

Sacred Re-Imagining: MNUCC Annual Meeting Gleanings

Pastor Clare:

Friends, long-time and new: this morning, Marianne, Kathleen and I have the privilege of an opportunity to share with you some key gleanings from our experiences at last weekend's Annual Meeting of the Minnesota Conference UCC. By gleanings, I mean pieces we gathered to take home with us so that they might inform our shared ministries here as St. Croix United Church.

As you listen to each of us, I encourage you to keep in mind the phrase "sacred re-imagining," which was the theme for the conference. Invite yourself to wonder in what areas of your personal life and of our communal life as a church might benefit from sacred reimagining (that is, seeing something anew with a posture of open wonder, while trusting that God's Love empowers our imaginations).

At this time, I welcome forward first Marianne Warnes and then Kathleen Dennison. I attended as a clergyperson whose standing is held within the MN Conference UCC and as a member of the Board of Directors for the Conference. Marianne and Kathleen attended as voting delegates representing our congregation.

Marianne:

This was the 62nd meeting of the Minnesota Conference of the United Church of Christ. We learned that there were 164 delegates representing 59 churches, 44 visitors, and 5 persons online. You know that many churches claim to be open and affirming. One of the seminars I attended was titled, "UCC Polity and History and Theology" and I learned some of the ways this church is indeed open and affirming.

I learned about sacred re-imagining, where the Council of Churches in 1948 wanted to incorporate more of the African American population into their already working churches. That was an interesting convention. I learned about the mission and vision and some history surrounding the creation of this tradition. Work to fulfill the UCC mission “welcome all love all seek justice for all “ is done in the local churches, conference settings, and national settings. The UCC tries to be responsible in their financial investments and they avoid investing in fossil fuel. They condemn the violence of Hamas and Israel’s use of force against Palestinians in Gaza. It was a great presentation.

Saturday afternoon I attended “Blessing the Beloved Body.” For those of you who don’t know, my last RN position was as a hospice nurse. This was a simple ritual brought by a grieving committee from Mayflower UCC. During the Covid time (as you probably all know), you could not visit your family in the hospital, in the nursing home, in assisted living facilities. It was horrible. People were dying and you couldn’t be there. Well, this group of women that had been together for many years decided that they needed to help families with their grieving. So they made a simple ritual of surrounding the body that has already passed away or is soon to pass away and use phone and video to include people from outside the space to be involved in the process. It started as a simple ritual brought to grieving families, primarily in the hospital, to bless and give thanks for the person leaving this world. It can be conducted by fam members, pastors, social workers or health care personnel. There is a prayer or poem said over the beloved body and friends or family are invited to share memories. There is also a singing bowl. This can be as secular or religious as it needs to be – the prayer or poem is adaptable to all situations.

I found this profoundly touching and I'm anxious to incorporate this in my role as hospice volunteer. It was a great time. I thank you for letting me attend.

Kathleen Dennison:

I had the pleasure of attending the Annual Meeting as a voting delegate of St Croix United, along with Marianne and Pastor Clare. It was a very full two days; I will say a few words about three of the sessions I attended along with a brief mention of a few other things of note.

I'll start with a couple of comments on a bible study led on Saturday morning by Prof Carolyn Pressler of UTS. Rev. Dr. Pressler led us through the passage from Jeremiah that Sharri just read (maybe to give the clergy in attendance a head start on this week's sermons), and asked us to consider it from the perspectives of several of the constituencies. To summarize, Jeremiah told the Israelites in exile in Babylon to get over themselves and get on with life, because they were stuck there for 70 years. Prof. Pressler asked us to consider whether we are more like the Israelites, forced to let go and move on to something new; or the exiles who desperately wanted to believe that they were going home any minute; or the Babylonians, who prospered by taking resources from others; or Jeremiah, who had to deliver a very uncomfortable truth to those in power. I found it resonated with some of the experiences of our congregation over the last year or so – as the former People's and St. Peter's congregations and as the current St. Croix United congregation.

I attended a workshop on “Faithful Conversation: Guidelines for Constructive Dialogue.” This session gave tips for why and how to hold conversations on difficult topics within a congregation.

