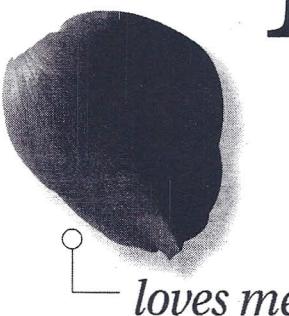


love & marriage *in* *City Market*

*Savannah preacher leads
the annual Valentine's Day
renewal of vows,
attracting dozens of couples.*

By Steve Piscitelli
for the Savannah Morning News



orman Vincent Peale. A rising actor. A renovated Old South marketplace.

They don't seem to have much in common. But one common denominator arrives each Feb. 14 in the form of a smiling, gregarious man of the cloth, his wife and a renewal of marriage vows ceremony.

Since the early 1990s, the Rev. William "Billy" Hester has officiated at the annual St. Valentine's Day renewal of marriage vows ceremony in City Market.

Hester got the gig in a serendipitous manner. One of his church members planned the initial event and needed someone to preside. With some trepidation, the reverend accepted the call.

"Coming into it the first time, I was concerned about noise and whether or not people would take this seriously," Hester mused. "When I arrived that first year, there was a group of bikers. 'Oh, Lord! This is going to be a disaster' was my first thought. But one of the biker women, with tears in her eyes, asked me to sign her Bible. It all turned out well. People took the service part very seriously. It was a lesson for

me in how not to judge people."

Hester impresses even the casual observer with his even-handed approach.

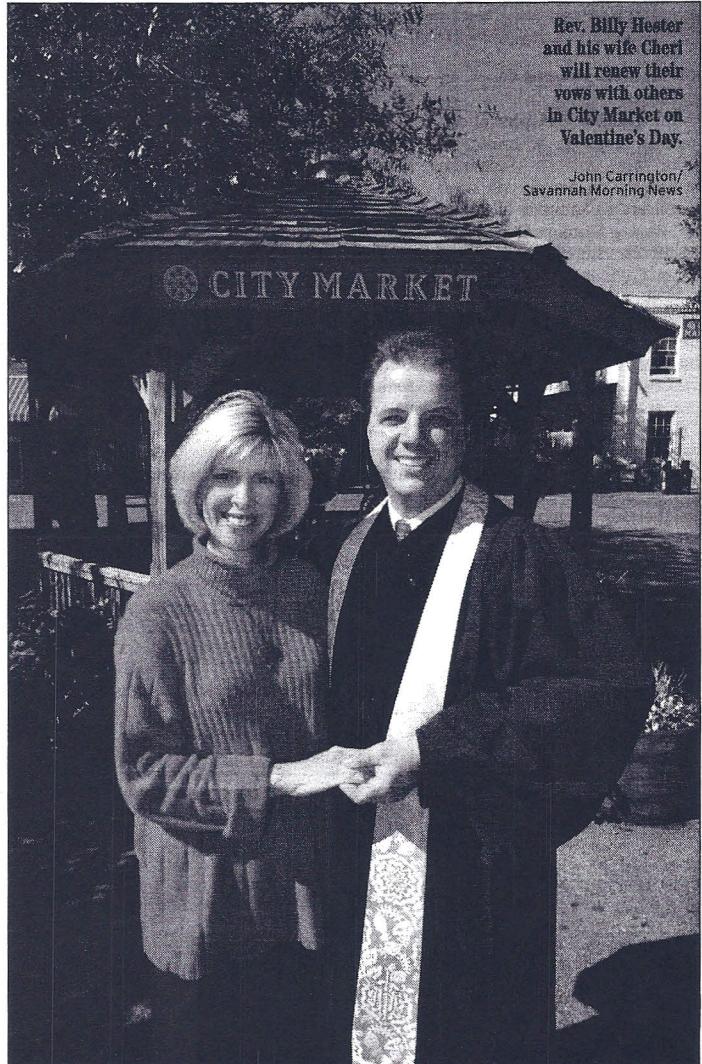
"He doesn't exclude anyone," said Kathleen Moore, assistant director of City Market. "He has helped the event become a long-standing tradition."

For Hester, it boils down to one word: interfaith.

"If you want to do this in your hometown community," he suggested, "go and listen to some ministers. Ask them how they define 'interfaith.' Some think it just means expanding from Baptists to Methodists – maybe including a Catholic," he said with a smile. "Interfaith means interfaith. It must be inclusive of all faiths."

Hester exudes a balanced passion for the ceremony because, as he said, "it is about the people" – not about a preacher's agenda.

A personable 40-something man with a lean look, he is not pushy. In fact, he is downright pleasant – the kind of guy who draws many to a congregation. Part of his graciousness can be traced to his roots in this old Southern community.



