

# Shalom

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Council of Bishops President Gregory Palmer spoke of blind Bartimaeus (Mark 10:46-52) who called out insistently to Jesus. The bishop preached on "Starting and Stopping the Parade," and asked, "Who is really blind in our midst?"

Jesus and his large entourage were leaving Jerusalem. "A little committee was formed," Palmer said, to tell Bartimaeus to be quiet. But Bartimaeus called out all the more. "He had heard that Jesus the healer was in town."

Likewise, some might look at the work of Shalom groups as something to quiet down and let them focus on what they consider "the real work of the church," Palmer said.

"The more you try to ignore the gaping holes in your community, the more they open. The more you try to ignore the injustices and inequities, the more they enlarge." "Our refusal to raise our voices in a loud trumpet sound, the more we ignore the voice within us," the more the violence and rage tends to grow. If we ignore it, we will soon cease to be a real church. We will find ourselves there to sing a few hymns, gathering together mostly to take care of ourselves, he said.

"Thank God for the Bartimaeuses who have not bought into the script."

The little committee changed its attitude after Jesus said to call Bartimaeus to come, Palmer said.

Looking at a huge number of commentaries, Palmer said he realized that they weren't the key to understanding the Bible. "I realized how little time I spend with the marginalized. I raise money for them; I lift up a voice for them," he said, but he had determined his lack of community with the poor was necessary so that he "might know the liberating power of the Lord who was crucified for me."

Instead, "we want to fill the pews with bill-paying members," Palmer said. "How the church would change if we were serving at the Master's side?"

Retired Bishop Joseph Sprague, cited as one who speaks truth to power, wrote the resolution that created Shalom in the midst of the Los Angeles riots of 1992. Bishop John

Schol said that while the embers were still burning, for the first time in its history, the General Conference stopped its business and took a whole day to fast and be in prayer for what the United Methodist Church might do.

Sprague's legislation included those "who would commit themselves as neighbors and urban missionaries," and from this Shalom Zones were born.

Schol said some would call Sprague a "heretic," but so was Jesus. "He's been arrested," he said, at the White House for asking for peace and at General Conference for suggesting "that the Lord's table should be open to all people."

Sprague responded with an irony: In June 1991, "the IRD, Good News and the Confessing Movement made a pact that I would not be elected. It was almost successful." Elected, it was the next year, that Sprague birthed

Shalom.

“We live in a broken-down time,” Sprague said when more than 1.6 million are incarcerated. We spent \$45,000 a year to keep people in prison and we do nothing to keep them out of them. “Our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters have been told to go to the back door of United Methodism. We have practiced urban and rural ministry at a broken-down time.” The nation and the church has experienced “an unjust war conceived in fear and the sour milk of torture, and costing thousands of lives and \$5,000 a minute.”

There were 691,000 U.S. children hungry (before the recession, in 2007), 41 million people in dire poverty, 43 million have no high school education; 1 million can neither read nor write, Sprague said. Now is “no place at all for those with no place.”

“For too many seasons, we have been sick unto death” with a general scourge of hopelessness and atheism. “The IRD’s (Institute for Democracy and Religion) self-serving half-truths have divided us, and church politics have become increasingly strident. But we have endured a broken-down time,” the bishop said.

“Now is a time to build up. As seekers of Shalom, we are called together for such a time as this.” We have to know the time, know when to play offense; seize the time, to tell the truth, to incarnate a new story, “once upon this time”; and trust a time, trust the timekeeper as you seize this time, he said.

“Turn, believe and dare with courage to act like the Shalom-addicted fools for Jesus we have been called to be,” the bishop admonished.

At the closing worship, Schol spoke on “Stepping Up and Stepping Out” in a world of constraints.

Schol told of a man who, in 1982, attached a chair to a bunch of weather balloons and strapped himself in. The balloons took him 1,600 feet in the air instead of the expected 300. His escapade caused such trouble for emergency forces that he was arrested when he came back down. “Why did you do that?” a television reporter asked. “Well, it’s better than just sittin’ in the chair,” Schol said. Isaiah told people who had been beaten up to “lengthen the cords.”

“Our failure is in not looking at our assets,” Schol said.

He told of going into a community where all but two houses were boarded up to tell them that Shalom would build on their assets, but he asked himself, “What do these people have to build on?” When they passed out a questionnaire asking them to list their assets, they turned in three pages of assets. They had a good cook, Schol said, and so they started a catering business.

“We wrestle with starting churches in the UM tradition; we have to do something rather than waiting for bishops like me to catch up.” He suggested we use the assets in our midst, that God’s eyes don’t see the constraints. “We need to stretch the cords.”

