

## Uncommon Ministries Michael Gillespie

[Editor's NOTE: *Michael Gillespie is a Teaching Elder in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), a member of the Presbytery of the Cascades, and Chaplain Service Manager at the Veteran's Administration's Roseburg Healthcare System in Roseburg, Oregon.* ]

Have you ever felt like you just don't fit in? I used to feel that way at Presbytery meetings and to some extent in the Church at large. For the past thirteen years, I have been a chaplain with the Department of Veterans Affairs. During that time, when I would go to Presbytery I often felt as if I lived on another planet. Pastors were there with their ruling elders. Most business items were about the parish--membership, stewardship, Christian education, summer camp, per capita, new development, redevelopment, mission studies, terms of call, church property or church discipline. And while I could work up a certain amount of interest in these subjects, none of them had a direct connection to me or to my ministry.

For the years that I was in parish ministry (when I was younger), I had not paid much attention to this bias. I fit in and did not really notice those who did not. I remember being intrigued when, for example, someone retired who had been doing ministry outside the box, but then that awareness would fade. It also seemed to me that we were perhaps harder on candidates for non-parish ministries during their examinations on the floor of Presbytery.

In my more recent experience as a misfit myself; I have toyed with the idea of reaching out to others who may be feeling the same. Who would they be? What would they say? How might we connect? What could we accomplish?

About a year ago, when my curiosity and restlessness overcame my fear, I began reaching out. I invited anyone who was interested to join together in informal gatherings during Presbytery meetings to explore how to support one another and raise awareness in the Presbytery. I have been surprised at both the level of interest and the diversity I have found. Attending the meetings have been chaplains, educators, administrators, campus ministers, musicians, candidates and inquirers, tentmakers, commissioned ruling elders and others. Most have had rather flexible career paths. The experiment has also been widely supported by enthusiastic Presbyters as well as our Presbytery staff.

The Presbyterian Church calls people like me "non-parish" ministers. It seems odd to define something by its opposite, doesn't it? There has to be a better name. So we have coined the name "Uncommon Ministries." We have deliberately not defined the term, preferring to let individuals do that themselves.

This idea is in its infancy, but many of us in these "Uncommon Ministries" think that we have something unique to offer an aging Church that is struggling to operate within the confines of old models and frameworks. The Church in this century must look at new modes of ministry outside of its walls. Perhaps we must all learn how to make our ministries "uncommon." And probably, this is what Jesus had in mind after all.

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