

Identity Campaign Toolkit



Wisconsin Conference UCC
Where God is still speaking,

Wisconsin Conference UCC Identity Campaign

What's an identity campaign? Faith communities and other organizations use identity campaigns to introduce themselves to outsiders—and to reintroduce themselves to current stakeholders for whom awareness of the original message and mission have dimmed over time. An identity campaign uses strong storytelling and visual elements to appeal to individuals' most cherished values and highest hopes.

A powerful story. Every day in the Wisconsin Conference United Church of Christ, we live the continually unfolding story of God's extravagant love. Our new Conference motto, *Where God is Still Speaking*, captures our conviction that the stories upon which the Christian movement was founded remain powerful today and find expression in the lives of congregations and individuals who extend compassion and advocate for justice in God's name. The phrase echoes the popular marketing campaign launched by the UCC two decades ago, inspired by a quote attributed to comedian Gracie Allen: "Never place a period where God has placed a comma."

Why now? Because UCC congregations offer the social connections that people desperately need. Just last year, U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy declared loneliness and isolation "an underappreciated public health crisis that has harmed individual and societal health." Congregational life nurtures the very relationships that humans require for their well-being. Our churches also provide a space where love, expressed in mutual care, takes priority over agreement on religious or political dogmas. As UCC pastor, futurist and consultant Cameron Trimble put it in her Leadership Matters Lecture last year, congregations are "circles of sanity" in a topsy-turvy world.

Can my church get help with its campaign? Absolutely. We have rolled out a variety of resources, including a new Conference logo. Congregations can contact the Conference to get their own *Where God is Still Speaking* logo (see page 4). And we'll offer online training intended to help your congregation tell its story to your community.

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Where God is Still Speaking

By the Rev. Franz Rigert, Conference Minister

Back in 2023, the idea surfaced that we should develop a unique identity as the Wisconsin Conference of the United Church of Christ. We held a series of conversations with thought leaders that led many people to reminisce about the 2004 “God is still Speaking” campaign. Remember how it poked fun at less-inclusive churches, with bouncers kicking out those who didn’t belong and ejection seats catapulting out those who were not welcome?



Ron Buford designed that campaign 20 years ago. Now, we have decided to revive it, aware of the tectonic shifts in the Church landscape four years after the initial COVID-19 shutdown.

Two troubling realities have created an unexpected opportunity for Church revitalization.

First, we are experiencing a time when people are longing for belonging. The surgeon general reports that 1 out of every 3 adults is lonely. Social media doesn’t satisfy the yearning for genuine relational connection. Well, guess what: We in the Church are really good at building community. The time is ripe.

Second, in this hyper-polarized, rant-prone, lies-are-often-more-welcome-than-facts society, many people are tired of deception and division, and just want to create safe spaces for authentic relationships in which we can hold diverse perspectives and honor one another in the process. Using Jesus as our model, we are called to be truth-tellers who practice civil discourse to show the world that it is possible to keep our integrity to treat those with whom disagree ... lovingly.

We chose the word “where” intentionally. It names the way our congregations, in a unique way, follow a “Still Speaking” God. It also points to our congregations as special places.

The sociologist Nancy Ammerman recently spoke about the “place” of congregations in America. She began by noting the sheer number of congregations—at least 350,000 across the country, in all different sizes. In fact, there are three times as many congregations as there are local elementary and secondary schools in America. A congregation is the most local of institutions.

Ammerman went on to describe the four basic things congregations provide their communities:

- A place of belonging, where people experience care and inclusion.
- A place of identity and tradition, where faith formation happens.

- A place of moral imagination, where values like neighborliness, justice, and service are nurtured.
- A place of public engagement, where civic skills develop—including the ability to be in community with those with whom we disagree.

So, as we return to the “still speaking” values of wide welcome and beloved community, we are promising you some amazing resources over the next 12 months—worship and sermon resources, branding materials for your congregation and ideas for resurrecting the evangelical roots of our tradition.

Here is a rhetorical question that I invite us to ponder together: If God is indeed still speaking, after all we have endured, are we still listening? And more important: *Are we listening attentively with fresh ears to what the Spirit is saying to the Church?*



Want to refresh the logo of your congregation? The Conference can help you adapt the “Where God is Still Speaking” logo with the name of your congregation. Please reach out to Nola Risse-Connolly at nrisseconnolly@wcucc.org to order. There is no charge for Wisconsin Conference churches who want a logo with their own church’s name as in the examples above.

Wisconsin Conference UCC Logo Style Guide

Fonts

WisConf: ITC Johnston Bold Italic, set condensed to 90%; tracking/ Kerning to -35



Wisconsin Conference UCC
Where God is still speaking,

Where God is...: ITC Skylark Italic

Comma/Pond: based on Times New Roman bold; highly stylized and skewed

Colors

TREES (left to right)



CMYK: 45C 20M 90Y 0K 85C 50M 100Y 10K 65C 32M 100Y 8K 81C 55M 85Y 10K 69C 22M 100Y 9K 70C 40M 100Y 10K

Hex: #9BAC4B #3B683B #67863B #476548 #598F3E #5D783A

WisConf Where God is... POND



CMYK: 100C 60M 60Y 25K 100C 50M 40Y 0K 50C 13M 23Y 0K

Hex: #004F57 #00708A #80B8BF

Using the same tagline, colors, and fonts helps create a consistent image of our congregations. Please consider using this style guide in your communications. Please note that the fonts would need to be purchased from MyFonts.com.

