

GLAD TIDINGS



THE NEWSLETTER OF CENTRAL ST. MATTHEW UCC

JULY 2009

In my first newsletter piece I mentioned music along with several other items of interest. Music brought the greatest number of comments, positive and negative, in response to the article. So, I will take another look at music.

Everyone has an opinion about music and its distant cousin, clapping. What is proper for church? What is allowed? What is the “right” music and what is the right response to the right music when (and if!) it is ever played or sung? The questions of “rightness” and “propriety” lie at the heart of this heated topic.

There is no question that both music and clapping are referred to with approval in the Bible. Both noises are an appropriate response to the wonder of God’s grace and love. Both are integral to worship in the Biblical text: humanity and nature alike are to make a loud noise for God.

“Clap your hands, all you peoples; shout to God with loud songs of joy.”
Psalm 47

Let the floods clap their hands; let the hills sing together for joy at the presence of the Lord ...”
Psalm 98:8

And my favorite: *“For you shall go out in joy; and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and the all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.”* Isaiah 55: 12

The question is not a question of Biblical support for or against singing and clapping in worship of God. To me the issue seems to be, “What are you used to?” I was raised in a church where no one made a peep and where the only music was the organ, two hymns and a soprano solo every Sunday. That is what I became used to and that is the church I walked away from at the age of 17 or 18 with no regret. I still do not know how to sing “different” or new music very well and there are times when the sound of clapping surprises me, but I realize that is largely because of my early church days and the worship culture in which I was raised. I am still learning and that gives me comfort.



I had a thought the other day what might make sense as we seek to bring together different tastes and different traditions. What if each one of us tried to take the focus off “me” and “my traditions” and “what I like” and instead looked to the other people in church. What if I learned to look with joy on my neighbor who in her joy is clapping or bursting into song? If I can learn that worship is not about my traditions and me, but is about the community gathered to celebrate the Lord, then whenever I see or hear the Lord being celebrated I should be able to respond in joy. Perhaps quietly, perhaps without moving very much, but with great joy.

There is no right and proper music. All music when offered up from the heart to God is right and proper. There may be times when some music seems more appropriate than others, but there is no perfect, one size fits all music. Clapping may not always be appropriate, but there are certainly times when to make that joyful noise to the Lord must include the hands as well as the heart. Witnessing someone else’s joyful response to God should not become a reason for me to judge critically.

One of our tasks is to learn to rejoice with each other as we rejoice in the Lord. God has generously given us many ways to worship and celebrate His goodness. Certainly one path to true worship is to rejoice not just when our favorite hymn is sung or our sense of propriety is met, but when we see other children of the Lord rejoicing in His presence. Then and only then will we make a joy fulfill noise unto God together.

The New Covenant Continued

Though I would love to tell you that there is a clearly marked path running through the next few months, there is no such path at the moment. But we have been moving together and mostly in the same direction. We have come a long way and there has been a lot of extremely hard work put in by so many of you. We just need to keep at it and to remain patient with each other and trust in God and all will be well.



We have reached a significant juncture in the lives of our two wonderful congregations. The leadership of Central and St. Matthew have agreed on a basic framework pointing towards unity. The "New Covenant" (as opposed to the existing Covenant) has been reviewed, reworked, tweaked and discussed at length. In broad outline it provides a basis for the two congregations to come together on essentially all aspects of church life.

Starting in late-August there will be a series of scheduled opportunities for each of you to discuss the New Covenant and to raise any comments, suggestions or criticisms you desire. The door will remain open to change. Then the two congregations will vote, as separate groups, on the New Covenant as it stands at the end of the discussions. If approved by both congregations, the New Covenant will become our focal point for unity. The path will be clearer, not easier, but certainly much clearer.

I have been tremendously impressed with the ability of each congregation to give in order to be together. There have been some very difficult times and some very hard discussions. I would expect nothing less from people who love their church and who seek to hold on to all that is valuable and good from the past and yet turn and squarely face the future. There has been an abundance of grace and trust in evidence in the leadership and in everyone I have talked to. I have come to expect the "outbreaking" of the spirit in every single discussion, meeting or casual conversation I have. These past four months have been intense and intensely alive unlike any other church time I have experienced.