The fundamental idea was that this sort of conversation is not necessarily meant to reach agreement or persuade folks, but to deepen understanding and promote congregational unity (to help people feel heard and listened to). There were specific suggestions for how to listen, how to speak, and the need to commit to truly understanding each other’s point of view. Remembering our shared values and goals and committing to treating one another with respect while bringing disagreements into the light of day (because it's really important to surface disagreements, not let them fester) should help congregations weather the inevitable moments of conflict.

The third session I will mention is the keynote address presented by Tabitha Montgomery of Flourish Placemaking Collective. Flourish works with nonprofits and especially churches to “further community belonging for everyone” by looking at “how property assets are used in furthering the mission of the organization.” Tabitha was a very engaging speaker who riffed on the theme of Sacred Re-imagining by focusing on a related verse in Acts Chapter 2: “and they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need.” Based on the common root of sacred and sacrifice and the early Christians’ example, she led us through many ways of looking at and thinking about sacrifice, including what keeps us from making sacrifices. It was a thought-provoking and challenging message (and I’d be happy to share more of it with you if any of you are interested).

I'll finish with a few one sentence observations that I thought might be of interest to SCUC.

- 70% of the congregations in the MN Conference have less than 100 people in worship, so it is a Conference of small churches.

- Sheri Nelson, who leads outdoor ministry for the conference. They are looking at what the role of outdoor ministry is. She is interested in talking to congregations on that subject.

- The conference continues to do its best to take anti-racism seriously. It is something they have been working on for many years. It was noted that twenty-five years ago is when they first started their formal efforts along those lines. They have been working with Crossroads, an anti-racism consultant. As a result of their work with Crossroads, the Board of Directors proposed amending the conference bylaws to add a standing committee called "Dismantling White Supremacy." The delegates present voted overwhelmingly to add that standing committee. Exactly what they are going to be doing and how is not entirely clear yet, but one of the things they mentioned was a training called Sacred Reckonings, which is training for predominately White congregations like ours to look at what our role is dismantling white supremacy. The next session is in the fall sometime and something we might want to consider sending some folks to.

- The MN conference has launched a young adults cohort to provide connections for folks in the 18 to 25 or so age range (an age range where, in the most congregations, there probably aren't enough folks to connect with one another). This is a way to connect across the conference.

Overall, it was a busy, fun, and inspiring two days, and I was grateful to have the privilege of representing SCUC.

Pastor Clare:

Thank you, Marianne and Kathleen.

Friends, as much as I love nesting within our local congregation and within the St. Croix Valley, I also LOVE participating in gatherings of the wider church because of how they can encourage, inform, and support all that we do as a local church.

I look forward to attending the Annual Meeting and Conference of our National Association of Congregational Christian Churches in Spokane, Washington alongside Cindy Parsons and Sharon Binger. We depart this coming Friday and return the following Tuesday. We will share with you our gleanings from that experience on an upcoming Sunday.

We each had opportunity to attend two workshops, with the difficult challenge of choosing from among ten to twelve options at each time slot. On Friday, I attended an informative workshop entitled “Immigration and Border Issues: Tell Us How Our Narratives are Wrong.” We examined biblical writings about immigration and border issues (from Leviticus and Revelation), present-day mainstream narratives, and intersections with recent and current US federal policies. To give you a flavor of the conversation, our workshop leaders offered counternarratives to the following 4 narratives which they consider false:

- People have a choice about whether to migrate to the U.S.
- The border wall is effective in preventing migration.

- People in the United States without proper documentation are criminals.
- More immigration courts and more border patrol agents will fix the U.S. immigration system.

Perhaps one or more of those narratives strikes you as somewhat or mostly true. If you are curious about the counternarratives, I would be happy to share my workshop notes with you. Just reach out to me.

Before sharing with you my gleanings from the workshop I attended on Saturday, I'd like to return to two verses in today's reading from Jeremiah. Through the prophet's writing, we heard God's encouragement to the Israelites in exile in Babylon:

“Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters” (and so on and so forth). *“But”* (said the voice of God) *“seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”* Sometimes, like the Jerusalemite exiles, we are the stranger, newcomer, or foreigner in a situation. Sometimes, like many of us as White folx in the US, we are the powerful, established insiders in a situation. In all circumstances, we are called to see, honor and nurture both ourself and the other.

