

President's Letter

Transforming "Do-Gooders" Into "Good-Doers"

By Gary Reiersen

One of the best signs of hope I see in the new year is the transformation, after the tragic events of September 11th, of "do-gooders" into "good-doers."

"Do-gooders" was the way large segments of our society used to view those who tried to help others. This effort was often disparaged for many reasons. Do-gooders were seen as naïve, people who were taken-in by devious manipulators and charlatans. They were sometimes portrayed as doing their good deeds for their own self-aggrandizement. Their approach was often characterized as patronizing or creating deep-seated dependencies in those they served. Who would want to be associated with that?

In the wake of September 11th, I believe doing good has been redeemed from the derogatory associations of the past, so much so that perhaps we should junk the old term and speak of "good-doers." There are signs of it everywhere. New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, it was recently reported in *Time* magazine, has attended over 200 funerals and memorial services for those New Yorkers killed in the collapse of the World Trade Center, especially services for firefighters and police officers who had rushed to the scene and saved countless lives before losing their own. Attending the services in itself is not as remarkable as the fact that Giuliani never informed the media when he was doing so. Getting credit for being good is not as important now, it would appear, as the good itself.

Police officers and firefighters and others from our own community, and all over the country, who have gone to New York City to try to help people there are often quoted as embarrassed whenever they have been photographed and interviewed. Their motivation again was in doing the good rather than receiving any honor or distinction for it.

At the interfaith prayer service on Jan. 2 for Mayor R. T. Rybak and the members of the Minneapolis City Council, I was struck by the same commitment to do good expressed by a number of religious leaders of our community from a wide diversity of faiths. Faith groups



Rev. Gary Reiersen, President
Greater Minneapolis Council of Churches

communicated a commitment to service and justice as partners in addressing the needs of our community. Several referred to the wisdom of many of our faith traditions in challenging us to work to build better lives for all people in the city. Most faiths do, indeed, call for their adherents to do the good thing for others.

The movie *Iris* will open soon in our theaters. It depicts the life of British novelist and philosopher Iris Murdoch. She had something very important to say about doing good. Murdoch's novels portray how immensely difficult, but nevertheless crucial, it is to be or do good in a world which seems to be increasingly mad. And so she asks, in her celebrated essay "The Sovereignty of Good:" "Are we not certain that . . . goodness really matters?" Murdoch argues that "the only genuine way to be good is to be good 'for nothing' . . ." This requires an effort to give real attention to others and away from self. In the often self-centered rush of ordinary life, that is not easy. It demands a kind of "unselfing," in her view.

This is what I see in the fresh days of this new year, people rededicating themselves to being good for nothing. Good-doers are certainly not a new feature of the landscape in our community as we have witnessed over the years countless citizens eager to roll up their sleeves and work to do whatever needs to be done to build a better world. But perhaps now many others will also join in and the efforts will not be belittled but rather celebrated. Do-gooders have been transformed into good-doers and all of our lives may be better because of it.

**The Reverend Dr. Gary B. Reiersen is President
of the Greater Minneapolis Council of Churches.**

**Office: 612-721-8687 Fax: 612-722-8669
greierson@gmcc.org**