I do not know exactly where we are going or exactly how we will get there. But that is fine. I am convinced that we will continue to walk this path together and that our destination will be exciting and pleasing in the eyes of God. We can all, at this point in the lives of Central Congregational and St. Matthew United Church of Christ be extremely thankful for we are indeed a people deeply blessed.

REV. DOUG

Creating a Just Peace, Environmental Justice: Part 2
By Gil Wilson

Last month we focused on *shamar* “to keep” and the earth-keeping principle. This month we will look at the fruitfulness principle.

In Genesis 1:22 God says to the birds and fish to “be fruitful and multiply, and fill the skies and fill the seas...” Humans are attacking the abundance of life that we see today. Pollution in the sea and air is destroying life. Overfishing is depleting our oceans.

This principle is further extended in Ezekiel 34:18: “Is it not enough for you to feed in the good pasture, must you trample the rest with your feet? Is it not enough for you to drink the clear waters, must you foul the rest with your feet?” The land itself needs to be protected and preserved as we use it.

Today we lose irreplaceable topsoil at an alarming rate. We load our soil with chemicals and fertilizers. We created bio fuels to the point that food prices moved beyond the reach of the world’s poor. We have exchanged free range into factory farms as animals are produced in sewer-like conditions with antibiotics, overcrowding, and grain. (Interesting to observe is how corn-fed beef may be killing us through the fatty, marbled tissue that adds to our heart problems.)

Are we ready as a church to address these issues? Can we alter how we buy food? Do we support local farmers markets? Organic? How do we take care of our own property? Does the fertilizer we use on our lawns contribute to the dead zones in the Gulf of Mexico.

We can restore the earth!

Just Peace helps us define who we are. It directs and focuses our actions as a church. If we truly become a just peace church we will find that it influences our lives in many different ways and gives us wholeness in our Christian life that we would not have had without using this focal point.

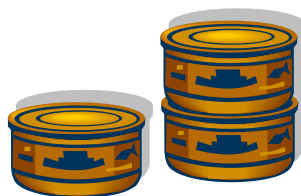


Church World Service School Kits Exceed Expectations



South Central Conference celebrated a 92% increase over last year in the number of school kits 24 churches and Eden Home in New Braunfels contributed—920 in 2009 in contrast to 484 in 2008. Central-St. Matthew contributed 25 of those kits, or a 64% increase for us over last year. In response to a SCC inquiry, Southern Calif.-Nevada's conference minister reported collecting 1500 kits from 134 churches. **So your Social Action and Ministry Committee (SAM) sends to all of you a big thank you!** Next year our conference will contribute similar kits or other kits CWS collects. We'll keep you posted so we can get a head start!

SEGUE TO CANNED MEAT!



Your Social Action and Ministry Committee (SAM) thanks all of you who contributed jars of peanut butter in June to the Second Harvest Food Bank. We'll give you a total in the next newsletter.

And now for the month of July we ask you to bring the item that usually consumes most of a family food budget—meat. But in this case we ask you to donate **canned meat**. It's a luxury that many families on limited food budgets cannot afford. Look for the donation boxes in the lobby.

Rediscovering evangelism in the 21st century by Richard Peace



The United Church of Christ has not been known for its evangelistic fervor, at least not within living memory. But I have come to believe that, as a denomination, we have turned the corner and are now hard at work seeking to recover the ministry of evangelism. One only has to look at the "God is still speaking" campaign to see what I mean. Here is a program that has been a very effective means of outreach. One aspect of the Stillspeaking campaign that caught my attention recently was a series of evangelistic booklets it produces. My favorite is "16 Reasons I Love Jesus." This booklet is real, funny, deeply true and challenging. I have given away a number of these and, without exception, they have been well received. Now, to be honest, most of these booklets have gone to friends from various churches who, after reading it, express amazement that "16 Reasons I Love Jesus" is being used by, of all denominations, the UCC. Yes, I know the booklets are meant for those outside the church, but I enjoy the reaction of my church friends and see it as a sign that in the UCC, we are busy getting on with recovering this lost ministry of evangelism.

