



REV. DAVID HANDLEY – Interview on Chicagoland Cursillo Beginnings

I was pastoring the First Presbyterian Church of Evanston (1982-2007) when I first became involved with Presbyterian Cursillo (“short course” from its Spanish origins), a three-day renewal experience now called Presbyterian Pilgrimage. Rev. Judith Watt, Rev. Al Timm, Fred and Arline Foster, Norm and Alice Rubash, Verna Todd, and Sonia Bodi were among the early travelers to Edmond, Oklahoma, to experience a weekend sponsored by the First Presbyterian Church there. Their enthusiasm was contagious, soon bringing more participants from Evanston.

I appreciated Cursillo’s inclusivity. It was Christ-centered, with a solid biblical foundation, but not doctrinaire in its theology. Judy was part of the first group to attend, and urged me to go, so I attended Oklahoma Presbyterian Cursillo #18 in 1998, and as a result came away wishing others from our congregation could attend.

As a participant, one does not get the view from above, as to structure, strategy, and teaching. Very little said to the participants about the happenings and sequence of components of the weekend, so each one can be fully into each moment as it comes. It was only later when I went to Oklahoma for staff training that I could better see the overall method of faith awakening. The Cursillo/Pilgrimage three-day weekends soon became an important addition to our overall renewal plan.

The Talks (originally called “rollos,” from Spanish) and the Table Discussions were high points for me. As I observed other participants, the whole experience of being surrounded by Christian Love, with surprises that happened along the way, was also a key ingredient in opening the heart and mind to God’s love for each one. I was impressed that these weekends were something that the laity put on, which is one of its great strengths.

Through my own experience, I came to realize that Cursillo could bring renewal to our congregants, with its user friendly format, the good balance of Christian teaching with personal application in real life experiences, group reflection on the talks, and lots of fun in between. The Sunday afternoon closing worship service was always the *coup de grace* as participants had the opportunity to share publicly their personal experiences of faith-awakening and healing during the weekend.

Group singing, led by a musically talented ensemble, has always been an important part of each weekend. Andrea Handley was one of the early musicians who recruited other talented musicians into a team of music “cha’s” (another name that reminded all of the Spanish roots of Cursillo). Greg Buell was an early addition to the Cursillo music team and many other musicians who first went through the three-day experience as participants then added their musical talents to add inspiration, fun, and memorable songs that carried the message of the good news of Jesus Christ. Jim Peterson, music leader at Southminster Presbyterian Church of Arlington Heights, has brought new vibrancy to the music in recent years. Over time, both Southminster and Village

Presbyterian Church of Northbrook became prime movers in this renewal ministry alongside First Presbyterian of Evanston.

Pastoral changes in supporting congregations have provided a challenge and opportunity to continue strong support of this ministry. The Rev. Dr. Raymond Hylton, Jr, became pastor in Evanston in 2009. He and his wife Judith Hylton, a counselor and musician, had experienced a Pilgrimage as participants and subsequently served on the staff, adding vision and support to Evanston's continued participation for a new generation.

By the 10th anniversary of Chicagoland Presbyterian Cursillo, the leadership saw the wisdom of having a broader outreach to include those from outside the Presbyterian denomination and those who had not yet committed to membership in any church. This decision has not only opened up new faith to several with no church home, but has also spread the vision for a weekend such as this to other non-Presbyterian congregations.

Prayer has always been the fuel for a spiritual fire that is lit on these weekends. Fervent, continual prayer for staff members and participants attending a renewal weekend is one of the key ingredients that has been inherited from the Spanish Roman Catholic roots of the Cursillo ministry (post World War II). The "Fourth Day" partners behind the scenes of every Pilgrimage is made up of participants from previous weekends who know how these three days can change peoples' lives. Some of this large body of former participants volunteer to pray daily for a specific individual who has signed up for the next three day event. They also write a card to their assigned participant that will be opened during the weekend along with scores of other cards that come from other Fourth Day people. Others from this behind-the-scenes group commit to pray for the entire group of participants and staff for a half-hour segment of the entire weekend that begins on Thursday evening and ends on Sunday afternoon.

Over these last twenty years as I have observed so many whose lives to have been touched on a weekend, I have wondered why the Holy Spirit seems to be so evidently active in this particular ministry. Time and time again I have gone back to the conviction that this kind of intentional, sustained prayer from so many is the soul-key to this ministry. The prayer is taken seriously and implemented in a way that I have seldom seen in any other event in the life of the Church.

Sola Gloria Dei. "To God be the Glory"