

“Through Whom Does Wisdom Call to You?”

Gleanings from participants at the 60th Annual Meeting of the MN Conference UCC
*Mary Maren Bjork, Rolf Dittmann, Jill Greenhalgh, Jane Hanson, Walt Richey,
Kimberly Jackson (Communications Coordinator), Pastor Clare*

Friends, today we step into the long season of green, growing, ordinary time in the circle of the church year – a season that lasts all the way until late November, when the church year begins anew with Advent. The beginning of this new season offers a spiritual foundation for the focus of our message this morning. Through whom does Wisdom (that is, God’s Spirit) call to you? We will hear gleanings from seven individuals of our congregation who engaged in the Annual Meeting of the Minnesota Conference UCC this past week. We all engaged virtually in workshops early in the week. Then Moderator Rolf Dittmann and I attended plenary sessions at College of St. Benedict across the past two days. As you listen to each of us, we hope you will hear the whispers of Wisdom calling in new ways to our congregation and to you individually. Let’s first hear from Rolf Dittmann, Jill Greenhalgh and Jane Hanson who are all hear with us this morning. Then I will share brief gleanings from three others and conclude with my own gleanings. May we have ears to hear wisdom calling.

[Rolf]

The week just past gave me my first in depth exposure to the programming and operation of the UCC. The first event was a **Zoom session with church Moderators**. One significant takeaway from this class was that these leaders need to know the church’s mission statement and keep it at the forefront of all we do - it is a guiding principle that will keep us focused.

The Moderator should also be well versed in the bylaws as they also provide useful guidance in how we proceed in accomplishing our mission.

These are just a couple of highlights: there is much more information out there on the subject which segues into my last point on Monday’s session. Our leader, Kelly Gallagher, wisely directed us to the Minnesota Conference’s and the National Office’s website. There is information available on just about any issue that could arise in the life of the church; I highly recommend you check them out.

I was in attendance at the conference meeting at the College of St. Benedict on Friday and Saturday. Somehow I was allowed to be a voting delegate there, and vote we did! Some of the votes were on mundane processes, but the others were quite interesting and important. These were the two resolutions that were being proposed after being vetted in other specified processes:

- 1) To support public school teachers, staff, and school board members who are experiencing increased pressure on what they are allowed to teach on subjects that have somehow become political, such as the history of racism, as well as to not mention anything about LGBTQ+ orientation in the lower grades in school; rather to turn a blind eye to it. At the appropriate time an action might be to lobby the legislature in support of academic freedom for teachers
- 2) To support the electrification of fossil fuel burning appliances in churches when these items need replacement (like furnaces, water heaters and ovens).

These were not controversial items among the group; they both passed almost unanimously. However, ample opportunity to present dissenting views were provided and each individual church can decide whether or not to support any resolutions.

There were keynote speakers on each day. Shari Prestemon, Conference Minister, addressed Covid and its negative impact on congregations, offering the metaphor of the resurrection as a hopeful vision for all of our churches' futures.

Yesterday's keynote speaker was renowned author and speaker Diana Butler Bass who was suffering from Covid and had to address us virtually. Her speech addressed the interconnected of grief and gratitude. She also told us how neuroscientists have proven that an 'attitude of gratitude' can physically prevent our more primal fears and anxieties from taking hold.

I was impressed in this first exposure to the UCC by how much is happening in the denomination and their strong concern about issues that are important to me and perhaps, most of us.

[Jill]

“Tis a Gift...” These words came to my mind after attending a Zoom presentation on **“Planned Giving”** by the UCC.

What a gift it was to learn about the passionate and knowledgeable planned giving professionals who are part of the UCC national network and available to assist us at any time.

What I found to be so memorable were their stories: stories of individuals who made gifts to their churches and the impact of those gifts. One was a story of a gift of \$5,000 that became transformative for a congregation. The stories ranged of gifts large and small, across the United States. For congregations that grew, stayed constant or folded into other congregations.

I learned how an individual can align their hopes and deeply felt values to make a powerful difference in the lives of people in their community as well as those they haven't even met.

I look forward to sharing more in the future with our congregation.

[Jane]

I attended a workshop about **“OCWM - Our Church's Wider Mission.”**

OCWM is a financial covenant among UCC local churches, regional conferences, and the national expression of the UCC. Congregations voluntarily give to this general fund of the denomination. It is not a requirement of affiliation as are per capita dues in both the UCC and the NACCC.

Not all churches can give equally. Churches incorporate OCWM into their annual operating budgets. Approximately 65% of OCWM funds given by Minnesota churches stays in MN. Approximately 35% is distributed nationally and internationally.