David Lindsey currently serves as the Transitional Conference Minister. For approximately one and a half to two years, he is the pastor to the pastors of the MN Conference UCC and an empowering supervisor to several other conference staff who directly support sets of local churches.

In his State of the Conference address, David offered these reflections related to our conference and any of our local churches (including ours) living through times of transition:

“It is the purpose of change or maintenance that matters.” “It is the purpose of change or maintenance that matters.” He went on to pose this question, which I find extremely relevant to our recent decision to sell this beautiful land, our recent step to begin our search for a Youth and Outreach Director, and our current strategic visioning process: *“Will this decision draw us closer to God and lead to greater healing?” “Will this [any] decision draw us closer to God and lead to greater healing?”*

He concluded his address with this encouragement: *“Because God creates and responds to us, we are free to dream. We don’t have to wait to start dreaming.”*

I’d also like to share gleanings from the workshop I attended on Saturday entitled “Innovative Culture = Transformational Ministries. It was led by Emily Meyer, Director of the Ministry Lab, located at United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities. Our congregation frequently borrows dvd resources from the Ministry Lab for our Sunday morning adult faith conversations. innovative culture = transformational ministries. I invite you to turn your worship bulletin over to the back page, where I share a few notes with you.

Our congregation (if we wish) will have the opportunity in the coming year, if we wish, to engage with a tool called the “Innovation Culture Index” and be guided by Emily to understand where we exist on each of nine spectra that align with nine Indicators of a Community’s Ability to Innovate.

The tool's core assumption is this: opportunities to innovate occur at the intersection of these three things:

- A church's mission
- The community's assets (those of the church and of the wider local community)
- The community's assets (those of the church and of the wider local community)

As you consider these nine indicators (which fall within four categories), I invite you to wonder where you would place yourself as an individual and us as a congregation:

Within the **Mindset** category:

In regard to **Risk Response**, are you and we more fearful or more hopeful?

In regard to **Input**, are you and we more closed or more open?

In regard to **Existential Vision**, are you and we more surviving or more missioned?

Within in the **Structure** category:

In regard to **Environment**, are you and we more serious or more playful?

In regard to **Composition**, are you and we more bureaucratic or more adaptable?

Within the **Relationships** category:

In regard to **Connectivity**, are you and we more isolated or more interwoven?

In regard to Bonds, are you and we more suspicious or more trusting?

Within the **Habits** category:

In regard to **Implementation**, are you and we more delaying or more enacting?

In regard to **Experimentation**, are you and we more reactive or more proactive?

I encourage you to take these spectra with you to wonder about your own life and other communities of which you are a part.

Finally, I was inspired to have us hear Psalm 37 today in part due to the overall theme of the Annual Meeting and in part due to a resolution which Kathleen mentioned and which we considered and passed. Our MN Conference UCC Board of Directors (on which I serve and with which I meet approximately 4 times per year), after many months of training and experiential learning led by a task force, brought forward a resolution to amend our bylaws with the establishment of a Committee for Dismantling White Supremacy. We may wonder, why not a committee for racial justice or a committee for antiracism? Well, because our God of all-encompassing love calls us to the honesty and courage to call a spade a spade.

White supremacy propagates these values in our society (which are pretty insidious but which are based in white supremacy: pernicious dualism, scarcity mentality, drive to dominate, disposability, secrecy, and competitiveness. Our Conference is deciding to devote energy to the dismantling of those values that distort and harm so many lives.

Psalm 37:5 is a verse that was given to me on the occasion of my Confirmation at Christ Lutheran Church in Eagle River, WI on May 5, 1996.

Psalm 37:5 says, *“Commit your way to God, and trust in God; God will take action.”*

May we together gather inspiration from the gleanings of today and take courage in the opportunity to re-imagine, day by day and season by season, as this congregation. God will be with us and God’s Love is counting on us. Amen.

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