

## There Is a Time: NACCC Annual Meeting & Conference Gleanings

Pastor Clare:

Friends, long-time and new: this morning, Cindy, Sharon and I have the privilege of an opportunity to share with you some key gleanings from our experiences at the recent Annual Meeting and Conference of our National Association of Congregational Christian Churches. From a very full and enriching 4-day event, we have selected pieces to bring home to you, so that they might inform our shared ministries here at St. Croix United Church.

As you listen to each of us, I encourage you to keep in mind the phrase “there is a time,” which was the theme for the conference, inspired by today’s familiar verses from Ecclesiastes. Invite yourself to wonder (both for your personal life and for our communal life as a church): what are the defining features of the current season and how might we grow spiritually by recognizing and honoring the power of seasonality?

At this time, I welcome forward first Cindy Parsons and then Sharon Binger. I attended as a **clergy delegate** serving a congregation of the NACCC. Cindy attended as our **voting delegate** to this year’s Annual Meeting and Conference. Sharon attended as our **year-round delegate**, whose commitment it to maintaining and strengthening the tie between our local church and the national association.

Cindy Parsons:

In a workshop from the Vitality Ministry Council, we heard from the Rev. Dr. Ned Parker. The title of the session was, “What do we learn on the road”? Rev. Parker shared the story of the two followers of Jesus as they walked along the road to Emmaus after Jesus had been crucified.

He brought this story to life for us while also teaching us about the importance of stories and the different types of stories.

As the two followers of Jesus walked along the road to Emmaus after Jesus had been crucified, they were sharing with each other their personal stories about what had happened. As they were talking, Jesus appeared and walked with them but they did not recognize him. Jesus shared biblical stories with them as they walked the seven miles to Emmaus from Jerusalem. When they arrived in Emmaus, they shared a meal. When Jesus took the bread, gave thanks for it and gave it to them, their eyes were opened and they recognized him. Jesus' taking the bread, giving thanks and giving the bread is an example of an illustrative story.

The fourth kind of story is sharing the Good News. Imagine as the two walked, or perhaps ran, back to Jerusalem to share the Good News of Jesus with the disciples and others. Rev. Parker asked us if our churches are on the road to Emmaus or from Emmaus. He asked us if our churches were running back from Emmaus excited to share the Good News.

It is Rev. Parker's prayer for us that through storytelling, we will spread more love and peace. Personal stories, biblical stories, illustrative stories and Good News stories. He hopes that we will continue to make our churches environments where stories can be shared, where space is safe to share stories and where stories are welcome.

In a session titled, "Footsteps of Faith", we heard from Carol Seppila, a Native American Alaskan, who shared how she faced the depths of darkness after giving up on life and found salvation through prayer. Despite the doctor's grim prognosis of permanent blindness and loss of speech, she forged ahead, driven with the belief in divine intervention, and emerged from the shadows.

Following in the footsteps of her ancestors, Carol went from merely surviving to living with a purpose. Her journey showcases the power of faith, granting her a new sight and a voice filled with the message of hope.

Carol's childhood had been very difficult. In her teen years, she turned to drugs and alcohol. Her depression increased and one day while intoxicated, she attempted to take her life. Carol was rushed to a trauma center. Carol's mother sought solace in silent prayer as she prayed Mark 5:23 to "Lay your hands on my daughter and she will be healed". Healing did come and Carol shared her long journey with us. Carol wears a mask under her nose that covers the lower part of her face due to disfigurement after the suicide attempt. She also has an artificial trachea to help her get the oxygen that she needs.

Carol's journey of reconstructive surgery and healing was very long and difficult. She shared how her ancestors appeared to her in a vision and told her that all would be well and that she needed to live and that she would accomplish great things. She also shared how she was told by someone that she needed to live and not just survive.

Carol's depression remained but she decided one day that she would attempt to run and although she only made it two blocks, she did not give up. Carol has run in many races including a 100 mile race that she completed after many attempts. With every step, Carol prays. She runs to bring hope to others who are thinking about suicide. She is a spokesperson for Suicide Prevention. She has lost many friends to suicide. Carol says that we all have a time in this beautiful life to live the way God want us to truly live. She says that within each of us is a light that shines in the dark.

I pray that each of us will let our own lights shine brighter as we share our stories with each other and with a world that needs to hear our stories.

Sharon Binger:

I am going to talk a little bit about the social life and the kinds of things that go outside of the formal sessions at the conference. Yet I do want to say that under the theme of “There is a Time,” Alan Roxburgh was an author and teacher from British Columbia who came and gave us some very challenging thoughts about church. The title of his talk was “Where Are We and What Happened?” I think this church obviously thriving at the moment (as far as I’m concerned) with ways to go. But the message he was giving is that the church isn’t really in the building anymore. Our church is our service and our love – what we take out into the street. And it is by listening to other people’s stories (their real truths) and giving our own without judgment – that’s what Jesus was teaching us: to reach out on an individual level. And that caused me to start looking around myself at the conference, thinking. And I tried to see things in people the way I figured God would see them. And it really transforms the view! I think when we are not thinking about ourselves and how we appear, that is when God can do God’s best work. And it’s the little things sometimes that are most like heaven.

