



Iowa Conference, UCC Report of the Conference Minister Annual Meeting 2013

Should a church (a local church, or a conference of churches) want to grow?

That's a trick question, I suppose. The closest thing the church has to an operational mandate is the Great Commission, where Jesus said, "As you are going into the world, announce God's Good News, invite everyone to be my followers, baptize those who are willing, teach folk what I've taught you, and never forget this: I am always with you....always!!" (Pleva paraphrase).

It doesn't say anything about growing. Of course, we also know that the early church did exactly these things, and it grew explosively.

The conference Board of Directors has been studying an interesting monograph by Gil Rendle (formerly of the Alban Institute). Rendle finds much to critique about the current state of regional church bodies (what in the UCC we call associations and conferences). Even though he doesn't make his point in exactly this way, he takes issue with a nearly unavoidable implication of organizing our faith into an institutional form - he finds fault with the impulse to make members rather than to make disciples (followers) of Jesus.

The distinction between the two may seem false to some, but it doesn't seem false to me. Let me illustrate: When I sit at a table in a church fellowship hall after worship I sometimes get asked about what it takes to get new people to come to church. Short of giving money away at the door, I don't think there's any sensible answer to that question. We now live in a day when almost everyone who doesn't already go to church never even gives church a thought. Just as I've never in my life spent a Friday afternoon wondering whether I should go to synagogue that evening, so people who aren't already committed to church don't wonder on Saturday evening whether going to church the next morning might be a good idea. They never even think about it, and if asked, couldn't for the life of them imagine why they should.

But people still do come to faith from time to time - sometimes these are the very people who'd never have considered going to church. How does it happen? Mostly it happens because at a point of need, somebody who follows Jesus suggests that doing so makes a difference. Not going to church, mind you....but following Jesus.

Wouldn't it be remarkable if over the next several years the churches of the United Church of Christ in Iowa became known as groups of people passionate about following Jesus? Wouldn't it be something if we gave up trying to grow, and instead drilled down on the challenge of becoming zealously Christ-like?

I'm not at all oblivious to the paradoxical implications of what I'm saying. I'm the judicatory guy. It's part of my mandate to sustain the institution. But I'm not blind, and I've never been very good at denial, and if I know anything, I know that the structures of church as we know

them are passing away. Not all at once....probably not utterly....but undeniably and inexorably, the church of the 20th century is diminishing and will continue to do so. We can work at sustaining it as hard as we want, but it will still shrink.

A year ago....at our conference 50th birthday party I quoted one statistic that haunted me then and haunts me still. In the year of founding of the Iowa Conference our aggregate church school enrollment was about 30,000....and today it is 82% less than that - and still shrinking. Whether we care to face these facts or not, the churches of our tradition were built on a foundation of two components: 1) European immigration and 2) high birth rates. Both are gone and show no sign of ever coming back.

I'm not willing to suggest that we pay no attention to strategic interventions. But I'm also unwilling to suggest that strategy alone will save our institutions. I am as certain as I can be that we must be strategically prudent and shrewd, and at the same time I am equally certain that good strategy will never save us.

The one essential thing that is more important than good strategy is childlike, genuine faith. It seems to me that learning to love Jesus and then letting the chips fall where they may will be the smartest thing to do. Like the stubborn prophets of the Old Testament harped incessantly on whatever message they felt called to proclaim, I feel called to a stubborn proclamation of this message. We must learn what it means to confidently and publicly follow Jesus - and not worry so much what becomes of our churches.

After all, don't you suppose it's true that if God is with us (or perhaps to put it better, if we are with God), our institutions will be alright. Maybe they'll die (I think that's possible) but new ones will arise, and perhaps by God's grace we'll be privileged to part of that moment of divine new creation. That actually sounds exciting to me!

So....go home and think and pray and talk together about what it means to publicly and confidently follow Jesus.

Now...having dissed the institution, allow me a few institutional observations. After all, while the new is emerging we must continue to faithfully care for the old, being careful not to hang on to it so tightly that it can't slip away if that is necessary - maybe even what God wants.

