

Report of the Interim Conference Minister

October 22, 2010

It is my privilege to be before you as your Interim Conference Minister. For me, this is a return to my ministerial roots. Forty years ago this past June, as a newly minted Yale Divinity School graduate, Class of 1970, I was ordained by the New Haven Association and Installed as pastor of the First Church of Christ, Congregational in Bethany. Twenty-seven years old, full of faith and knowledge and energy, I followed a beloved seventy-five year old veteran pastor, The Rev. Raymond Putnam. Some of Bethany's grandparent generation had a difficult time adjusting! The beloved Nathaniel Guptill was Conference Minister and I still remember how anxious I felt in our first meeting, in the very office I now occupy.

Our Conference's strong history reveals giants on whose shoulders we stand. I share my office with one such ancestor whose imposing portrait adorns a wall opposite my desk. The painting is of the Rev. Amos Bassett, DD (1764-1828), pastor of our Hebron Church when the Missionary Society of Connecticut was born there (1798). As he did throughout Dr. Guptill's ministry, Mr. Bassett silently presides over my comings and goings, making certain that I do not forget the centrality of Christian mission to our life and work as a conference.

It is a privilege to be here, in ministry with you as the amazing Connecticut Conference of our beloved United Church of Christ.

"Privileged" also describes my feeling about succeeding the Rev. Dr. Davida Foy Crabtree, one of the United Church of Christ's outstanding leaders. I bring warm greetings from Davida — and her appreciation for your many cards and notes to her in these days. While Davida's health is strong again, her David is now in hospice care. I visit them every week or two and am impressed with David's strong spiritual and mental condition even as his body weakens. Please keep them in prayer. They still yearn for cards and notes to their home address or through the Conference Office (but no phone calls, please).

Our Conference theme is:

"Journey With Jesus... 400 Years of Transforming Mission."

Tonight and tomorrow, we mark the 200th anniversary of our nation's first overseas mission society. That ministry continues today in the transformative work of our United Church of Christ's Wider Church Ministries unit. And we look forward to the next 200 years of mission and ministry.

Since 1810, according to Conference archives, so wonderfully curated by the Rev. John Van Epps, some 284 missionaries have been sent by our Connecticut congregations to serve in this country and around the world. The records show

ministry to God's people in as diverse locations as Syria and India, Southern Africa and Thailand, Turkey, and Singapore, Hawaii, as well as to the Choctaw and Osage Native American reservations and many more. Today, we continue to send *missionaries* to stateside communities of need and, with our UCC global mission partners, to all corners of the earth, including to South Korea and Colombia — and we receive missionaries from them to us as well.

Over forty years in parish ministry and volunteer leadership in diverse settings of the UCC, I have come to frame mission in broad terms. I see our wonderful Connecticut Conference staff, and the dedicated men and women of the national setting of our United Church of Christ, as mission partners, sent *by* our congregations, and supported by our OCWM dollars, to be in mission *to* and *with* our congregations as well as *to* and *with* diverse peoples around the globe. The great pundit, Pogo, known for his statement, "*We have met the enemy and they are us!*" inspires my theology of mission, which is:

*We have met the missionaries and they are us! And we are
friends in faith working together for the healing of all peoples
and of the earth itself, our common home.*

But what is the nature of our mission? Many worthy organizations are effectively serving the neediest people everywhere. Even the local Kiwanis Club does that. So, what is our distinctive mission? Our ancestors were clear. Their mission was to spread the Christian Gospel for the salvation of all people. Today, we Christians still yearn for all people to know God in and through Jesus Christ. But as we, somewhat belatedly, honestly study other major faith families of the world, we have grown in our understanding and respect for how God is revealed through them as well. We respect other faiths as instruments of holiness. So what is it that we have to share that is so special?

Only news of the One who is alive and active and present with us tonight, the Good News that God Is Still Speaking... to all people... a Word of inclusion and affirmation and openness... a message of justice and peace and lion and lamb lying together... the Good News that says, "no matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are accepted here... loved here... valued here... redeemed here."

We have Good News, friends — all 82,000 of us here in Connecticut, together with some 1.4 million UCC members across this land and beyond — have Good News to affirm, to live, to share with all the world. We have the news of a God who seeks us personally — not for only for our own cozy relationship with Jesus for comfort and peace — but for bringing that same Presence to all who are in need of justice and hope and life itself. Through us, God can speak a new word for this new time; the 21st Century — a word of hope and encouragement, education and technical assistance, freedom and empowerment for Third World women and First World corporate titans and embattled government leaders. Together, we strive to confront the principalities and powers of evil — greed, corruption, racism, gridiron politics,

human rights violations, ecological rape of earth and air — all in the name of the God we know revealed in Jesus Christ.

