

Cartoons as Truth-telling: Jay Sidebotham

Have you ever wondered who creates those wonderful cartoons that accompany the welcome letter for each issue of *The Good Steward*? It is the Rev. Jay Sidebotham, an Episcopal priest who comes from a long line of ad men – and who has been drawing his whole life.

“I have been drawing cartoons since I was a kid,” Jay says. His father was a creative director in an ad agency, and his grandfather was also in advertising and worked as an illustrator. “There was always blank paper, pencils, and markers in our house, growing up.”

From Madison Avenue to the ministry

Jay studied Art at Trinity College in Hartford, CT. From there, he moved to Manhattan and became an animator for the television program *Schoolhouse Rock*. For eight years following that, he was an art director in various ad agencies in Manhattan.

He then made a big change in his life: He decided to attend Union Theological Seminary in Manhattan. “At the time, I didn’t know what exactly I wanted to do,” he says. While in school, he felt a call to become a priest. Since his ordination in 1990, he has served at parishes in Rhode Island, Washington, D.C., North Carolina, Chicago, and New York City.

Currently, Jay serves part-time as an associate rector in Wilmington, N.C. The rest of the time, he concentrates his ministry on consulting with congregations about their spiritual development and growth. “I help them see what is working for them and what is getting in their way,” he says. This work is made possible through a ministry in the Episcopal Church called RenewalWorks, which is part of the work of Forward Movement.

One thread has been woven throughout his life: He has always been interested in cartooning. “Cartoons are a wonderful communication tool,” he says. “You can say things in cartoons that you can’t say any other way.”

Jay’s inspiration

Jay gets his ideas by keeping his eyes open and being aware of common scenarios in parish life. “I try to get in the heads of people who do a lot for the church, but that people don’t really understand,” he says. That includes parish secretaries, custodians, and clergy people.

One situation that he uses a lot is that of a clergy person greeting parishioners at the door at the end of service. “I draw it a couple of different ways,” he says. Sometimes the clergy person misunderstands what a parishioner says, and sometimes it is the reverse situation.

Jay quotes Charles Schulz, the artist who created the comic strip *Peanuts*: “Cartooning is preaching. And I think we all have a right to do some preaching.” For a cartoon to be really good, it should have a strong idea or insight that communicates something important to readers, Jay says. “Cartoons can be teaching tools to get people to think about something.”

One of his cartoons that gets a big response depicts a preacher in the pulpit saying, "There seems to be something wrong with the sound system." The congregation is saying in return: "And also with you." (See the cartoon above.) Jay also contributes his work to the highly anticipated annual Cartoon Liturgical Calendar sent out by the Church Pension Group.

Jay says it is important that people can have a laugh about church life. "Sometimes we take things too seriously," he says. "You need to have a sense of joy, no matter how serious a situation may be."