What happened to the ministry of evangelism in the UCC? I think that this is a complex question but, apart from anything else, the fundamentalists spooked us. Along with other mainline denominations, we seemed to have made a deal. The fundamentalist would do evangelism and we would get on with social justice.

In post-World War II America, the split between these two ministries was deep and non-negotiable. I remember my own amazement when I moved to Africa in the 1960s to discover that the African church apparently had not heard about this deal: They happily went along caring for the needs of others (like feeding the hungry and protesting apartheid) while simultaneously calling people to

follow the way of Jesus (and so escape the power of evil spirits and find joy in life). And, of course, the African church got it right. Both ministries are a central part of the church of Jesus Christ. It is a both/and not an either/or. So in this 21st century climate of openness to the spiritual but suspicion of the religious, how do we recover the ministry of evangelism? How do we engage in outreach in ways that fit who we are as a denomination, as well as touching the real issues of those we seek to reach?

The first challenge in our churches is to deal with the "cringe factor" when we mention evangelism. Perhaps we do have to talk about outreach, faith sharing, being "good news" people, holy conversation or some other combination of words that get across the central idea that evangelism is all about sharing the amazing news about who Jesus is, what Jesus has done for us and our planet, and how we can experience new life (resurrection life) through Jesus. So on one level, evangelism is an invitation into relationship. Relationship stands at the core of Christianity: relationship with God, relationship with Jesus, relationship with the community of those seeking to follow Jesus, relationship with those we are called to love, relationship with ourselves.

The idea behind invitation is that when others connect with our Christian community, they begin to discover what the community is all about and, in particular, what binds the community together. "Belonging before believing" is the phrase often used to capture this perspective. Invitation to belong is one thing; invitation to believe is another. Evangelism is all about an invitation to believe the gospel. In the UCC, we are pretty good when it comes to discussing God but we need to learn what it means to talk about Jesus.

Conversion is another word that causes some discomfort in the UCC. But let us be clear: conversion is the goal of evangelism. Our longing is that people discover the Way of Jesus; that they decide to turn from their own way to this new Way; and that they start following Jesus by faith. We do not need to be embarrassed by this call to conversion. Conversion to Jesus can and does bring new life out of a destructive lifestyle, even as it brings new purpose out of an aimless lifestyle.

I am convinced that evangelism is not primarily a matter of individual witness. I believe that evangelism is primarily the calling of the community. It takes a community, not only to raise a child, but to reach a person with the gospel. The church is the primary context for conversion. One thing I have been talking about a lot these days is what I call "contemplative evangelism." The idea is pretty simple. If people are fascinated by spirituality, why not invite them to places and activities where they can explore the spiritual? Perhaps to a small group that is learning the art of spiritual journaling, then journaling together, and then talking about what they are journaling.

This isn't just academic. Mainline churches have declined steadily for the past 40 years, losing 50 percent of their membership (members per capita). And nothing seems to abate this trend. The UCC is doing worse than most other denominations, losing 60 percent of our market share in this same time frame. The math is easy. If this keeps on there will be no such thing at the United Church of Christ by the year 2100. Now I do not want to make evangelism into a membership drive. To do so undercuts the whole meaning of the gospel. But I do want to note that without active outreach, we will die as a denomination.

We share the gospel because it is good news and when we do share the gospel — by how we live, by what we say, and by what we do both as individuals and communities — others see new life, come to Jesus, and experience the beginning of transformation. Conversion is like that. And so they join in our community. We share not to prevent ourselves from going out of business. We share because this is our business and when we do, we thrive. No, evangelism is not an academic exercise; it is what the church is all about. And the Stillspeaking witness and welcome is what the UCC is all about.

The Rev. Richard Peace is a UCC pastor and the Robert Boyd Munger Professor of Evangelism and Spiritual Formation at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, Calif.

