

Seventh Sunday of Easter
June 5, 2011
Acts 1:6-14

WITNESS

In his last words to the apostles found in the Book of Acts, Jesus charges them to be his witnesses "to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8b). These words, along with the "Great Commission" in Matthew 28:19, have inspired Christian mission for over 2,000 years.

At no time did those exhortations resonate more than in the 1800s, the "Great Century" of world mission. The fact that the same century also saw the race for overseas empires in Africa and Asia has led to the conclusion that the "cross followed the flag." Or, to put it another way, mission, too, sought to "civilize" Africans and Asians along western lines.

Such was not the case, at least, with the American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Missions, the predecessor of the UCC's Wider Church Ministries and Global Ministries.

From 1832 to 1886, the American Board was led by Rufus Anderson, who revered the first-century Christian church and knew the Book of Acts intimately, especially Jesus' reassuring words to his followers, "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you." His theology of mission rested upon absolute trust in the Holy Spirit.

According to Rufus Anderson, the missionary's role was limited to planting the seeds of the Gospel. The harvest was up to God. If the mission bore fruit, then indigenous pastors must be trained and given responsibility for the new churches. The missionary's role was to make way so that the indigenous church could become self-supporting, and self-governing, as well as self-propagating.

It was a mistake, Anderson believed, to identify the Gospel with "the blessings" of American civilization. In his thought, as well as his leadership of the American Board, Rufus Anderson defied the stereotype of the missionary as an advance agent of western civilization. Today, when we speak of the "indigenization" of the Gospel, we can give thanks to God for this pioneer and innovator in mission.

Pentecost Sunday
June 12, 2011
Acts 2:1-21

SPREAD THE LOVE: STRENGTHEN THE CHURCH

Today congregations across the United Church of Christ are receiving the Strengthen the Church offering. As we celebrate the birth of the church, this offering builds the future of the church by funding The Stillspeaking Ministry, new and renewing churches, youth and young adult ministries, and lay and pastoral leadership formation.

Did you know that 50% of the offering is put to use directly by our regional Conferences?

The Southwest Conference is gathering young adults in Flagstaff and Tucson as emerging “communities of faith” to find support, meaning, and sustenance together.

The South Central Conference sends pastors to the national UCC training for New and Renewing Church Pastors.

The Ohio Conference funds a Coach for Church Development and Congregational Renewal to work directly with congregations.

The Hawai‘i Conference used \$5,000 for youth to attend the 2010 Western Regional Youth Event.

The Southern California Nevada Conference has made youth and young adult ministries its priority.

The Pennsylvania Southeast Conference funds a Conference Resource Director to assist churches in the midst of a changing world and evolving church.

The Illinois South Conference broadcast a UCC God is still speaking television ad during the Lenten season.

The Wisconsin Conference supports two new church starts – La Viña del Señor UCC in Waukesha and Grace UCC in Milwaukee.

In addition to the funds used by our regional UCC Conference, 50% of gifts to the Strengthen the Church offering is used by Local Church Ministries and The Stillspeaking Ministry for church development, leader development and The Stillspeaking Ministry. In the last three years, Stillspeaking reached an estimated 25 million people through advertising and registered over 3,000 Stillspeaking Voices committed to the growth of the message and membership of the United Church of Christ.

Your generosity today ensures our vibrant life today and tomorrow. Spread the Love. God is still speaking.

Trinity Sunday
June 19, 2011
Genesis 1:1-2:4a

“INDEED, IT WAS VERY GOOD.”

When John Houghton calls global warming "a weapon of mass destruction," he speaks not only as a scientist but also as a committed Christian. Houghton, a Welsh scientist, was one of the leaders of the U.N.'s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the organization that shared the Nobel Peace Prize with Al Gore in 2007. He views climate change as a moral and spiritual problem as well as an environmental one. "If the Old Testament prophets were here, they'd be tearing their hair out, cursing us, telling us we're absolutely greedy," he says, "and they'd be right."

