

## **CASE FOR ESSAY #2 OF THE “APPLICATION FOR ADMISSION TO DOCTOR OF MINISTRY PROGRAM”**

### **“Why Can’t They Just Levitate?”**

From *Attentive to God: Thinking Theologically in Ministry* by Charles M. Wood and Ellen Blue (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008, 51-53; used by permission)

St. Miscellaneous church was about sixty years old, and the building was beginning to need a good bit of maintenance and upkeep. The congregation had aged as well, and most of the people carried AARP cards in their wallets. Still, a number of younger families helped keep the congregation vital, and since the church was located in a suburb with higher percentages of affluent and well-educated (and therefore healthier) people than in most communities, many elderly members were still vigorous and active.

Inevitably, though, some members began to have difficulty in getting around, and making the climb to the church’s second-floor choir room became harder each year for the dozen or so faithful singers. One had ruined a knee jogging, one had never recovered properly after a broken ankle, one was short of breath due to a heart condition, one was losing her eyesight, and a few had some of the general mobility issues often associated with aging. Bob usually chatted with members of the adult Sunday school class in the hall near the staircase at about the same time the choir members were heading upstairs to don their robes and go over the morning’s special music, and he frequently had an opportunity to observe how the members paused to gather their strength for the climb that they clearly dreaded making.

The church had made some concessions to the needs of the disabled, installing a wheelchair ramp and some handrails at the main entrance to the sanctuary. Otherwise, though, the interior and exterior of the building were full of obstacles for those with mobility impairments. Even the one bathroom on the ground floor was not handicap accessible.

Despite the affluence of the community, many of the St. Misc members had retired and now considered themselves to be on “fixed incomes.” Bob was aware that their incomes were fixed much, much higher than those of most Americans, but he nevertheless understood that most of these individuals saw themselves as being financially at risk. After two or three of the larger donors died, the church itself began to feel a financial strain, and it was a bit harder to make the budget each year. Then, a particular member who had been among the richest died and, being childless and a widow, left her entire estate to the church. When all the dust had settled, the legacy amounted to about a quarter of a million dollars. Though some of Bob’s younger colleagues were envious and thought that it would solve many of their problems of something similar happened in their churches, Bob had watched dozens of families share inheritances, and he was not surprised to discover that the gift was not a healthy thing for the congregation.

He was surprised, however, to discover in exactly what way the windfall would prove to be problematic. Having envisioned fights between individuals or factions, each of whom wanted to spend the money a different way, he found instead a consensus that the money should not be spent at all. There was a great deal of talk about “good stewardship.” Many were willing to articulate the idea that investing the money, spending only the interest (or perhaps only part of it), and thus keeping the principal in reserve for future “hard times” was obviously the “responsible” course to take; others simply nodded in tacit agreement with these sentiments whenever they were voiced. A very few suggested mission projects, the most ambitious of which would cost \$5000.

Bob was a proponent of empowering the laity and understood well that it was vital for the congregation to “own” any project they adopted. Believing that it might help open their hearts to others, he thought that perhaps the congregation could install a handicap accessible bathroom and perhaps an elevator chair lift to the second floor, as this would benefit their own members while making the building more hospitable to others. At the next board of trustees meeting, he mentioned the difficulty that some of the choir members were having getting upstairs and that some of the money might be used to make the church more accessible for them.

Jack, a vocal member who had crossed swords with ministers before, spoke up right away. “We have to think of the good of the whole group,” he said, “and we wouldn’t be good Christian stewards if we spent so much money for just a few individuals.”

Bob said nothing at first, thinking that surely one of the laypeople would react to that statement, but then he realized that all the trustees, including Jack, were looking at him and waiting for a response.