners. And of course they also tend to be more liberal than their counterparts in other more conservative Christian communions.

From a distance, moreover, that may be all that matters. But it does not correspond at all well to what one actually encounters in the life of these churches. Why? Because typically the laity are quite varied in their theological as well as political views, and that variety matters greatly in the conduct of church life. Listening to the critics, one would think that the typical PCUSA congregation is a liberal cell. But that is just not true. In the congregations with which I have any active contact, at least, there is clear evidence of a diversity of views, and one of the more significant defining features of their ethos is a constant effort to accommodate that diversity in constructive ways. Whether they are sitting in a session meeting or worshipping together on a Sunday morning, Presbyterians (and other mainline Protestants, I suspect) know well that the people next to them (who may well be their good friends) do not in fact agree with them on many matters of religious as well as political consequence. And if they get the impression that anyone (pastors included) is trying to force the congregation to adopt a certain ideological position, they typically react negatively--which is, I suspect, the reason why we rarely hear preaching with a overtly partisan political message these days (certainly much less so in the more conservative Protestant churches).

This is closely related to another feature of mainline Protestant life today--which the mainline churches correctly identify in their own publicity as an effort to cultivate a form of the Christian religion that is "thoughtful" or "reflective." Admittedly, that language is somewhat self-serving, but it still is accurate in describing something important. These are churches that want their members to think for themselves, knowing full well that this will give rise to diverse opinions.

I happen to believe that both of the things I have just mentioned are valuable, and my hunch is that they help to explain why the mainline churches continue to be attractive to many people who

are serious about their faith in this country. I personally would not want to give up either of them, and I am sure I am not alone in that sentiment. But having said that, let me add this critical observation: the emphasis on "reflective" practice of the faith would be more plausible if the churches in question balanced their endorsement of thinking for oneself with a corresponding insistence that one needs to know certain things (starting with knowledge of the Bible) if one is truly to be thoughtful about religious matters. For without that, the emphasis on thinking for oneself all too easily plays into the all-too-common belief that the content of religion does not matter all that much. Surely that is not something we want to encourage.

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