How Race is Lived in America: Video and Discussion Groups

Living for the past 27 years in Vermont, I grew to view questions of race as theoretical issues for discussion by well-intentioned white people. I am not sure but I believe Vermont is the “whitest” state in the Union. Our three adopted Korean children were usually the only people of “color” wherever we went.

The rest of the world is different. New Orleans is different. Race is everywhere and questions of race are constantly in front of each one of us. Particularly for the “odd couple” congregation known as Central St. Matthew race is a vital issue. I will probably never understand how and why the color of one’s skin became so important, but clearly it is and that will probably not change for a long time. So, the real question becomes, “How will race be lived in Central St. Matthew?” Put another way, how can we talk to each other and still talk about race? How can we work together and still work together in a highly racial context? How can we worship together as children of God in the full glory of our racial differences?

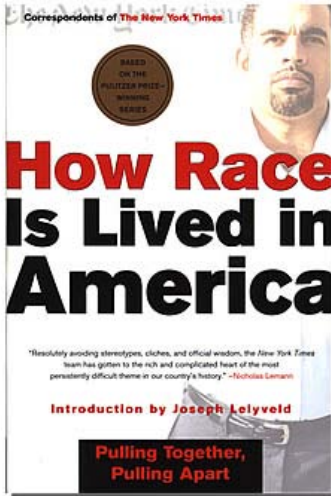
Several years ago I saw the video, “The Color of Fear”. It is the account of a racially mixed group of men gathered for a weekend on a ranch in California. It is the account of sudden and harsh realization of racial difference and racism in what appears to be the most innocent of attitudes and actions. This video was revelatory for me. It will be shown on August 23 after church and all of you are invited to attend. It is not easy watching, the language is certainly not all “churchy” and it is brutally honest. But the “Color of Fear” is significant and well worth the effort to watch and learn.

The video is the beginning of our discussions on the book How Race is Lived in America. I believe the video will be the perfect lens through which we can read and talk honestly about the six selected chapters in How Race is Lived in America.

At the viewing of the video we will take a moment to work out the book discussion schedule. Twenty five people have signed up for the discussion. This is enough for two groups if we decide to break up to make the discussion times convenient for as many as possible. I would suggest one time be Sunday after the service and if desired, a second time could be set during the week either evening or day time. The six chapters we will discuss will be available for pick up in the office by August 23rd. The discussions will begin in early September.

This should be an informative and productive time for Central St. Matthew. I know that I am looking forward to the rare opportunity to be in a group where race is lived and discussed openly, honestly and lovingly. That is the great advantage we have: We begin together bound by our love of God, of Christ and his church, and each other. We come together knowing that we are able to love each other because God first loved us.

Yours in Christ, Rev. Doug



General Synod 27 News: It's a Wrap Written by Synod 27 Newsroom Staff

The UCC's 27th General Synod came to a close Tuesday evening, June 30, with a celebration of five days of worship and work.

In her concluding sermon, the Rev. Patricia E. deJong recalled Matthew's Gospel story of Jesus and the disciples and the Sea of Galilee. While Jesus walked on water in the Sea of Galilee, it is Peter who provides the drama. Will he or won't he step out of the boat and walk with Jesus? "Are we ready to take the risk and step out of the boat? Are we willing to go where Jesus is standing?" she asked. The senior pastor of First Congregational UCC in Berkeley, Calif., deJong also reminded visitors and delegates that "anybody who rocks the boat takes a tremendous risk. Water is mighty powerful, and it can also be impersonal and downright mean." As General Synod ended, delegates and visitors had much boat-rocking to remember from their time together.

The Rev. Geoffrey Black, who has served for nearly a decade as minister of the UCC's New York Conference, was called by election Tuesday evening to succeed the Rev. John Thomas as General Minister and President of the United Church of Christ. Thomas was ineligible for an additional term. The announcement of Black's election was greeted with a standing ovation. In brief remarks, the new general minister and president thanked the delegates and spoke of his high expectations of working with other members of the UCC's five-person Collegium of Officers. Echoing his remarks at the time of his nomination, Black affirmed, "We are in this together." The Executive Ministers of two covenanted ministries also were called by election to new terms. The Rev. M. Linda Jaramillo was re-elected as Executive Minister of Justice and Witness Ministries and the Rev. Stephen L. Sterner was chosen as Executive Minister of Local Church Ministries. All will serve four-year terms beginning Oct. 1, 2009.

