

Shine, God's People!
Presentation at Annual Meeting of Maine Conference
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Good morning vital evangelists!

What a wonderful morning! I'm so glad to be here. This morning I'm going to talk about growing in our vital witness and outreach as congregations and individuals. This afternoon my workshop will focus on the tools and resources for congregations to get ready and set to grow in vitality. I believe that God is still speaking to the UCC, and God is saying: Ready, Set, Grow.

Of course, I don't know about you, but it usually takes me, well, until at least 9:30 AM to start to get vital, and probably 10 AM to start shining, but I'll work on it.

When I say, "I'm glad to be here this morning," I really mean I'm glad to be here this morning: Flight from Cleveland to here was cancelled, airline was saying "can't get there from here"!

So I'm glad to bring you greetings from our national church house and appreciation for your support of Our Church's Wider Mission.

In local church evangelism ministries, we give thanks to work with you, not only through the still speaking and church vitality initiatives, but also in developing new churches like Open House in Portland. We look forward to more to come, and appreciate the spirit and leadership of Dave Gaewski on our church development advisory committee which he mentioned last night. Wasn't that a great vision and speech last night? He had me the minute he started talking about propagating the gospel, evangelism, church vitality, and new church starts.

Vital churches and denominations start new churches, and new churches spur vitality among us. All churches were new churches at one time, even if 275 years ago. Many of our churches were started by another congregation

and now is the time to return Congregation Multiplication to our churches' DNA. Congregations planting congregations.

As an evangelist and person involved in church vitality and renewal, I love your conference theme, for I know that vital disciples and vital congregations do indeed let their light and life shine for the glory of God.

So let's talk about how we let it shine, God's people.

It's been a great year of letting our light shine as the UCC.

Our fiftieth anniversary theme has let it shine. We celebrate fifty years and more, 200 years here in Maine, of letting God's light and life shine for spreading the gospel message, proclaiming Christ's unity and bold witness, practicing evangelical courage and extravagant welcome, engaging in early truth telling and racial justice, seeking global understanding and Christ-like compassion, advocating peace and environmental wellbeing. Let it Shine, UCC, and Let it Shine, Maine Conference.

Of course it's not just about a denomination that shines; we celebrate how the congregations and members of the UCC shine.

I spent two weeks here this summer on vacation in Eastport, Maine. I had the opportunity to see, and drop in on, several of your churches...including, Machias UCC – getting ready for the blueberry festival and a midweek concert, witnessing to a church as a vital partner, an outreaching and welcoming presence to the whole community. Shine God's People!

And at Eastport, we attended a wonderful worship service, when the pastor was not able to come and a member of the church lead the service with humor and enthusiasm, and another member of the congregation sang a moving a cappella solo of an old spiritual as we gathered for prayer. My wife and I were received with a warm welcome in a surprisingly diverse group of just twelve folks. The service was authentic and intimate, just what a younger generation and folks are looking for today. Shine God's People!

Fifty years and more of shining.

We have much to celebrate, but we also have a challenge before us.

In the Gospel of John we are promised the spirit of still speaking God, the “Spirit of truth,” to lead and teach us. If Steven Colbert were to exegete that verse, it would be the Spirit of “truthiness.” So let us engage in some “truthiness.”

This is not the same world that our church and churches were birthed into. The world of 1957 was at a high point and the ending times of the modern institutional world. Church was an integral and significant chaplain to the culture and the culture supported the church.

Today it’s a different story and world. The 21st Postmodern world is well characterized by:

Delivery young man, giving me package in sanctuary
“this is a nice place....what do you do in here”

Woman to pastor after communion service at High Ridge UCC
“that thing we did with juice and bread, let’s do it again,
I liked it.”

People do not know what we do or why we do it. They don’t know the meaning or the language of faith.

The world is 60 – 80 % unchurched, unfaithed, undisciplined. Especially here in Maine, 50 to 80 % have no religious affiliation. And 80 % of baby boomers left church after confirmation and never came back.

That doesn’t mean that they are unspiritual. In fact, the world and people are on a great spiritual search. They just don’t know and are wary, even hostile to, the possibility that there may be spiritual strength and meaning to discover in the church. Eighty percent of young people under thirty do not think that the church is authentic, welcoming or caring.

It’s not just the people, but the postmodern culture has disassociated with the church. The rational, institutional, and cultural underpinnings that we have relied upon for the past several modern centuries in the church no longer support the postmodern world

I’m not saying this is a problem that needs to be fixed or that we can fix it by going back to the past. The postmodern world is simply reality. In fact, the postmodern world provides great opportunity for the church to rediscover its apostolic mission and calling in the world.

The spirit of “truthiness” is saying that it is a time for openness to change. As new occasions teach new duties different from those fifty years ago, ten years ago, or even last year, we need to learn how to let our life and light shine in a postmodern 21st century world.