No one knows for sure what global warming may bring, but we can be sure that it will change our climate. People of faith should be the first to sound the alarm because, as Houghton says, "Christians and other religious people believe that we've been put on earth to look after it. Creation is not just important to us, we believe it is important to God and that the rest of creation has an importance of its own."

Houghton believes that the rich nations of the world, which have generated most of the carbon dioxide, have a moral obligation to solve the problem. "The developed world has to take the first action in reducing greenhouse gas emissions. That part is inescapable." The environmental crisis, Houghton says, offers the rich nations of the world nothing less than an opportunity for moral regeneration, if only we can seize it.

Next Saturday we celebrate the 54th anniversary of the United Church of Christ. In 1967, ten years after our church was formed, John Houghton gave his first lecture on global warming. Thus, the UCC has grown up with the environmental movement, and has been an eloquent advocate for the stewardship of the earth all along because we believe that our Stillspeaking God cares for creation.

Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
June 26, 2011
Matthew 10:40-42

WORDS OF WELCOME

In a world of short attention spans and sound bites, many of our United Church of Christ congregations have adapted well by coming up with brief but meaningful mottos to tell who they are and what they do. Here is just a sampling:

“A wellspring of hope for diverse people.” Old First Reformed United Church of Christ, Philadelphia, PA.

“We celebrate diversity through out warm and inclusive welcome.” First Congregational United Church of Christ, Portland, OR.

“United in our quest for spiritual growth and in our commitment to putting faith into action.” Mayflower Church United Church of Christ, Minneapolis, MN.

“Inclusive, intentional, intimate, inspiring, inquisitive.” Evangelical United Church of Christ, St. Louis, MO.

“Where love is first.” First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Oakland, CA.

“Where heart and mind meet.” First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Houston, TX.

“An open community united in love and justice.” First United Church of Oak Park, IL.

“A family rooted in Christ, growing in grace, and living in love.” Eden United Church of Christ, Edwardsville, IL.

“Dedicated to spiritual renewal, we strive to be an accepting, thinking, and serving community church.” Elon Community Church, United Church of Christ, Elon, NC.

“Greeting all of God’s children with extravagant welcome!” Pleasant Hill Community Church, United Church of Christ, Pleasant Hill, TN.

“Come walk with us for the experience of a lifetime meant to last a lifetime.” Pilgrim United Church of Christ, Cleveland, OH.

“Extravagantly welcoming, racially inclusive, evangelically courageous.” First United Church of Tampa, FL.

These mottos, and those of many other congregations across the country, prove that in the United Church of Christ, God is still speaking.

Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 3, 2011

Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67

"IMAGINE WHAT'S POSSIBLE"

Yesterday was "Suncoast Saturday" in Tampa, Florida, for over 3,000 delegates and visitors to the 28th General Synod of our United Church of Christ. Taking a break from the business agenda of the Synod, which opened on Friday, they listened to speakers and attended programs on subjects ranging from personal growth and intergenerational ministry to congregational vitality and outreach before gathering for an evening of music and entertainment.

This morning it's back to business in the committees that process the resolutions, submitted by churches, Conferences, and national ministries, to be brought to the whole Synod for a vote. In so doing, the delegates, who are chosen by their respective Conferences, will be mindful that General Synod speaks to and not for the local churches of the UCC. Then this afternoon the doors of the Tampa Convention Center will open for a community-wide worship service, which will lift up the Synod theme, "Imagine what's possible. God is still speaking."

It's a message that will resonate far beyond the Gulf Coast of Florida. "It is an acknowledgment that the last several years have been tough for many of our members and our churches," admits Edith Guffey, associate general minister of the UCC. "But too many of us have been looking at what we can't do or what we don't have--the dollars, the resources, the young people in our churches, the attention of the media, and on and on.... We need to begin to imagine again, imagine what is possible with our Stillspeaking God."