And I saw that three times today, coming in here. I was going to tell you about the conference, but I saw it right here. The first thing: I get out of my car and here’s Jonah, running toward the parking lot with bulletins going, “come in!” And it’s like, that is God – that is heaven. And there’s a lady standing next to me. And she goes, “What is that over there?” And I said, “It’s my church.” And she said, “Really? You know, I think I might want to come.” And I say, “Please, join us. You can see we’re really fun.”

And she came over and got a bulletin. So, if you see her next week, her name is Kate. Another story was just now when I saw the children sitting up here and the little girl with an art project that she sat and held the whole time. And when it was over, she got up and went over and gave it to Sam. That was her gift to him – her flowers for him. And that was God. I think, if we stop looking for the big things and trying to make a big statement (which I know I do)... but it's the little things.

I have one more thing to report, and that is about Pastor Clare and Cindy. They were both very well behaved. It was a pleasure traveling with them and it was really fun to watch Pastor Clare engage with other people about UCC and NA – those were wonderful discussions for me to be part of and listen to (how we bring everything together). Thank you.

Pastor Clare:

Thank you both, Cindy and Sharon, for bringing your perspectives. I think I speak for all three of us when I say we were so grateful to be part of that gathering. In fact, I said this two weeks ago when Marianne, Kathleen and I shared gleanings from the MN Conference UCC Annual Meeting and I'll say it again now: 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 encourage, inform, and support our life as a local church.

This morning, I would like to share with you brief gleanings from our keynote speaker (whom Sharon mentioned). And before sharing my comments, I invite us to hear again excerpts from the reading from First Kings. This portion starts when the voice of God reaches into the cave where Elijah rests as he runs away from powerful political enemies.

We heard: *“And the word of God came to him: ‘What are you doing here, Elijah?’... God said, ‘Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of God, for God is about to pass by.’... And after the fire [and the earthquake and the whirlwind] came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. Then a voice said to him, ‘What are you doing here, Elijah?’”*

I experience this passage as a call to awareness – an invitation to be still enough to sense God’s presence – not only in moments of transformational epiphany, devastating loss, or exuberant celebration but also in ordinary moments of wondering ‘what’s next?’ Our NACCC annual meeting and conference in variations asked me this question, *‘What are you doing here, Clare?’*

Alan Roxburgh served as the keynote speaker. He is a pastor, teacher, writer and consultant who works across denominations in the area of church leadership. He explored this question across three sessions: *“Where are we and what happened?”* Alan recognizes how Christian communities have followed the lead of industrialization since World War, attempting to manage communal life with strategies aimed toward growth in production and efficiency. He wonders if we have trained ourselves to believe that we are the agents instead of seeing God as the agent. He longs for us to ask, *“Where is God showing up?”* instead of *“What do I need to do?”* In our strategic visioning process as St. Croix United Church, we have been discerning our values, vision and mission this spring. In the fall, we will develop a visual representation (a logo) as well as a strategic plan of action for upcoming years. In our strategic visioning, are we asking, ‘Where is God showing up?’ at least as often as we ask, ‘What do we need to do?’ I personally believe we are asking both of those questions.

With references to the Babylonian exile of the Israelite people in the sixth century BCE (which would have been about two centuries after Elijah) and the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in the first century CE, Alan asked this question: “How do we form communities of hope in places we’ve never been?” “How do we form communities of hope in places we’ve never been?” As a new congregation, we the people of St. Croix United Church may want to attend carefully to that question. Drawing on words from the prophet Jeremiah during the Babylonian exile as well as Jesus’ instructions to his disciples as he sent them out as itinerant preachers, Alan encouraged us to **dwell**. Movement toward dwelling involves shifting away from any fear or hate in relation to our neighbors, seeking the welfare of those who surround us, and entering fully into a new and previously unfamiliar space with practices of vulnerability such as receiving hospitality and embracing another’s way of life. Alan encouraged us to start practicing how to dwell where we are, which leads to discernment and exploration.

In his last session, Alan reinforced the invitation to dwell. *“God calls us to roots ourselves deeply into the places where we live and belong,”* he said. *“As we dwell in that way, we will begin to hear, and in that hearing discern what the Spirit of God is doing. How do we form communities that dwell?”* he asks. *“What kind of leaders form communities that dwell, discern, and explore? Leaders who are themselves learning again how to pay attention to the presence and reality of God in their own lives and in their community.”* Words of wisdom from Alan Roxburgh. Alan’s ponderings remind me of God’s gentle whispered question: *“What are you doing here, Elijah?”* What are we doing here, St. Croix United Church?

If, as the author of Ecclesiastes declares, “*There is a time for everything, a season for every purpose under heaven,*” then what purpose is tugging at your heart-mind and your gut-intuition in this season (both for our congregation and for your own life? What purpose is tugging at you?

May we learn the spiritual practice of dwelling such that we recognize God’s voice showing up in our everyday life, infusing our days with discernable purpose.

May we together gather inspiration from the gleanings of today and take courage in knowing that God shows up in every season – for each of us, for our congregation, and for our wider community. May we dwell in God’s gently loving presence, because that Love is counting on us. Amen.

June 30, 2024  
St. Croix United Church @ People’s Park  
1 Kings 19: 1-13, Eccles. 3:1-8