Here's several things I want you to know:

- We have the best staff in the whole of the United Church of Christ. Jonna Jensen provides remarkable support for congregations in search. Brigit Stevens will see that we authorize ministry in ways second to none and provide remarkable support to clergy who are willing to make themselves accountable to colleagues. (An aside: I've just returned from Cleveland and a member of a different conference staff told me that she was going to entice Brigit to that conference. Good grief! She's not been here even two months yet!) Our office staff, Mallory Hamilton and Jo Ordway care about your church and will leave no stone unturned in responding to your needs. We are just beginning to work with three very part time adjunct staff to address three very specific points of need. Katherine Mulhern is beginning to work with our cadre of young clergy - what

we're calling 2030-Iowa. Laura Arnold is administering our program of theological education for lay people - what we call Pathways. And Samantha Houser will coordinate youth programming in the wider church.

- The Conference Board of Directors has just authorized that we provide access to a sophisticated source of demographic data for your community. We know there aren't any longer any new European immigrants in your town, and it's obvious that there aren't very many children being born to our members - but there ARE people in our neighborhoods. What do you REALLY know about those people (maybe less than you think you know!)? MissionInsite can help you understand what's happening right outside your church door.
- Even though our staff is smaller than ever before, it's a good staff and worthy of financial support. In addition to the support that our churches provide, we very much need support from individuals who understand the importance of being church together and are willing to give to the conference in addition to their commitment to their local church. You have a letter making the case for that support in your meeting materials. Please consider a generous gift.
- Early next year we will repeat the fundraising seminar that we've repeated twice over the past two years. This seminar is practical and realistic. It is not easy or painless, because there is no easy way to raise money. BUT - if embraced, it can generate JOY! You see, not only does God love a cheerful giver, but generous giving produces joy! I kid you not - I know this from firsthand experience. One way to increase the level of JOY in your congregation is help your congregation become more generous. Groups of generous people are inherently more joyful than are groups of stingy people. I'm sure you recognize that this is a true statement.
- Next year we will introduce a program called "New Beginnings." There will be much more information about "New Beginnings" next year, but this is a program originally developed in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and is intended for congregations that are wondering if they really have a future. Stay tuned.

On the first of this month I marked the 8th anniversary of my service as your Conference Minister. In a few months I will have been working at this call longer than I have worked at any job in my life (which tells you that I'm a restless soul and have trouble staying long at a thing). It's beginning to be likely that I will retire from this job. I very much look forward to retirement, but I have a fear about retirement - or not so much retirement per se, but about the years leading up to retirement. I've seen too many folk come to the end of their careers badly - to put it bluntly, to retire in place.

I want to use these last few years in ways good for the cause of Jesus here in Iowa Conference of the UCC. I am passionate about the possibility that God can use a cadre of people like ourselves to bear witness to an understanding of the Gospel that's just a bit different than how many of God's people see it. We are the people who claim to accept the idea that God still speaks - that there is still more truth and light to break forth from God's Word. We are people committed to take scripture seriously, but not succumb to the enlightenment heresy of literalism.

We're not perfect, so let us not get puffed up. Our usual forms of worship frequently tend to the arid, and our failure to embrace rigorous disciplines of spiritual practice often leave us spiritually malnourished. There are places where these deficiencies are being addressed. We must continue and intensify those efforts.

There is much to commend about our church. But there is much that could be better. I will continue to comment on that which I see.

I am also painfully aware of my own deficiencies. I often feel utterly inadequate to this calling. The gracious support of my staff, of the Board of Directors, of many of you and others inside and outside this church are indispensable to my capacity to carry on. I am blessed to be married to a woman who demonstrates remarkable forbearance about my moodiness and sometimes discouragement. Thank you Ruby...I am profoundly grateful for your friendship, partnership and love - and perhaps especially your patience.

Blessings to all of you! I love you and I will continue to do my best to serve you faithfully and effectively - holding encouragement and challenge in tension - to the end that God be glorified.

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