It's a message found in the passage from Isaiah used at all of the worship at this year's General Synod: "I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert." (43:19)

During the next two days, the Synod delegates will make some momentous decisions. They will elect three new people to the UCC's collegium of officers. They will act upon a "Proposal for Unified Governance of the National Setting of the United Church of Christ." And they will approve resolutions that can help to define the issues and priorities that propel our ministry and mission as a church during the next two years.

Let us be thankful for all who are attending General Synod in Tampa, and hold them up in our thoughts and prayers.

Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
July 10, 2011
Genesis 25:19-34

EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY IN LAOS

Laos, the rugged, landlocked nation on the Indochinese peninsula, is one of the least developed in Asia. And the ethnic minority Akha, Hmong, and Khmu people, who live in remote rural areas, are among the poorest in that country and have been severely disadvantaged when it comes to schooling. Some of their children do not even attend primary school, and others drop out at an early age.

The Global Ministries of the United Church of Christ and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) are seeking to improve educational opportunity for the Akha and other minority children in Laos through our partner, Church World Service (CWS). By creating after-school programs in community development centers, CWS has increased the number of primary school age children who stay in school with two important results: first, they acquire skills that can provide them with a livelihood in later life, and second, they avoid the idleness that can eventually lead to a downward spiral into alcohol, drugs, and prostitution.

In Laos, our Global Ministries missionary is Xuyen Dangers, a social worker who coordinates the six community development centers she helped start. Because those centers have improved primary school opportunities for Akha, Hmong, and Khmu children, Ms. Dangers has now turned her attention to helping create schools for grades six through eight, so that children who have completed the fifth grade can continue their education.

Building the first of these middle schools, in rural Oudomxay province, involved Church World Service, local residents, and the provincial education department in a cooperative effort. CWS contributed the funds for the cement walls and steel roofing of the five-room classroom building, dormitories, kitchen and dining hall, as well as housing for the teachers. People of the community provided lumber and labor for the construction. And the government assumed responsibility for training the teachers as well as supervising the school.

All agreed that providing a secondary education to ethnic minority youth in the area opened up previously unknown opportunities for further study, even including higher education, that could prepare them to become teachers, social workers, or physicians. As resources become available in the future, additional secondary schools are planned.

We give thanks to God for the opportunity to support mission programs in Laos, and all around the world, with gifts to Our Church's Wider Mission.

Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
July 17, 2011
Genesis 28:10-19a

PLACES OF BLESSING

Last year, the Associated Press published a long story on church camp closings, writing that "hundreds nationwide are on the critical list." In the United Church of Christ, our Conferences provide most of the opportunities for outdoor ministries, and some of those programs are in trouble, for a variety of reasons. But, thanks to our Still-speaking God, others are thriving.

The Wisconsin Conference maintains two camps, and both are going strong. Moon Beach has a year-around program, which includes family camps that attract families of all definitions and configurations. Enrollments in Pilgrim Center's youth camp program have grown every summer for the past four years. "Mom and me" and "Dad and me" camps are popular, too. Managing director, Jeff Puhlmann-Becker is particularly excited about a pilot program to bring American Indian youth from the Pine Ridge Indian reservation in South Dakota to Pilgrim Center this summer. Local Wisconsin churches are sponsoring the older teens and their adult leaders, who will spend a week in fellowship, sharing their spiritual practices with the other campers.

Youth camp programs are not all play at the Southern Conference's Johns River Valley Camp, located in the foothills of the North Carolina Blue Ridge mountains. Initiated in 2010, "Youth/Work/Mission Camp" offers teen-age campers the opportunity to participate in a variety of work projects. Cooperating with anti-poverty agencies in the region, last summer the campers made improvements on homes and worked in a thrift shop in a nearby community. They also built trails and restored natural animal habitats. Evenings in camp provided time for recreation, dinner, de-briefing, and worship. This summer, camp director C.L. "Curly" Stumb is looking forward to expanding the program.

No camp facility matters more than the dining hall--which often also serves as a recreation center. In 2010 the Penn Central Conference remodeled and enlarged the dining hall at Hartman Center, their camp, conference, and retreat center. That's where over 100 youth gathered last November for a retreat that featured a chance to meet and chat with UCC president and general minister, Rev. Geoffrey A. Black.

