

## Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

February 15, 2004

Luke 6:17-26

### *From Washington, D.C. to Sri Lanka—Via Indiana*

**W**hen former Congressman Lee Hamilton used to joke about all the Sri Lankan experts in his southern Indiana district, he wasn't kidding. Unlikely as it seemed, there were close connections between two rural Indiana churches and the South Asian island nation once known as Ceylon. Those ties stemmed from a partnership between the Indiana-Kentucky Conference of the United Church of Christ and the Jaffna Diocese, a Sri Lankan division of the Church of North India, which itself had grown out of an earlier encounter with Sri Lankan Christian missionaries in residence in Indiana.

While other congregations in the Conference concentrated on supporting the Jaffna Diocese's work with children, the yoked St. Peter and Trinity UCC congregations in Lamar, Indiana, boldly took up their Sri Lankan partners' second challenge: justice and peace advocacy. When Rev. Chip Jahn, who pastors both congregations, says that "we didn't know much about advocacy," he refers to both the Conference and his churches. Since no one could be sure what such a ministry might produce, Rev. Jahn's congregations agreed to cover the costs, rather than dipping into the Conference budget. That didn't surprise anyone in the Conference, since St. Peter and Trinity have always believed in mission. "Reaching outside the church walls gives us the right to call ourselves a church," is the way they see it. Still, some congregations might have balked at a commitment that would involve both time and travel for their pastor. But St. Peter and Trinity are the only churches Rev. Jahn has served in twenty-five years of ministry, and they have a special relationship with their pastor.

Besides chairing the Conference partnership committee, Rev. Jahn developed government contacts in Washington, D.C., and relationships with other peace advocates in Europe as well as Sri Lanka. Peace advocacy had to be a priority in the relationship because life in Sri Lanka has been continually interrupted by civil war since 1982. The International Red Cross calls the conflict between the majority Buddhist Sinhalese and the Hindu Tamil separatists a "war without mercy." Nine out of ten casualties have been civilians.

But what could American church people do to facilitate a peace process? Using their contacts in Congress, Rev. Jahn and his committee helped draft a non-binding resolution on Sri Lanka that the United States Senate adopted. Developing relationships with the U.S. State Department has also permitted them to serve as a conduit between Washington and Sri Lanka. More than once, Rev. Jahn has been called to Washington for consultation on short notice. But his congregations understand: that just goes with being one of those Sri Lankan experts in southern Indiana.