We stand on the shoulders of those who fought for the freedom of slaves on *La Amistad* and then for abolition in this young nation. We labor like those who fought to free the Wilmington Ten after marching in Selma with Brother Martin. We seek justice in broadcasting and the protection of personal rights in new technology. We strive to curb the urge to greed, whether it be on Wall Street or main street, New York City or Hartford. Remembering the struggles of our immigrant ancestors, we open our eyes to the plight of today's immigrants that they also might find take their place with justice and dignity in the workplace and the neighborhoods and churches.

We are missionaries, each of us in service to Our Still Speaking God, Whose message is love and justice, openness to, and affirmation of, all children as they were created to be.

The Connecticut Conference exists to be in mission to and with the local congregations, and as an extension of their mission, to the world. So our dedicated staff labors diligently for local church empowerment. Obvious ministries include help in times of pastoral change — assisting search committees to find just the right person, Christian education resourcing, congregational crisis and conflict intervention, decision-making and leave-taking, births and deaths. And so much more.

And we have Good News to share! Listen to just a few highlights of what our Conference is doing; key ministries:

Good News in Congregational Vitality — Threshold and Crossroads — Sara Verasco and Michael Ciba, Regional Ministers

Good News in Stewardship — Patsy Bjorling, Associate Conf. Minister, Generosity Ministries.

Good News in Youth and Young Adult Ministries — DaVita McCallister, Associate Conf. Minister

Good News at Silver Lake Conference Center — Tim and Anne Hughes, Directors

Good News in core ministries, our Regional Ministers' reflections on the big screen!

Wow!...

Give yourselves a hand for making all of this possible

Through your leadership

Through your support of OCWM- Our Churches' Wider Mission and per capita contributions

In this interim, we are not treading water! Every aspect of our life is receiving scrutiny. Constantly giving thanks for the historic strength and leadership of this conference, we are examining the present to prepare for the future.

The Sustainability Commission's report represents a year of diligent study, prayer and visioning by some of more able and dedicated people. In tough economic times, how can we increase and optimize financial resources for our Conference's ministries and its support of the national and global mission of our United Church of Christ?

The Staffing Study Committee appointed by our Board of Directors, will soon begin its review of how we can be staffed and organized for effective and efficient use of every dollar entrusted to us. And the Board and I are developing new ways to consult and collaborate on all that we are doing.

The staff and I have begun our own conversation about best practices of ministry, including increased collaboration, transparency and mutual support in our ministries. In weekly worship with the Sherman Street-based staff, monthly all day staff strategy and resourcing sessions, monthly Regional Minister sharing of the joys, challenges, and needs of our congregations, and many other venues, we are working to hear the voice of our Still Speaking God.

The Board and staff of Silver Lake Conference Center, our amazing ministry to youth and adults out in beautiful Sharon, Connecticut, are constantly working for the highest quality program and operation possible, again seeking faithfulness in the use of all human and material resources available. Many of you know this ministry personally through sending youth to Silver Lake and volunteering time, talents and treasure. The Silver Lake Board is hard at work now on new ways to fund the future of Silver Lake.

Very soon, our hard-working Conference President will be announcing a Search Committee to work with its Chair, the Rev. David Young of First, Greenwich. The group will listen to the needs and yearnings of the Conference and study all of the work now under way, to finally develop a profile of the conference and of the kind of individual needed to be the next called Conference Minister for the amazing Connecticut Conference. I am committed to remaining until that special person walks through the door, so I am eager for the Committee to begin its work! I am certain that an amazing new leader will emerge to take the helm. Our amazing God will see that it is so!

This is a transformative time for the mission of the Connecticut Conference and for all settings of our United Church of Christ. Thanks for the privilege of being in leadership and mission with you in these days of challenge and change!

May God's guidance and joy be with us as we journey forth into new lands of challenge and promise.

In our congregations...

In our Conference...

In our United Church of Christ...

In our nation and world,

As the song goes, Day by Day

Oh, Dear Lord, these things I pray-

To see Thee more clearly,

Know Thee more dearly,

Follow Thee more nearly,

Day by day by day by day...!

Amen.