Great stories like these about outdoor ministries in the United Church of Christ could be multiplied many times. What they would all have in common are the dedication of volunteers, pastors and laity alike, and the generous gifts of congregations to Our Church's Wider Mission.

Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
July 24, 2011
Genesis 29:15-28

GOD SPEAKS THROUGH THE WORLD'S VOICES

“The other day, I was attending a chapel service and the worship leader asked us to clear our heads of all the world's voices (our concerns about the day, frustrations about family, ideas about projects we are working on, etc.) in order to listen for God's voice. It wasn't the first time I had heard such a suggestion, and almost out of routine, I began to try to do just that. I took a few deep breaths (in through the nose, out through the mouth: in, out, in, out, in, out), closed my eyes, sank further down into my seat, and began to try to ignore all those voices that the worship leader had asked me to block out. . . .

“Then it occurred to me: why I should I be trying to ignore these voices? Why couldn't--indeed, why wouldn't--God be speaking to me through them? In trying to block them out, might I be trying to block out God? Besides, I've never really been able to achieve that air of blankness that the worship leader asked for--nor do I think that creating such an empty space is necessary before God and I can speak. . . . Why should I think of God as having a voice so weak that it could only be heard in utter internal silence?

“And if Jesus is, indeed, Lord of all, then why can't he be Lord of my concerns, frustrations, and ideas as well? Could it be that the object of meditation ought not be to clear our heads of the world's voices, so much as to learn to discern Jesus' voice in the midst of them? Could it be that meditation need not be an anti-worldly thing?

“What is true of meditation is true of prayer and scripture reading as well: God's ability to communicate with us through them is not necessarily hampered by the reasons we give for either not doing them well or not doing them at all. . . . God's revelation--which is God's communication--is always an irruption into our lives, and we too often chalk up their difficulty to something about God or them rather than our own resistance to having our lives disrupted by God. Thankfully, God outside us does interrupt our lives with his graceful word and God inside us does urge us into response with her graceful power: ‘the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.’” (Romans 8:26-27)

from *Confessing Christ in the Twenty-first Century*, by Mark Douglas (Rowman & Littlefield, 2005, used by permission).

Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
July 31, 2011
Genesis 32:22-31

FACE TO FACE WITH POVERTY

If you have an income of less than one dollar a day, the World Bank says you're poor. By that definition, over a billion people in the world live on less in a year than some Americans spend on a single suit of clothes.

We know from scripture that God has a special concern for the poor. And we know from Jesus' words that Christians are called to feed the hungry and clothe the naked.

But, we protest, the problem of global poverty is just too big to tackle. Imagine: a thousand million poor people! How can we even begin to make a dent?

Just as Jesus did: one person at a time.

That's the idea behind microcredit. Governments in need may negotiate loans and repayment plans worth millions of dollars with the International Monetary Fund. And banks may lend money to corporations. But individuals in need can't wait for government aid to trickle down, nor can they qualify for a line of credit at the bank. Being poor, they simply lack the means. Still, they want and need to help themselves. That's where microcredit comes in. Men and women whose only resources are initiative and resolve receive small loans to start or sustain small business enterprises that can lift them out of poverty.

Sounds great, you say. But does it work?

Last year, a delegation of United Church of Christ and Disciples of Christ clergy and laity flew to the Democratic Republic of the Congo to meet our partners in the Church of Christ in the Congo. One afternoon they visited a women's microcredit meeting. With the help of a grant from our Global Ministries, a group of 25 pastors' wives had pooled their own modest resources to create a savings and loan association from which individuals can borrow the equivalent of 50 dollars each to launch or improve a small business. One woman markets manioc, a food staple in central Africa, and another opened a small restaurant. Fresh from a country with an epidemic of defaults, the American visitors were astonished to learn that 100 percent of the money borrowed has been paid back, with interest. Which means that the "bank" can continue to make its loans.