While here on vacation, I read the newspaper church sections and noticed that congregations would list having their steeples lit at night with offerings in memory or celebration of someone. What a great idea. Now how do we see that not only our church steeples are lit, but that our lives shine also?

I believe that there are three things to learn in order to be people whose light shines. We must be:

- ◆ A church engaged in the world, missional in outreach that builds relationships
- ◆ A people conversational in our witness, having everyday holy conversations,
- ◆ And a community of Christ’s great commission, formational, yes, transformational in making disciples

The post modern world calls for a church engaged in the world, a church that is missional in outreach and relationship focused.

I know that here in Maine there is a strong Celtic tradition and heritage. We have a lot to learn from St. Patrick, and Celtic missionaries about being disciples in an unbelieving, unfaithful world.

George Hunter writes in his book, The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach the West . . . Again, about the difference between what he describes as the evangelism approach in Roman and Celtic Christianity. Celtic Christianity is the tradition of mission and ministry that was first developed by St. Patrick in Ireland and then journeyed into Scotland. Roman Christianity is the tradition of mission and ministry that was practiced by missionaries from Rome that sought to ‘Christianize’ the people of England.

The Roman model seems very logical to us because most American evangelicals are scripted by it! It is the evangelism of revival, door knockers and brochures that ask where we are going to spend eternity. It is the evangelism that we usually respond negatively to. We explain the gospel,

they accept Christ, we welcome them into the church! Presentation, Decision, Assimilation.

In contrast, this is the Celtic model for outreach: (1) you first establish community with people, or bring them into the fellowship of your community of faith; (2) within the embrace of community, you engage in conversation, ministry, prayer and worship; (3) as people discover their gifts and faith, you invite them to commit to discipleship.

The Celtic model reflects the adage that for most people 'Christianity is more caught than taught!' As Professor Robin Gill observes, "belonging comes before believing." For this reason, evangelism is now about "helping people to belong so that they can believe."

Reflect on your own experience, how you came to believe within a community of faith.

Helping people belong so that they may believe. Stillspeaking experience reminded us that we have a mission and message. Reaching out over the abyss of alienation to the spiritually homeless, those alienated from God and God's people, with a message of God's extravagant welcome. No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey you are welcome.

When the Celtic missionaries moved into new communities they lived among the "barbarians" – the unfaithed, the followers of other faiths and gods. They lived among them and entered into relationships with them.

Ministry in the postmodern world calls for just such a relational and communal mission. It's about growing relationships and community with those out there, outside the church, the unchurched spiritual seekers of our age.

The days of waiting for folks to come into the church to build relationship is over. Today, we need to get outside the church, go out there to build relationship.

I encourage you to send out teams of two or three to visit community, get to know it. Small community have the opportunity to meet each household not just to say who you are, but more so to find out who your neighbors are, what their needs are, and how the church can be a good neighbor. How

together with neighbors we can be all that God wants us to be as a peaceful, just, welcoming corner of God's world. People are used to driving long distances here, just to get the necessities for life, and they will also drive a distance to get the spiritual nourishment and friendship they need.

I've heard of a rural church that asked neighbors of the church who were non-members if they wanted to be listed in the church directory. And the church neighbors did. What a great way for the church to say that we want to be good neighbors!

Get the church out of itself and out there.

Pastors, set up office in a coffee shop or community center. Have your meetings and bible studies in a shopping or eating place, a community gathering center, outdoors on your church lawn, or in your homes. Invite your friends and neighbors.

Go to where the unchurched are.... a pastor, I know writes about going to bars to meet the unchurched: "It became a regular practice of mine to go to the bar one or two times a week and have conversations with people I didn't know. I was astonished by how easy it was to talk about "spiritual" issues. People told me about their hopes and their fears, their relationships and their identity struggles. It was hard to explain to my congregation (or to my family) what I was doing, and so I started inviting people to come along with me. I stopped wondering about how to draw younger folks into my church and started focusing on how to draw my congregation out of its building and into relationship with the world outside its doors."

"In short, I became something that I never dreamt of being: an evangelist."

(I know what you're thinking of telling all the folks when you leave, that the speaker encouraged you to go to bars, but what I said was go to the unchurched are!)

This fall, this year, how will you draw yourself and your congregation out of your building and into relationship/community with the world outside its doors? After all, the church exists to serve God's mission. We don't exist for ourselves, to serve the folks already in the church, but rather we exist for the folks out there, for the folks God is waiting to welcome back, welcome home.

One of those ways of outreach is through the virtual world. I invite you to check i.UCC.org, our virtual online community and ministry.

Meeting people today means going forth into the virtual world to minister online to the people who live there.

The postmodern world calls us to be engaged in the world, Missional in outreach and focused on building relationships with an unchurched world and neighbors.

