

Acts 2: 37 – 47

The New Normal – a sermon preached at the MACUCC Communication event

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Alban Institute guru Gil Rendle once said, “If you don’t know where you are going any path will get you there.” I think the same can be said about answering the question – who do we say that we are? When groping for or unclear about a sense of mission/purpose- any message will do. In these days when we are living in the end of the church-going era it is more important than ever to be clear about our church’s sense of mission/purpose. We can talk about “marketing” all we want but without clarity of mission/purpose – a sense of where you are going, the message rings hollow. Message follows mission!

We experienced this truth at the Conference level. You may or may not be familiar with the mission of the MA Conference but it goes something like this, “nurturing local church vitality and the covenant among our churches to make God’s love and justice real.” It used to be that our mission was “to nurture local church vitality and covenant” but many of us asked, to what end? Over a year ago the phrase “to make God’s love and justice real” was added. For myself I state it “provoking local church vitality and covenant following Jesus who made God’s love and justice real.” *Stating our mission and purpose clearly makes a difference* and is a critical element in the “new normal” our churches find themselves in.

Let me paint a picture of “the new normal” for our churches. In any given community across the United States only 17% are worshipping in a faith community on a Sunday morning. Some statistics say the percentage in New England is closer to only 9%, not surprising since MA is the fourth least religious state in the union. The fastest growing religious group in the United States are “nones” (not nuns!).

The average age of members of United Church of Christ congregations is 65. We have enough seminarians to fill one seminary, but not the seven soon to be six that are associated with the United Church of Christ. And given the smaller size and older age of our congregations it is estimated that between 30-40% of our churches will close in the next 15-20 years. Add the characteristics of the culture at large to these challenges – like an increasingly multi-option

society, the impact of social media on people's way of relating to one another and the decline of institutions in general – and you can see that local church vitality faces an uphill battle.

Now that was the challenging news. Here is some good news. I can tell you some stories of UCC churches in the area that are meeting that uphill battle of church vitality and are thriving. And they all have the same thing in common – they can clearly state who they are, why they are and for whom they are. In a Twitter world where you need to state something in 140 characters or less, these churches can sum up their mission in a Tweet!

UCC Medfield – the discipleship church. Each member lives in covenant together around six marks of discipleship – daily prayer, daily bible reading, weekly worship, generous giving, mission through and beyond the local church, relating with others to foster spiritual growth. \$700,000 of their \$750,000 budget is met by people's giving.

Old South Church in Boston – the blessing church. Located at the finish line of the Boston Marathon they bless the feet of the marathoners. They bless backpacks at the start of school, hammers for mission trips, animals – you name it, they will bless it.

First Somerville – the testimony church. Everything they do is understood to be testimony to the faith they live. This even carries over to the front yard of the church that is fully taken over by a vegetable garden. It is a living testimony to who they understand themselves to be just outside of Davis Square. They also practice testimony in worship. Every week in worship the liturgist leads the time of confession and the offering by sharing testimony of their faith lives. There is a one year waiting list to be liturgist!

Let me also share the story of a non-UCC church, Highrock Church in Arlington – the transformation church. I live in Arlington and had been meaning to visit them for awhile. I finally got there on Labor Day Sunday, the 9:15 a.m. service. There was a line to get in the door! The sanctuary was packed (and air conditioned!) with a multi-ethnic, mostly young adult congregation. Throughout the service in any number of ways they were clear that they are about transformation – through connecting to God personally, connecting to God's people, connecting to God's purposes. There was a long invitation to join a small group – either a short term connection group or a longer term covenant group. They will help you start a small group around Monday Night Football Group! You could not leave worship there without a sense of who they are, why they are and for whom they are.

Each one of these churches has at least two things in common: 1. They have clarity of the mission God has called them to and 2. That mission is rooted in the reclaiming of ancient practices.

Ironically, the renewal of the church is dependent upon recapturing the past for the present day. The acts of discipleship, blessing, testifying and changing lives of these thriving churches are all rooted in ancient Christian practices.

If we look back to the first days of the Christian Church, those days right after the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost we can see the roots of our renewal staring us in the face.

You remember the story that precedes the portion of Acts we heard today, the story we label Pentecost – a huddled group of grievors waited in a room in Jerusalem because Jesus promised an Advocate, a spark that would carry them forward without him. On the rush of a wind they were filled with the Spirit to the point where they were ablaze with passion for sharing good news.

But they did more than share good news, they lived good news. They prayed together, ate together, remembered together and gave so generously from what they had so that no one was in need. They were crystal clear about their mission and purpose! And those who witnessed their transformation were beating down the door to be baptized and grab some of this good news for themselves. That day of Pentecost saw 3000 baptized. Can you imagine 3000 people knocking on your church's front door because they saw in you something they knew would quench that unidentified hunger and thirst for God in their lives.

The wonderful gift of being clear about your mission/purpose is that you will help shape people who live that mission in their daily lives. If you are the blessing church – the people that come and go from here will be a blessing in their places of work, home and play. If you are the testimony church – the people that come and go from here won't be shy to bear witness to their faith in their daily lives. If you are the church of changing lives – the people that come and go from here will be agents of transformation!

When you are clear that you are the _____ church, you will see that same energy that had 3000 people knocking on the door of the early church wanting to be baptized. It would be like someone sending a tweet – “going to Hancock UCC because they are living Jesus over there,” and all following that Twitter account showed up!

Donald English, a British Methodist leader said, “the world doesn’t need more salespersons for the gospel, just more free samples.”

That is who you are called to be in this new normal, in this day and age. A community who has hundreds of people following your every move because they see and experience in you something of Jesus still alive, still present, still calling people out into the world.

So I wonder with you today name your church in the midst of a new normal, in the throes of a Twitter world - what do you want to be known for in your neighborhood? Better yet, what do you imagine God is calling you to be known for in this neighborhood? If I can encourage you to be clear about your mission/purpose, now is the time to be able to say UCC in is the _____ church. Now is the time to be making Christians. Not for your own survival and vitality, but so that the transforming power of Jesus Christ is known through the people who gather in your meeting place and in the community that it seeks to serve. May it be so.