Obviously, our Global Ministries cannot even begin to provide low-interest loans to all of the poor people in the world who qualify. But our church's interfaith partner, Oikocredit, has the resources to make more than a dent in world poverty. Created in 1975 by the World Council of Churches, Oikocredit has helped over 15 million households in 69 countries by making over \$200 million in loans!

We thank God that this is one way we can help reduce world poverty through gifts to Our Church's Wider Mission.

Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
August 7, 2011
Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28

SUMMER READING

Whoever said that what you read in July has to be mindless? Just because you're going on vacation doesn't mean you have to put your brain on vacation, too. Pilgrim Press, our own United Church of Christ publishing house, has come up with new titles that just might interest you. Here are two that are forthcoming:

The Unofficial Handbook of the United Church of Christ by Quinn G. Caldwell and Curtis J. Preston.

The pocket church survival guide you never knew you needed, but shouldn't have to live without, this lighthearted look at the United Church of Christ is intended for all UCCers who want to learn more about their denomination--while not taking themselves too seriously. Packed with practical tips on staying awake in church, surviving in an un-air-conditioned sanctuary, how to identify and avoid evil, and what to bring to church potlucks, as well as brief overviews of our history, polity, and specific ways we in the UCC go about being church. Guaranteed either to make you laugh or make you a better church person--or both. Timeless theological truths stand alongside everyday faith situations, with step-by-step instructions to make the going easy.

Quinn Caldwell is associate minister of Old South Church (UCC) in Boston, Massachusetts, and one of the authors of the *Stillspeaking Daily Devotionals*. Curtis Preston is pastor of Lakewood United Church of Christ in Lakewood, Colorado.

God's Big Table: Nurturing Children in a Diverse World by Elizabeth F. Caldwell.

This book, for leaders of congregations and parents who want to open themselves to a multi-cultural faith community, offers the chance to consider ways that issues of diversity are present among us in families today. Culture, faith tradition, formation and differently-abled children are some of the ways difference is represented at our tables in homes and in the church. Using the imagery of "the table" as a metaphor, this book shares many ways churches can engage with differences and diversity, through a biblical background for welcoming all children. As the author says, "God's table is very big and the invitation to join the feast is inclusive. No one is excluded. All are welcome. All are nurtured in faith."

Elizabeth F. Caldwell is Professor of Pastoral Theology at the McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago, Illinois.

These and other Pilgrim Press books may be ordered through United Church Resources, a UCC ministry that is sustained by gifts to Our Church's Wider Mission.

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time
August 14, 2011
Genesis 45:1-15

TEN GREAT READS

Think the Bible's boring? Think again. Well, think again about some of it, anyway. Check out these stories for amazing exploits, surprising people, and inspiring transformations . . .

Exodus, The Book of Exodus, but especially Chapters 1 through 17:7

One of the best stories ever. Moses, Pharaoh, plagues, the parting of the sea, manna, water from the rock, and the beginnings of the people of Israel. For sheer drama, it can't be beat.

The Valley of Dry Bones, Ezekiel 37:1-14

"The ankle bone's connected to the, LEG bone..." Starts out creepy, with dancing skeletons; ends happy, with resurrection and the Spirit of God. Which is good news for God's people, if we can just manage to get that song out of our heads.

Doubting Thomas, John 20:24-29

Admit it: you'd be skeptical, too. Jesus gives Thomas exactly what he asks for, and more besides.

Paul and Silas Singing in Prison, Acts 16:16-40

Paul gets in trouble—again—for telling people about his faith. Angry mobs, prison hymn-sings, earthquakes, and mass conversions ensue.

Saul on the Road to Damascus, Acts 9:1-19

Be careful who you persecute; you just might become one of them. Saul (later "Paul") gets a conversion and an eye-opening comeuppance.

Pentecost, Acts 2:1-42

The Holy Spirit surprises everybody, and Peter, who 'til this point has been more of a screw-up than you or I will ever be, finally gets it right.