Longtime health care reform advocate Rep. John Conyers of Michigan visited with UCC members and made the case for a single-payer health care system during a workshop on Saturday afternoon. Conyers, a 22-term U.S. Representative and a founding member of the Congressional Black Caucus, came over from Detroit for the day. During a brief meeting with a handful of church leaders, Conyers said he admires the UCC and has friends in the church. He expressed appreciation for the denomination's stands on civil and human rights issues.

Monday afternoon, 200 Synod-goers marched from DeVos Place to City Hall and gathered in the shadow of Grand Rapids' signature Calder stabile to demonstrate their commitment to universal health care. Leading the 15-minute walk was Mayor George Heartwell, a UCC pastor, and the demonstration organizers, the Rev. Bert Perry of the Florida Conference and the Rev. Peter Wells, an Associate Conference Minister from Massachusetts. Chanting "Health care now!" they wound their way through downtown streets on a path cleared by city police. Resolution actions called for solidarity with the people of Iran, support for Iraqi refugees, a continuation of "Sacred Conversations on Race" and advocacy regarding a single-payer health care solution - among many others.



Delegates also considered resolutions on restructuring the national setting of the UCC, approving a resolution written during Synod called "Toward Unified Governance for the National Setting of the United Church of Christ." The resolution asks the Executive Council and the Covenanted Ministry Boards to bring to General Synod 28 a proposal for a single governance board, along with necessary constitution and bylaw changes. That Synod is planned for Tampa, Fla., in 2011. Bylaw and constitution changes were approved allowing the creation of guidelines facilitating multiple paths to authorized ministry. Amendments emphasized authorization of all UCC ministers: ordained, commissioned, and licensed; the responsibility of Associations in determining fitness for ordination, discernment in the ordination process in all settings of the church and the importance of covenants of mutual responsibility.

A coverage archive of all resolutions, committee actions, worship services, pre-Synod gatherings, River City Saturday events and presentations is available at ucc.org/news.

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We're on the Web!

See us at:
www.centralstmatthewucc.org

Upcoming Events

WANTED: BOWLERS !!! (AND GUTTER CHAMPIONS)

THE FELLOWSHIP COMMITTEE OF CENTRAL-ST. MATTHEW UCC INVITES YOU TO "STRIKE" YOUR NAME ON THE SIGN-UP LIST TO "BOWL OVER" WITH FUN AS WE GATHER ON SATURDAY, JULY 13, 2009 AT THE COLONIAL BOWLING LANES, (6601 JEFFERSON HWY, HARAHAN), FROM 6:30PM-8:30PM, FOR OUR BOWLING COMPETITION.

THERE WILL BE FOUR (4) PEOPLE ON EACH OF EIGHT (8) TEAMS NAMED: FRIED GREEN TOMATOES; SOUTHERN FRIED CHICKEN; MISSION TO MARS; NAT'RALLY N'AWLINS; SAINTS KREWE; KREWE OF ZEPHYR; KAJUN ROLLERS; GRAND MARSHALLS.

COSTS: APPROXIMATELY \$18.00 PER PERSON (WITH SHOE RENTAL).

CASH SNACK BAR IS AVAILABLE.

EVEN IF YOU HAVE NEVER BOWLED, COME OUT AND TEST YOUR AMATEUR BOWLING SKILLS, OR CHEER FOR YOUR FAVORITE TEAM.

FIND THE TEAM LIST IN THE CHURCH LOBBY. RECORD YOUR NAME UNDER THE TEAM NAME OF YOUR CHOICE (FIRST-COME BASIS), BY JULY 12.

SEE YOU IN THE ALLEY!!!

(QUESTIONS: SEE VICKI WEEKS, FAY KAUFMAN)

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