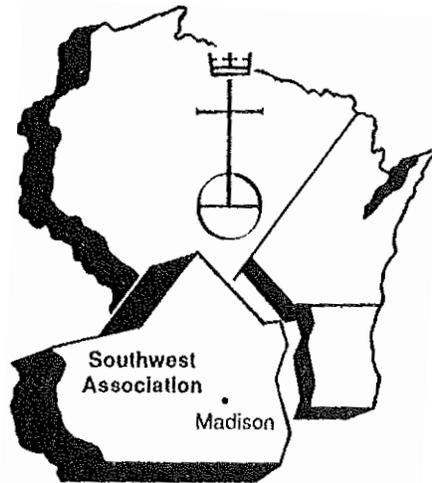


2017

WHITE BOOK



ANNUAL SPRING MEETING

**SOUTHWEST WISCONSIN ASSOCIATION
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

Saturday, May 6, 2017

**St. John's United Church of Christ
Monroe, Wisconsin**

Moderator's Report

The High Art of Ecclesiastical Agriculture

Wendell Berry, that farmer-poet-activist-and-Christian-suspicious-of-the-church, writes lovingly of his Kentucky farm. He especially notes that, though his farm is in a neighborhood of farms, each farm is distinct and that there is widespread diversity within each farm. The essence of agriculture, he believes, involves knowing and honoring the individuality of each farm and the particularity of each field, animal, and person on each farm. He offers the judgment that "Farming becomes a high art when farmers know and respect this individuality and particularity."¹

What Wendell Berry says about agriculture applies to the life of an Association. An Association can be compared to a farm and the churches within the Association to the fields. Though the farm is one, each field is unique. Though we are one church and our congregations are intimately related, each faces its own unique problems and opportunities, its own distinct set of individual possibilities and potentials. The marks of successful congregational life – whatever those marks are – will apply across the whole Association, but they will be manifest in different ways among our churches.

If the Association is the farm and the congregations its fields, the organizational structure of the Association is comparable in some small sense to the farmer. Berry says the ideal farmer respects each field for its uniqueness. Likewise, Association officers, Division members, other leaders, and staff are in place not to impose uniformity or advocate a kind of standardization upon our churches, but to offer encouragement, guidance, support, and, at times, admonition, all with an eye on helping each field realize its finest and distinctive potential. Our work in community is to recognize our differences while we tend to our similarities; it is to honor and encourage our particularities while we see to the cohesion of our covenantal relationship.

This, in part, is what we are doing today as we come together for an Annual Meeting of the Association. We are tending to what Wendell Berry describes as the high art of farming and what we can think of as the high art of ecclesiastical agriculture. We do not wish any church to feel badly because it is not doing what another is doing, but we hope every church will be ready to say what it is doing and imagine what it could do. And we hope each congregation will rejoice in the success of others and be ready to commiserate and assist another where the neighboring field is struggling.

I close by noting we experienced significant losses in our family since we were last together for an Association meeting. We are saddened at the deaths of Vivian Meier and the Rev. Heide Hackman, but we give God thanks for the lives of devotion they lived in our midst and for the ways they left our Association stronger.

¹ Wendell Berry, *Imagination in Place* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2010), p. 9.

