

CHARGE

TO THE CONGREGATION of MCPC



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Issued by Jane Little, Executive Presbyter of Boston Presbytery*

What in the world is a “charge” to the congregation? My office dictionary lists 39 meanings for the word “charge.” You can relax. I am not going to supply you all with a quantity of electricity – or accuse you of anything or even lead you into battle! I am going to put before you several admonitions as you continue your journey and ministry as a newly constituted church, proclaiming the love and forgiveness of our common Lord, Jesus the Christ.

I urge you always to provide nurture and challenge for both the inner and outward journey. You know as well as I do that some churches concentrate solely on Bible studies, Christian Education programs, working hard to present Biblically centered worship and programs to their members and the community. And, of course, this is what a church should be about. — But, there’s more! Our Bible study, Christian Education programs and worship must lead us into the world.

Let me share with you a personal story. One of the persons who challenged my understanding of what a church should be is Cherie Bratt. Cherie was a participant with me in an adult Christian Education program. I remember vividly Cheri saying on night after we had just finished a six week study on death and dying, “So what? So, what are we going to do about all we’ve learned?” The following conversations led to the church sponsoring the second Hospice in the United States. A few years later my friend Cheri was president of the Women’s Association of the church. After a program on housing problems in the community, she asked her questions again. “So what? – What are we going to do about it?” Which eventually led to a church-sponsored low cost housing program – still administered by the Goleta Presbyterian Church.

I challenge you then to keep as a motto – “So What – What Can We Do About This?” To balance the inner journeys that churches so lovingly nurture with opportunities for mission. I am personally convinced that we need both the inner and outer journeys to become mature Christians.

Another balance I urge you to keep before you is what I will call shared ministry. I mean by this that the ministry is not the sole task of profession church leaders – the clergy- but ministry is the job of all of us. Several churches I know list in their bulletins as Ministers – the entire congregation.

One of the real challenges any church faces is to help its members develop a nature Christian faith. I can guarantee that will never happen if Sarah – or whoever your pastor is – is expected to do the work of the church. To the contrary, the pastor’s role is to enable you and me to do the work of the church.

Developing shared ministry is not easy. Nothing worthwhile is. I urge you to struggle with this question mightily over the years. It will shape your church.

I challenge you to encourage diversity. How refreshing it would be to develop a community of faith that shares differences openly – and still loves and respects each other. I know it can be done. I’ve experienced it a lot – but rarely in the church. My experiences of diversity have all come from the League of Women Voters. In that setting people can share the beliefs and opinions openly. How I

covet that openness for the church. We will differ! I certainly wouldn't want a world of people just like me!

In the church this means a respect and understanding for a single basic fact. God speaks to us in many different ways and its corollary,

What moves me, what is life giving to me may not do anything at all for you. Therefore, it becomes important to celebrate diversity – Bach and bop, guitars and pipe organ, the Revised Standard Version and King James, silent and public confessions, clowns and balloons as well as the crown of thorns. We are young and old, from all over the world, perhaps from different races, men and women. We are diverse – but we all are children of the living God. It is because we are united by our faith that we can risk celebrating our diversity.

Lastly I want to challenge you to be about what I have come to believe is the most urgent job of the contemporary church; to help people discover God at work in their lives. I've had the opportunity to lead lots of workshops and one exercise I've found informative is to ask people to list the times when God has been at work in their lives. Time after time I was greeted with blank looks. No, God was just at work in the Bible days – or maybe in someone else's life, but no, I don't know when God has been active in my life! I know far too many churches that talk about God but never provide the opportunity for people to share their personal faith, practice and experiences. Anderson and Jones in their recent book on ministry boldly say "If God seems not to be there, it is because we do not have the eyes to see and the ears to hear."

Two weeks ago in my Bible study class David shared that he was so grateful to God for answering the prayers of his friend Don, a lay person in Pennsylvania who has for the past several years picked up persons at nursing homes and brought them to his church. The church had a rickety old bus, but it had broken down and couldn't be fixed. A new bus would be \$65,000. We'd prayed and asked others to pray too. Two weeks ago two different persons made gifts to the church of over \$30,000 for the bus. I tell you this story only to share with you the next comment made by a member of my Bible study group. "What a coincidence!" he said. No way, my friends! That's God at work. A coincidence,

I've learned, is another word for one of God's anonymous miracles! If God is truly at work in the world – and I believe this is so – then we have to start exercising our atrophied powers of discernment. It is the church's urgent task to help people see that God can and does meet their needs, addresses their fears, and is present in our daily lives.

Frequently we need help in pointing this out. I remember talking with a friend and saying, "You know, Carol, it's so easy to see God at work in Don's (my husband) life. But I just can't see God in my life." "Oh, no," she replied, "How about" and she went on to name several recent occurrences. That, to me, is the role of the church – helping each other to see God at work in our lives.