--excerpted from "Ten Great Reads," by Quinn G. Caldwell, from *The Bible and the United Church of Christ*, by the Stillspeaking Writers' Group.

Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time
August 21, 2011
Romans 12:1-8

GOD'S ABUNDANCE

Thomas Malthus was an Anglican clergyman who famously argued, in an essay first published in 1798, that the world's population growth would eventually outdistance the food supply, leading inevitably to mass starvation.

Almost two hundred years later, Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* (1968) became a bestseller, predicting that in the 1970s and 1980s, "hundreds of millions of people will starve to death...." Like Thomas Malthus' predictions, Ehrlich's proved wrong.

Famine is simply not part of God's plan for creation. Sent by God, Jesus made that clear when he announced, "I came that [all] may have life, and have it abundantly." And showed, when he fed the five thousand, and "all ate and were filled."

Apparently, for Thomas Malthus, God had stopped speaking, and the future could only be foretold by demographics, and not theology. But God *is* still speaking, in so many ways, including through agricultural research and development. "India couldn't possibly feed two hundred million more people by 1980," Paul Ehrlich had declared. But since then, the introduction of new high-yielding, disease-resistant wheat varieties into India, as well as Mexico and Pakistan, has made possible the feeding of millions in those countries.

To be sure, hunger and malnutrition have not yet been banished from the earth. But that is no reason for the pessimism of Thomas Malthus. God is still speaking through the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, the first of which is to cut in half by 2015 the proportion of people in the world who are hungry. And we can help achieve that goal with partners around the globe because food insecurity is not part of God's plan for creation. Yes, God is still speaking--through the individuals and congregations who support our One Great Hour of Sharing offering and participate in Church World Service's CROP Hunger Walks in their communities.

Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time
August 28, 2011
Romans 12:9-21

“A LOAVES-AND-FISHES SORT OF THING”

Imagine walking down the cereal aisle at the supermarket and overhearing the conversation on the other side of the shelf: “Say, you’re the pastor with the clothes, aren’t you?”

Pastor Moira Finley has been known to field that inquiry on a trip to the grocery store in tiny Cecil, Wisconsin (population 400, “give or take,” she says).

Moira Finley is pastor of St. John’s UCC in Cecil, and Trinity UCC in Shiocton, 22 miles away, and oversees the hugely successful Cecil Community Clothes Closet operation at St. John’s.

“We don’t know where the clothes come from — it’s definitely a loaves-and-fishes sort of thing,” says Finley, whose St. John’s congregation numbers about 80. “We put out the clothes and people take what we think are tremendous quantities. And then the next time, we still have more.”

Donations are carefully hand sorted, and overly used items are discarded. Twice a month, the Closet opens at the church. Whether it’s a nice shirt for a job interviewee, steel-toed boots for a construction worker, or a soft, stuffed animal for a child, the Closet meets many and various needs.

For shoppers’ convenience, the Closet is always open on a day when the food pantry at nearby St. Martin’s Roman Catholic Church is open.

“Last Christmas, a man came in with his daughter,” recalls Finley. “She couldn’t have been more than 9 months old, no shoes, no socks, no coat. We’re talking Wisconsin in the winter here. I zipped her into a new coat that she’ll be able to grow into.”

Closet doors first opened in summer 2008 after St. John’s member Bonnie Young posed a question: “Did you know the cost of things at Goodwill is going up and up and up?” Finley was on the same wavelength. “Most of us have way too many clothes in our closets anyway,” she said.

Young then won \$1,000 for the Closet as the Shawano Area Community Foundation’s “Volunteer of the Year.” In addition, a request to the UCC’s Wisconsin Conference brought in \$1,000 from the UCC’s Our Church’s Wider Mission. Other donations arrived, including one from a local builder — a well-insulated storage shed with generous shelving and a skylight.

After an initial six-month, “is-this-really-going-to-take-off?” period, Finley had her answer. “It just exploded,” she says. “People who were at first a little unsure about our ministry have really come to embrace it, have brought donations, have been excited about increasing our visibility in the community.”