UCC congregations also take up collections for four special offerings per year. These do not have budgetary implications. Here they are:

THE CHRISTMAS FUND assists retired clergy and their families.

ONE GREAT HOUR OF SHARING funds emergency disaster relief, refugees and more.

STRENGTHEN THE CHURCH funds the expansion of ministries and growth.

NEIGHBORS IN NEED funds social justice initiatives in local churches.

These are just highlights of the presentation. A PowerPoint of the entire presentation is available.

[Pastor Clare shares from Mary Maren and Kimberly]

Mary Maren Bjork and Kimberly Jackson (Communications Coordinator on our church staff) each attended several workshops with some overlap between the two of them and among others of our members. I will read Mary Maren's gleanings from two of those overlapping workshops.

A workshop entitled "**Called to Welcome the Stranger and Set the Prisoner Free.**" Background information: In 2016, delegates gathered for the Annual Meeting of the MN Conference UCC voted to become an immigrant welcoming body. At the 2019 Annual Meeting, delegates passed a resolution to mobilize faith-based groups to work with the legislature to pass legislation to become a sanctuary state.

Diane Haines of Mayflower UCC in Minneapolis interviewed Nancy Hasset of Union Congregational in Elk River. Her congregation is close to the Sherburne County Detention Center, the largest in a 5-state area, and was approached by the MN UCC to get involved somehow in response to the new resolution. They formed SARI, Sanctuary and Resistance to Injustice.

We learned about one particular detainee's story (Julio); he had experienced horrific treatment repeatedly and fortunately had a good immigration lawyer, so he is now out after 19 months in the Sherburne County Jail. ICE is only supposed to be involved with undocumented people who have committed a crime, but that is not the case now. Julio was arrested on false drug charges.

The Elk River Congregation, and briefly a local Lutheran congregation that worked with it, want to build awareness in the community and do so via letters to the editor, weekly demonstrations on Highway 10 service road and occasional rallies that have attracted large numbers of people and concerned the local sheriff due to negative publicity.

The Sherburne County Jail gets \$100/day/detainee, more than they get for criminals. The contract with the government is up for renewal in 2023, and it is hoped that with enough publicity the detention center will be closed. A multi-denominational letter was sent to the Board of Directors with 42 agency signatures. The sheriff responded to each agency with his “factual” perspective, misquoting the letter.

The MN Sanctuary Bill has not gone to committee yet, but there is some support with legislators. It’s a long process. Hennepin County is a sanctuary county. There needs to be attention to rural counties where a lot of immigrants live. As of 2016 there are 95,000 undocumented people in MN, 20 % of the total immigrant population. Only 1/5 is from Mexico.

Also from Mary Maren: A workshop entitled “**Community/ Church Based Resettlement,**” offered by Rev. Charlotte Frantz of Peace Church in Duluth and Dr. Jill Sanders of Alexandria. Sponsorship Circles are a new form of resettlement involving community members as support to agencies. They were started due to the overwhelming influx of refugees currently and the lack of infrastructure to meet their needs. Churches interested in developing a sponsorship circle can apply online with a detailed plan of how they will address the refugees’ needs and demonstrate their fiscal responsibility. The Circle also needs to be hooked up to an umbrella organization and to be able to commit \$2200/ person for 3 months.

In developing a Welcome Plan, it is important to study the available resources for meeting housing, health, legal, education, cultural connections, transportation, employment, document completion, language and interpretation needs. It is useful if the circle members have different areas of expertise.

78,000 Afghans came this year under different visas. They are expected to apply for asylum, work with an immigration lawyer, and move into their own quarters upon arrival, with the goal of independence within 6 mos. They are eligible for work permits, SS#, MFIB, cash assistance and MNsure.

Ukrainians are now included in Sponsorship Circles with the understanding that they are here for 2 years. They are not guaranteed a path to citizenship. They must fill out an I-34.

People coming from the southern border receive limited benefits, but there is a MN Asylum Network that helps them.

So much information! Mary Maren was our one participant to attend a workshop entitled, **“Requirements for Maintaining Standing [as an authorized minister] in the MN Conference of the UCC.”** Mary Maren offered these gleanings: I learned a lot from both the questions and screen sharing documents. The Manual on Ministry lists 4 categories for ministers:

- 1) Ordained ministers (can include those in dual affiliation congregations and those with partner churches)
- 2) Licensed ministers (may be in seminary or serving in some capacity in congregation)
- 3) Commissioned ministers (skilled lay people, i.e., educator, spiritual director, minister of arts)
- 4) Lay ministers

There are 3-way covenants (a pastor, a local congregation, and the MN Conference) and 4-way covenants, which applies to ministers in non-church settings such as a hospital chaplain.

