

## The Circle of Mercy Congregates for Uncommon Christian Witness

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Seeking justice. Pursuing peace. Following Jesus.— Mission of The Circle of Mercy

I guess it's the music that first grabs me. When I attend The Circle of Mercy (COM) congregation, the musicians have carefully customized music for the service of worship. Not only does the music carefully match worship themes, but the musical styles are as appropriate as they are surprising.

Last Sunday evening at COM, the music genres included old-time music styles that Doc Watson or Alison Kraus could sing from heart. Appearances in music also came from the traditional, the spirituals, the evangelical and the popular. Lyrics and choruses from The Beatles, Bob Dylan and Bruce Springsteen are often intertwined into the more historical "religious" songs. Some people sing quietly. Others clap and tap in more blatant expressions of feeling.

The mission of this church also interests me. COM affiliates with the two most progressive denominations of American Protestant Christianity, The Alliance of Baptists and the United Church of Christ. The latter has recently stirred controversy and made advertising news for their progressive ads (viewable at [www.ucc.org](http://www.ucc.org)).

Circle of Mercy is not for everyone. Its theology is considered by most folks liberal/progressive and yet strongly biblical. I rarely find such a combo in Christian circles. Anyone (let the reader understand) is welcome. Anyone can serve Holy Communion and participate in it (even children), pray, preach, get baptized, and bear witness. It has a sister congregation in Cuba.

The preaching I commend as well. Pastoral leadership is shared between Ken and Nancy Sehested and Joyce Hollyday, all three of whom have considerable records as eloquent spokespersons regarding peace and anti-war efforts, prison ministries, refugees, death-row inmates, and social justice. They enable congregants to ask hard questions of faith (such as "Where is God bearing witness in God's Realm today?") and point to uncommon places, full of common people: refugees, outlaws, children, the homeless and the imprisoned. COM is more a hospital for the hurting than a museum for perfect specimens of faith.

Speaking of imprisoned, one of COM's members is currently serving a prison sentence in a federal prison for her once-too-often protest at the School of the Americas, a state-sponsored terrorist training outfit run by the US Army at Fort Benning in Columbus, Georgia.

And speaking of children, I guess they grab me most. I've rarely been to a religious house where children are taken so seriously. The Christian education program at COM focuses first upon the kids' holiness and what this means. They are an excited, enthusiastic and inspiring bunch. They'll bring out the kid in you.

The Circle has a problem. Its membership of about 50-60 people usually fill up their worship space rented from All Souls Episcopal. [NOTE: COM worship now takes place in the parish hall of St. George's Episcopal Church.] So if COM get lots of visitors as a result of this column, then it has the happy problem of finding enough space for all the chairs. But the Circle seems to think that it can always grow large enough for one more seeker at the Christian intersection where Truth, Mercy, Justice and Compassion all meet.

Check out the Circle some Sunday if one is hungry for non-traditional, non-boring, often-radical conversations of faith. Dress: Very casual.

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I wouldn't call the Circle a church in any traditional sense. It's something ... different, and that's what attracts its small group of dedicated members. I say, check it out; it might grab you, too.