Rev. Billy Hester
and his wife Cheri
will renew their
vows with others
in City Market on
Valentine's Day.

John Carrington/
Savannah Morning News

IF YOU GO**What:** Annual Marriage Vow Renewal Ceremony**Where:** City Market courtyard, weather permitting.**When:** 7 p.m.**Contact:** Call the City Market office at 232-4903 or visit www.savannahcitymarket.com. There is also an information line at (912) 525-CITY.**What's happening:** Let your spouse know you'd do it all over again: The Rev. William Hester leads a Valentine's Day ceremony renewing marriage vows.

"You see that building there," he said motioning toward an art gallery in the Market. "I grew up here in Savannah. That was my dad's restaurant – Hester's Restaurant – back when I was 4 years old."

In his early 20s, Hester left his hometown and traveled north to seek his fame as an actor. Unlike many struggling actors, he actually landed some high-profile stage jobs. But another door opened and changed his life forever.

Across the street from his New York apartment stood Norman Vincent Peale's Marble Collegiate Church. Hester started attending and eventually became a lay leader for an actors support group.

"You know," he said with a smile in his voice, "actors get lots of rejections. So I organized an Actors' Fellowship."

But more significant for Hester was the ability to work with a mentor like Peale.

"He was a practical man. He didn't just talk doctrine. He communicated in a way that benefited people's lives. He made faith very practical."

An original thinker, Peale wrote motivational books on personal fulfillment when Zig Ziglar was still a salesman.

"He was a master storyteller in the way he communicated the faith," the Rev. Hester remembered.

While Hester did not formally study under Peale, he did learn what would become his craft.

"I did 'study' him, you could say. I would type out his sermons and study how he delivered his message."

Inspired by his association with Peale, Hester stepped away from the stage lights and entered Princeton Theological Seminary in 1986. After a two-year stint at Marble as an associate minister, he returned to Savannah. In 1993 he took on the pastoral duties at Asbury Memorial United Methodist Church.

And he came home with more than acting experience and the tutelage of a wise mentor. Hester met his future wife, Cheri, in New York.

"I first saw her in the Actors' Fellowship. Two weeks later she and I played opposite each other in 'Pippin.' " He played Pippin. Cheri was Catherine.

Now, 15 years and four children later, she shares duties with her husband on the renewal ceremony stage. Putting her performing career to work, she also helps the church's liturgical dance company choreograph performances.

In an era of change, turmoil and tension, Savannah's annual renewal ceremony follows a refreshingly familiar pattern. It typically starts with a lone troubadour strumming his guitar and softly singing easy love songs. The crowd is welcomed by a representative of City Market. The reverend is introduced and the assembled crowd moves closer.

It is not unusual to see some 50 to 60 couples, although one very cold and stormy year only four couples braved the weather. My wife and I were one of the couples who huddled in the dusty upper level of one of the warehouses being refurbished that year. The Hesters cheerfully conducted the ceremony as if 100 people had joined hands.

Surrounded by the renovated restaurants and shops of City Market, the Rev. Hester graciously welcomes the crowd

each year and shares some brief thoughts on the vitality of marriage. He stresses the power of reaffirming marriage vows.

"I like to tell the people that these renewal vows are, in some ways, more powerful than the original vows. Once we're married we know what it means to be committed to a person."

The couples turn toward one another, and holding hands, Hester leads the men in their renewal vows. His wife, Cheri, then follows suit with the women.

Drawing on his experience with Peale, he does not use traditional wedding vows. "I talk about listening to one another; laughing with one another. It can be traced back to Peale's practicality."

Upon completion of the vows, Hester ends with a simple invitation for the couples to kiss. The crowd cheers and couples hug.

"Do you take this gig on the road?" someone asked after the reverend packed his robe away in 2002. "Maybe I could get you to come to our hometown?"

"Sure," Hester replied.

But my wife reminded us, "I don't think Savannah will let go of him on Valentine's Day."

Steve Piscitelli is a professor and free-lance writer. He lives in Atlantic Beach, Fla. with his wife, Laurie. They have been married 27 years and have been to six previous renewal ceremonies.

RENEWAL OF MARRIAGE VOWS: SUPERLATIVES

Each year an annual prize giveaway recognizes couples at the renewal of vows ceremony. City Market rustles up door prizes from area merchants and recognizes those couples who:

- have been married the longest
- have been married the fewest years
- have come the furthest distance for the ceremony
- have the most children

While my wife and I participate for the meaning of the ceremony, the truth is we have always "coveted" at least one of those prizes. The 2002 renewal marked our sixth year attending the event and since it was also our 26 anniversary we thought we had a good shot at that longevity prize.

Unfortunately, it was not to be. We were 27 years too late. Fifty-three years of matrimony won the prize that night.

But we did take home a ceramic teapot for the couple attending the most ceremonies.