Requirements to maintain standing in the MN Conference UCC include the following:

- Follow the Minister’s Code
- Maintain membership in a local church of the UCC

- Annual Information Review (updating personal data)
- Power and Boundary Training (class)—every 3 years
- Antiracism/Diversity training—every 2 years
- Vocational Support Consultation

[Pastor Clare shares from Walt]

Walt Richey attended five workshops, three of which have already been described. I offer his brief reflections on two others he attended.

In a workshop entitled “**Eliminating Medical Debt,**” Pastor Daniele Bartz, of Winona, MN described the process of a project through which her church in collaboration with two other churches raised \$15,000 and formed a partnership with RIP Medical Debt to purchase over \$2,000,000 of medical debt from collection agencies. The debt was then canceled, relieving families of that liability. The focus is on medical debt that has been turned over to collection agencies for collection. Such debt can be purchased for pennies on the dollar. This program cannot be person-specific but can be geographically specific. It’s a very exciting program and one that we might pursue in conjunction with other churches in our area to focus on medical debt in St. Croix valley. This was one of the most inspiring workshops I attended.

Also from Walt: Another workshop entitled “**Church Consolidation**” was a good session focusing on requirements for successful consolidation or merger of churches. They distinguished between consolidation and merger. In a merger, a big church takes over and absorbs a smaller church; in a consolidation, two churches join together on an equal basis. Although there may be some legal distinction between the two methods of combining, the requirements for having a successful combination are the same. Partners must develop a trusting and respectful relationship with each other. There can be great importance in maintaining equality of leadership and in worship. I think our approach and efforts thus far to develop a relationship with St. Peter’s UCC are consistent with the admonitions and ideas from this workshop.

With gratitude to those other six attendees at our Annual Meeting, I will share very briefly from my gleanings. I attended four workshops, two of which have already been described. I also attended a workshop entitled **“Ambiguous Parables: Coping Well with Uncertainty”** led by published author named Ted Bowman. He is a lay leader and facilitator of caregiver and bereavement groups at St. Anthony Park UCC. I have attended workshops led by Ted in the past and look forward to sharing gleanings with you from this one at a later time.

The workshop that most energized me for our ministries was called **“Becoming a WISE Congregation for Mental Health Diversity and Accessible to All!”** The UCC Disabilities Ministry is a very strong effort of the church in both its national and MN Conference expressions. Our congregation could choose to engage in an accessibility audit at some point if we wish. As you’ll soon read in our June Leadership Team minutes, we are exploring the possibility of making People’s Park worship space more accessible, from parking lot through Outdoor Chapel space! WISE in terms of mental health is an acronym that stands for welcoming, inclusive, supportive, engaged. My key take-away from my colleague Pastor T. Michael Rock of Robbinsdale Parkway UCC (who was here for our service of installation last year) was this: “Pastors are not meant to hold secrets but to deal faithfully with information.” In other words, mental health challenges are not meant to be kept in the secret silence of shame and stigma but to be thresholds toward shared compassion and empowerment. WISE congregations do life-affirming and life-saving work.

I believe there were approximately 125 or more people present together at St. Ben’s this weekend. It was very energizing! One particular energizing moment for me was when I was voted in as one of the newly elected members at large of the Board of Directors for our MN Conference.

Also, there was quite poignant sharing by a young woman in her early twenties regarding the March For Our Lives. Our MN Conference had sent her and several other high school students to Washington DC in 2018 for the March For Our Lives after the Parkland shootings. She challenged us (in love), wondering, what in the hell that we continue to enable on this Earth are we going to do to take action to prevent school and other shootings?

It was a powerful sharing by a woman who was willing to come back to us as the Christian church yet again and be part of us (and yet see the change not happen).

In our closing worship, we acknowledged multiple churches that have closed in the past year. It happens in every branch of the body of Christ. Churches close when they need to. And so we recognized each one with silence and candles. We also recognized all of the authorized clergy who had passed away in the past year.

It was quite a community! And I will leave you with the note that so many people in this wider community offered affirming, enthusiastic and curious comments about our congregation because they are seeing in cyberspace and hearing from one another about the exciting ministry that we as People's Congregational Church here in Bayport are engaged in. So we are supported by the MN Conference UCC. Having heard all these gleanings from one another about many ways we can be stronger, more welcoming, more supportive of each another as friends in the body of Christ; let us take that forward and let us embody all we can to be the body of Christ, because Love is counting on us. Amen!

Rev. Clare Gromoll
People's Congregational Church (Bayport, MN)
June 12, 2022 (1st Sunday after Pentecost, Trinity Sunday)
Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31; John 16:12-15