

Harvard Divinity Today

SPRING 2005 VOLUME I NUMBER I

Where Two or Three Are Gathered

Rain or shine, Jedediah Mannis provides regular Sunday worship on the sidewalks of Cambridge.

by Wendy McDowell

I T WAS PALM SUNDAY, a day when many Christian churches start their services outside and then move inside to their sanctuaries. But in Porter and Harvard Squares, the Rev. Jedediah Mannis (MDiv '04) spent the day presiding over services that took place outside from start to finish, something he has done every Sunday for nearly two years. At a 9 AM prayer service outside the Porter Square T station, people with palms in their hands gathered around the draped table Mannis and his assistants had set up, and worshiped together in the midst of nearly constant traffic (bus, car, and pedestrian). Later in the day, Mannis would preside at another outdoor service, on the Cambridge Common in Harvard Square.

Rain or shine, or in the cold and snow (of which there was plenty this past winter), Mannis provides what he calls a "full-service Outdoor Church" to people who do not want to go indoors for services. Many, but not all, of his congregants are homeless, and Mannis says they don't go to churches for "many of the same reasons people won't go into shelters: they're

afraid of what will happen, self-conscious of how they look or smell, or scared that they'll be kicked out."

To encourage trust in such an environment, "we always arrive at the same time at the same places, and follow the same path," Mannis said. Though the services are ecumenical and do not, in their details, cleave to any one Christian tradition completely, Mannis wears a clerical collar, because he says "people have very powerful ideas about what clergy should look like, and it helps them to recognize me."

Mannis started the outdoor Sunday prayer service at the Cambridge Common two years ago, and added the Porter Square service in fall 2004. There is also a Thursday evening Compline service held outside Christ Church in Cambridge, and this summer another Sunday service will be added, in Central Square.

"We do carry socks with us, and occasionally underclothes, but we're not providers of social services or material help," Mannis explained. "We're ministers, and as such, we're unique, because no one else in Cambridge is out there



MARK OSTOW

The Rev. Jedediah Mannis (MDiv '04), at center, leads a communion service earlier this spring.

for that purpose."

"Anything that you would ask of a minister, we expect to be asked, and we are," he continued. "People confess to us, and they ask us for blessings. Communion or blessing turns out to be the thing that most strongly links people to what they

remember of religious practice, and we feel that communion can be offered and administered by anyone and taken by anyone. Almost always, it is the people themselves who feel that they should not

continued on page 10



Harvard Divinity School
45 Francis Avenue
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138-1911

NON-PROFIT
ORGANIZATION
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
PERMIT NO. 250
MAILED FROM 01842

Where Two or Three Are Gathered

continued from page 1

be taking communion and have firm rules about it. We don't argue with them, we're just present and try to be utterly nonjudgmental."

"We also do memorial services," added Mannis, "though that is the most heart-breaking thing we do. So much of our ministry is witnessing people sliding deeper and deeper toward death. The arc of people's lives is so foreshortened, by exposure and all the other challenges they face."

Mannis stresses that the people to whom he ministers aren't likely to ever get off the street. "Nonetheless," he said, "it is possible to help people whether they get off the street or not." The services have expanded, as word of mouth has spread, and there are now some regular attendees.

Mannis says that his ministry extends not only to homeless and street people, but also to members of local churches (most from nearby congregations that have taken a special interest in the outdoor church, including Christ Church, Harvard-

Epworth, St. James Episcopal, and North Prospect churches in Cambridge), who have "had some extraordinarily transformative experiences" as they have been given "a radically different sense of what the church is and can be." These connections have been one of the surprising and important parts of the development of the Outdoor Church, Mannis says. "We have made a point to affiliate with those churches, and try to preach in each of them once or twice a year."

He is sometimes surprised himself that he has ended up where he has. A Yale-educated lawyer, Mannis gradually realized that ministry was his calling when he started doing pro-bono legal work (mostly regarding money issues such as bankruptcy, debt, and tax problems) for residents at homeless shelters in Cambridge and Boston. Through this work, he encountered the Rev. Deborah Little, whose outdoor church services in downtown Boston through her organization Ecclesia Ministries he credits as being the inspiration and model for his current work.

"About five years ago, it occurred to me that more and more, I had become someone who was engaged in a ministry and also happened to be trained as a lawyer rather than being a lawyer who wanted to



MARK OSTOW

do good things," Mannis said. "So I decided to enroll in divinity school and seek ordination."

At HDS, Mannis found that both the coursework and community helped him to deepen his calling. "Though it may sound counterintuitive, courses that would seem to be entirely academic proved to be the most helpful," Mannis said, and noted particularly David Hall's "Liberalism and Orthodoxy" course. "I would have never imagined that reading about Puritans would have anything to do with my calling, but I came to realize that the connection made perfect sense to me as a minister."

Such courses helped him to "learn a vocabulary for describing what I wanted to do, and why" and that vocabulary, Mannis said, "allowed me to be a lot more disciplined and rigorous in my thinking than I had been up to that time."

Mannis also found himself in the midst of like-minded people at HDS.

"The kinds of student contacts I made were important from the very beginning," he said. "I tended to meet people my age rather than younger students, and that group of people was very intentional about committing themselves to some kind of life of service. It was astonishing to me to be surrounded by people with a similar attitude and way of engaging in the world, and was particularly helpful to me after spending the last 30 years deal-

ing primarily with real estate brokers."

Two students in particular, Kevin Smith and Tom Lenhart, fellow student ministers at North Prospect Church, have been invaluable assistants to Mannis with the Outdoor Church.

Mannis was ordained as a minister in the United Church of Christ in October 2003. "It is extraordinary of the UCC to treat the Outdoor Church as an ordainable call, since normally they expect you to be attached to a conventional church with a conventional salary," he said. "They have been very supportive, and I will be installed by the Outdoor Church this fall."

Mannis's Outdoor Church has become an official nonprofit organization, with its own board of directors, and an office. Next year, it will be an official field education site for Harvard Divinity School students.

Meanwhile, Mannis continues to provide legal advice at shelters in the Boston area, which he says "is partly a way to keep track of some of the same people, and a chance for people to catch up with me." What's more, he continues to maintain his day job, acting as the head of a nonprofit organization, the Shelter Island Fund, which attempts to preserve open space through limited development.

Mannis calls this group "the preservationists of last resort" and says he cannot help but think of it as "dancing with the devil."

"There are some things we feel strongly about in this ministry, and one of the most important is that we aim to never stand between a person we meet on the street and the church," Mannis said. "Hopefully, with three services in Cambridge, we can at least be accessible to most of the people who are likely to be outdoors most of the time. That's the goal."

Although his words are humble, to watch Mannis preside over the service and see the people he serves bowed in prayer on Palm Sunday, you cannot help but feel as if you are witnessing something extraordinary—a glimpse of peace and blessing amid chaos and noise. As such, every Sunday is Palm Sunday in the Outdoor Church, as Mannis, with his gentle passion, tries to soften the paths of the people he serves. 🌿



MARK OSTOW