The postmodern world calls us to be Conversational in our witness. Count conversations, not conversions.

The Celtic model of evangelism of building community also engaged in conversation and discussion about things that mattered with those that the missionaries built relationship with. Conversational ministry is central to the future of the church in a postmodern world. How is God still speaking among and between us? The postmodern world calls for disciples who reach out to a world that is hungry for good conversation about faith, values, hope, meaning, purpose, goodness, beauty, truth, life after death, life before death and God. Engaging in everyday faith conversations will not only help others become Christians, it will help us become better Christians, who know and love the still speaking God more than ever.

A world of spiritual seekers wants to talk.

President John Thomas and the car rental guy

After giving his AMEX card to car rental guy, the young man behind the counter asked John, "Tell me, what do you think happens to people when they die?" (I would have said...they don't bring the car back...)

John thought for a moment and said "I think God loves us so much and God's power is so great that God seeks to overcome everything that would ever separate us from God, including death itself, so that we might be with God forever." The young man said..."Good answer."

A world of spiritual seekers wants to talk. Usually, we are the ones who are not talking.

I encourage you to wear the brand, the UCC still speaking brand and comma. It's a great way to witness. People always say or ask something

Like the guy behind the security machine at the airport who said "Hey dude, God is still speaking.....if you listen!"

Of the folks in the restaurant who said to me "Nice shirt, are you Mormon?" I answered, "I'm United Church of Christ, we believe you never put a period where God has put a comma, perhaps you've seen our commercials." If fact they had and asked if a church like that was in the area and indeed there was a UCC congregation just two blocks away.

People have asked about the still speaking initiative. We are working on projecting the still speaking identity and message into the next five years. God is still speaking, pass it on.

Let it shine, United Church of Christ!

What do Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, and James Dobson all have in common? They have been on Meet the Press 28 times since 1998. What do John Thomas and the Presidents of any major mainline denomination have in common? They have never been on Meet the Press.

We need to get the still speaking word out. If we are concerned about peace and justice, the earth and environment, about a just and loving multiracial world, we need to practice talking about our faith.

We can give many reasons for the decline of mainline congregations and denominations, but perhaps the simplest reason is that we stopped talking. Stopped talking about our faith, conversing about the good news of knowing God in our lives, and inviting others to come and see about the still speaking God in our lives and congregations.

How many have invited someone to church or spoken about God or faith with someone outside the church in the past month? Six months?

Vital growing churches are places where the pastor and members have invited 5 to 15 new folks to consider discipleship in the past six months.

I know there's this New England stoic, granite, few words needed character quality around here.

Get over it.

There's a popular phrase that says, 'Preach the gospel, if necessary use words,' they'll know who we are by what we do. But in an unchurched world, people don't know why we do what we do, how our actions connect to our faith unless we say it.

What difference is there between the church's concern for peace and any other peace and justice group to those outside the church, unless they know that we believe in peace because we believe in a God who knows that our future requires peace and in Christ who is our peace?

Young people know about working for peace and a green environment. What they don't know is the relationship between peace and the environment and our God. The piece they are missing and want to know about is the peace of being a disciple of Christ.

The postmodern world calls us to become conversational in everyday life with those we meet about our faith and witness. The postmodern world also calls us to be formational in making disciples: Forming disciples for the transformation of individuals and the world.

I'm not talking about membership here. We have made many members. But how have we done in forming disciples, initiating people not only into the church, but into God's realm – God's realm and rule that transforms lives and the world?

Anyone coming to church is not coming to become a member. They are not coming asking, "Am I saved?" They are asking... "How do I make it through this week? If you can help me get in touch with a power for living that will get me through this week, I may come back next week. Then I may talk about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, and then perhaps I will consider being a member of the community of Christ's people, this church."

Discipleship formation today starts with the basics. We can't assume theological sophistication in an unchurched world. People want to know the

basics of faith and God, and who we are as a people of Christ, the United Church of Christ. Ultimately, it's all about still speaking God's grace, peace and salvation at work in lives, but it starts with getting people through this week, before it gets to forever.

The world out there is hungry, eager, dying to know the peace we share in Christ's community here this weekend. Someone you encounter this week will want to know, is dying to know, of the peace that still speaking God has for us. Your job this week is to discover that person and share God's life and light with them. Shine, God's People!

(Sing: This little life of mine, I'm going to let it shine.)

I believe we let our lives shine as vital disciples in vital congregations when we engage in missional outreach, building relationships with those outside the church, engaging in conversational witness and invitation to faith, that can lead to transformation of individuals into disciples who shine with the light of god.

(Pass out combs.) The combs are a reminder to do your part!

God is light, and the light still shines. Now let your life shine to give glory to God and light to others. Shine, God's People!