

Classroom encounters: Lecture interrupted

by [William H. Willimon](#) in the [February 13, 2002](#) issue

When I first started teaching, the dean thought it would be a good idea for me to warm up to the vocation (after five years in the pastorate) by teaching summer school. The summer school was designed for second-career folk—those called into the pastoral ministry late in life. Some of these students, I was to discover, are the most interesting kind. Many of them have walked away from lucrative jobs. Many are already serving in some—shall we say—challenging congregations.

I remember I was lecturing on “effective liturgical leadership.” Using some of Robert Hovda’s thoughts on liturgical leadership, I was stressing how the one who presides in the liturgy sets the tone for the assembly, conveys the church’s faith in its acts of worship. A hand went up.

“Doc,” said a large pastor from the hills of West Virginia, “I had something happen the Sunday before I come down here. Don’t know if I handled it right or not. I was at the prayer time and so I asked the church, ‘Do you have any special prayer needs?’”

“A woman raised her hand and said, ‘Yeah, I got one. I want you to pray that Mary Jones will stop leading my husband into adultery.’ With that, Mary Jones jumped up screaming, ‘You bitch!’ and the two of them locked in a fight, pulling and jerking each other all over the church. Their husbands got into it too, one ramming the head of the other into the backside of the pew.”

I froze at the lectern, mouth gaping. What got me more than his story was the class’s reaction. All of the other students sat passively, some nodding in silent agreement as if to say, “Yep, that same thing happened at my church just last week.” Apparently, no one found anything that they were hearing to be bizarre or ecclesiastically odd. Some appeared to be taking notes.

“So,” he continued, “I came down out of the pulpit, pulled the two women apart, and said, ‘Stop it! Sit yourselves back down. Now, I’m gonna ask one more time. Are

there any prayer requests? And I'm gonna see if you can do it right this time. And if you people don't settle down and act like Christians, I'm gonna bust some heads. Ya'll is acting like that crowd Paul had to put up with in Corinth.' They knew I could bust heads if I needed to. I was in the marines before the Lord called me to seminary, also did a little pro wrestlin'. They quieted down and we went on with the service. Now Doc, my question is, was this what you would call 'good liturgical leadership'?"

I mumbled something like, "Sounds good to me." Then I dismissed the class. That was enough for one day. I stumbled back to my office to engage in a bit of prayer time of my own. "Lord, help me to be a good seminary professor."