

## Chapter Eight - Alternative Services

When the new rector was about to arrive at St. Philip's in Potwallup, Deacon Mike Bamberger had already decided that would be a good time to leave the parish he had served these past five years, and take on a new challenge. After a chat with the Arch-deacon, she suggested that he talk to Fr. Patrick McNulty-Fish at St. James in East Riverside. "Father Pat" had been nagging Melanie to send him a deacon, and East Riverside was not all that far away from where Mike and his family lived.

Deacon and priest met soon thereafter to size each other up. Pat was delighted at the prospect, and seemed particularly eager for Mike to take over the lead role in something called the Four Corners Ministry. The priest told Mike more than once that, if Mike could take that responsibility on, it would free him up for other things around the parish. The deal was sealed, and Deacon Mike started at St. James.

So it came to pass that about a month after he arrived there, Deacon Mike had his first meeting with the Four Corners Ministry team. About 10:45 that night, he got home from the meeting, staggered into the den, and flopped into his favorite chair.

Jo Bamberger looked up from her mystery at her husband. "That took a while. How was it?", she asked.

"Bourbon, please", he groaned. "I need something to dull the pain."

"That bad, eh. What exactly is this group?" Jo asked, as she got up to get him a shot and a rock.

"They are supposed to be the cooperative ministry of the Four Corners neighborhood, which is just down the block from St. James. It's the Methodists, the Lutherans, some other churches, and us. Near as I could tell from tonight, the ministry died a long time ago, but the body lives on."

Jo handed her spouse a glass, and sat down with a little something for herself. "So, what went on this evening that was so painful?"

"Remember that I wolfed down dinner so I could get to First Methodist early and introduce myself? Didn't matter. The church was locked and dark when I got there. I waited around for fifteen minutes before this elderly couple showed up. Magnusons or something -- very sweet people. They were the reps for the Methodists and opened up.

"I introduced myself to them, and then a few minutes later to someone else, and then again to Mayme the secretary -- I think she's with the Lutherans. Two more people came in, and finally, the president -- Frank somebody -- showed up a little after 8. We probably didn't start until 8:15."

"Wait: wasn't it a 7:30 meeting?" Jo asked.

"Time is immaterial to these people," sighed the deacon. "It's an alternative universe they live in, I'm afraid."

Mike then related what passed for the meeting. No agenda. The secretary read the minutes verbatim from her notebook. The treasurer opened up an envelope and read off the bank balances as his report. Then the

worship committee chair proposed holding the next Thanksgiving Day service at the Baptist church, which prompted everyone to resurrect their memories of previous services there.

"That was hardly the worst part," Mike went on. "We then went back to the so-called Treasurer's report, to discuss what to do with the interest from the cd that is maturing."

Jo interrupted. "They have money?"

Mike took a sip, and resumed his tale of woe. "Yes, about ten thousand dollars in the cd, a couple of thousand in a savings account, and a checking account with a small balance. The bone we gnawed on most of the meeting had to do with the interest on the cd. In years past, they gave the money to the church that runs a soup kitchen on Saturdays. But that congregation has a new pastor who left this bunch of squares -- and rightly so -- and now they don't want to give him money for that ministry."

"So, who is getting it?" Jo looked both concerned and fascinated by this tale.

"They couldn't decide between the visiting nurses and the Red Cross. So, they voted to rolled the cd over until next year."

"There are people in need in this town -- and they decided to SAVE the money?" Jo was incredulous.

"You got that right. I think it was the treasurer who said that was good stewardship -- not spending money if you couldn't be sure it was going to a good cause." Mike rolled his eyes at his wife as he said it.

He took another sip, and then resumed. "As we were adjourning the "meeting", Frank announced that elections would be held next month. And that he and his wife were moving down the shore, so he wouldn't be able to run again."

"Thank God for small favors", said Jo.

"Don't be so quick," Mike responded. "As soon as he said that, every head swiveled my way. They want me to be the new president."

Jo raised an eyebrow. "And???"

"I said I'd think about it."

"You should do it. You'd whip them into shape." Jo leaned forward for emphasis. "Remember what you did when you president of the library board? Not to mention the Boy Scouts when the kids were growing up. Maybe the Four Corners ministry would finally do something useful."

The deacon frowned. "I'm not sure I should do it. First of all, my view of what this ministry should be would be a sea-change from what they've been doing lately. I'm not sure I can convince them to go along. Second, deacons aren't supposed to be taking leadership roles like that. As I

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understand it, I should be enabling people, not leading the charge. Besides, I'm brand new here -- what do I know?"

The wife was not deterred. "Hon, Father Pat said he wanted a deacon, and he knew that you started the transient housing program back at St. Philip's. He obviously wanted you to do something like that here."

Mike finished his dram, and thought for a moment. "For starters, I'm going to bed. I have a project meeting at work first thing in the morning, with a real agenda. Then I need to talk this over with Father Pat, and see what he wants. He did drop this group like a hot potato. Perhaps he'd be just as happy if nothing happened there."

To which Jo responded, as she followed her spouse off to bed, "And maybe he wants you to light a fire under them."