And “we need to drive deeper,” Schol said, before telling the story of an interpreter in Russia, Elena, an atheist who “got a gig interpreting for a preacher from Oklahoma.” During the service, she realized “he’s speaking to me.” She was interpreting and giving her life to God at the same time.

Now Elena has raised up 17 pastors and congregations that came out of the Bible studies she led and has organized a small church in Russia. Asked why the church is small, Elena said, “You have to go deeper before you can go wider.”

Schol encouraged Shalom Zones and ministries to go deeper.

Shalom workers came from 26 states, from North Dakota, California, New Jersey, Texas and states in between. South Carolina brought 71 participants.

In the stead of S.C. Bishop Mary Virginia Taylor, the Rev. Willie Teague, director of Connectional Ministries for the S.C. conference, noted a photo on the front of the Advocate when he was editor that featured Bishop Schol and the Conference Council on Ministries Associate Director, the Rev. Jack Washington, after accreditation had been awarded to the four S.C. sites. Those four are still vibrant and 29 more have been added, Teague said. Of the 104 Shalom sites, South Carolina has 33, noted Michael Christensen, executive director of the Communities of Shalom headquartered at Drew University.

The Rev. Michael Henderson, pastor of Cayce UMC, was introduced as chair of the conference’s Board of Global Ministries. Staff of the UM General Board of Global Ministries, a co-sponsor of the event, were also present and the Rev.

Kelvin Sauls of that organization spoke. Thirty youth took part in JustUs Youth activities.

Al Byrd, a layperson from Cherokee Place UMC, Charleston, was cited by Schol for his perseverance after being able to find only six of the requested eight people from his site to be trained more than a decade ago. But when training was over, Byrd and his five compatriots went door-to-door to North Charleston businesses and got people moving toward change, bringing in \$10 million in new development.

“We (Shalom leaders) begin by looking at the good in our communities,” Schol said. “No one needs to tell us the bad things.”

Videos were interspersed in the program to show the varied work being done by communities of Shalom across the United States and three African countries, opening with a video of Bennettsville Cheraw Shalom that works on housing, holds health fairs and provides tutoring, among other services. Carolyn Little, coordinator from that site, skipped to the podium to tell how “great it is to be in Carolina,” noting she was in Shalom for a lifetime.

Christensen said South Carolina was chosen for the summit, not because of the politicians or because the Sons of the Confederates wanted to keep the Confederate flag flying, but because, after Shalom Zones were instituted in Los Angeles in 1994, South Carolina United Methodists were the first to apply for four Shalom Zone sites and stands as “a prophetic witness for racial reconciliation.”

Drew University Theological School dean, Maxine Beach, also was on hand to speak. The Summit also was co-sponsored by Drew. Christensen said Shalom, based on Jeremiah 17, seeks the peace and prosperity of all in the city and its members “pray to the Lord in its behalf. Drew provides local Shalom organizations with asset-based community development. The work of Shalom begins with a local United Methodist church, but is designed to be an interfaith effort with other churches within the community. Shalom is on the loose!

Video presentations made included one from Macon, Ga., where the mayor called in Shalom’s management at Drew to help solve the city’s problems. Five communities of Shalom are now located there. Participants also heard about Gallatin, Tenn., near Nashville, which has the largest Shalom and has raised \$1.4 million for its work; a North Texas Shalom that provides legal services for undocumented immigrants; a Shalom in High Point, N.C., that moved addiction recovery into Ward Street UMC’s sanctuary; the Deaf Shalom Zone in Baltimore, Md.; a green Shalom that gleans food for the needy in Scranton, Pa.; Shalom Farms in Greater Richmond, Va.; community health care provided from a van in Charlotte, N.C.; and numerous family services provided at Rosebud Reservation in Wolakota, S.D. Shaloms also offer medical assistance in Ghana, a community garden and kitchen in Zimbabwe and care for 100 orphans in Malawi; and —

— and then there’s Jayda, who was in Columbia to talk about her role in forming Nine Strong Women of Newark, N.J., to rescue “young ladies” from what beset her as a 15-year-old, a member of the Bloods gang and doing time. “I’m here to build a bridge between Juvenile Justice and college. Now I find myself right smack in the middle of God’s people,” she said at the summit here.

Her Shalom training has led to a residential program to house the young ladies. With her help and that of the man she now loves, a Crip, the two gangs are working together, with Shalom and other interfaith assistance to help gang-affiliated people return home from prison in a safe way.