Our Covenant as a UCC Congregation

—Adapted from the Rev. Izzy Harbin, First Congregational UCC of Elkhart, Indiana



The 4,500 congregations of the United Church of Christ covenant together to put God's love into action in our communities and across the world. Our covenant means:

- Staying United even when we disagree. No one is turned away from God's unfolding kingdom. Rather, we strive to find ways to expand our understanding of community and to extend grace to one another.

People at First Congregational UCC of Elkhart, Indiana, gathered for a game night. The community takes Jesus seriously. But as for themselves, they joke and have fun.

- Being Church together while we worship in different ways. We ask lots of questions of ourselves and

one another, and we pay attention to our lived experiences, all of which inform how we see God and know God. Most importantly, we do this in community.

- Following Christ as our blueprint for living. Our sacred texts teach us how to live lives of compassion and to always choose the more compassionate path. We celebrate that all people share in the image and likeness of God. We recognize that our language is inadequate to ever fully articulate who God is, nor can we comprehend how God works in the world.

In isolation, no single congregation can completely answer God's call to love. Together, we offer a bold witness to God's extravagant love for all.

Messages like "Our Covenant as a UCC Congregation" and "What We Believe" can be adapted for use in your congregation. Consider using language like this on the About Us page of your website and in a brochure for visitors to your congregation.

What We Believe: A Still-Speaking Church

By the Rev. Eric Kirkegaard, Peace UCC, Kewaskum

“Never place a period where God has placed a comma.” Two decades ago, the United Church of Christ took this quote from Gracie Allen and paired it with a proclamation that spoke to the faith and values we hold in our hearts: “God is Still Speaking.”

It excites me to be a part of a church taking seriously Jesus’ promise from the Gospel of John (16:12-13). He said to those closest to him: *“I have much more to say to you, but you can’t handle it now. However, when the Spirit of Truth comes, he will guide you in all truth.”* Jesus invites us to be a people of faith open to the ways in which the Spirit of God leads us forward.

When we pair this idea up with Jesus’ command to love one another as he has loved us, we encounter this incredible journey of not just looking over our shoulders at what God has done, but an exciting opportunity to walk with God in an unfolding ministry of extravagant love.

The command to walk with God in love challenges us to transcend the boundaries that our world is so good at creating. This is the magic (and the grace) of a congregation. We listen for God and love one another across our social, political, and cultural differences. At our best we nurture a spirit that is eager to discern together how God’s love is being revealed among us.

This always requires a spirit of trust and humility: Trust to share from the depths of our beings. Humility to listen to what others are sharing from the depths of theirs.

It’s hard work, and it’s far from perfect. Our certainties tend to get in the way of our listening. Our passions can get in the way of our sharing with humility.

Still, we experience moments when we get it right. Together, it feels like we are discerning what Jesus would do, rooted in what Jesus did do, and that was always about love, care, and respect. Often this leads us to embrace and to affirm commitments to justice. Those moments embody Jesus’ promise: “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I’m there with them.” Jesus dwells with us whenever people speak about a love that binds the disparate group of travelers together on the way with Jesus.

As congregations following the Still-Speaking God, listening together with one another feels like the heartbeat of God’s love at work in the church. It’s the reminder that God is not speaking through any one of us individually. It’s not about power grabs or positioning, and it’s not about the gifts of any one pastor or leader. It’s about joining together in being this crazy and extraordinary body of Christ that



always feels as if it might be the antidote to the fractured ways of our lives and our world. In the United Church of Christ, we listen. Together, we listen for where God is still speaking to us. We hear God's voice in the unfinished "commas" of each other's stories. And to better hear, we draw closer to one another: engaging in mission trips and service projects and justice initiatives; creating imaginative space for youngsters to experience faith; gathering at table for church suppers. Through all the ways we experience faith together, we are encouraged not just to be busy, but to be animated in the life and witness of our Still-Speaking God.

Where will you find that God is Still Speaking? May it be in the trust and humility of church friendships, as we journey together to listen for all the ways God speaks through each of us.

Do One Thing Well

By the Rev. Franz Rigert, Conference Minister

According to statistics contained in the most recent UCC yearbook, 60% of congregations in the Wisconsin Conference UCC have an average worship attendance of 40 or fewer people. That may surprise some, but many of us have marveled for years at the creativity and resilience that sustains our smaller congregations. Lately, I have been referring to them as tiny, mighty churches that know their mission. One congregation sold its building a few years back in the interest of preserving its ministry impact. That congregation now worships in a funeral home. Another congregation operates an amazing clothes closet. Yet another serves a community dinner once a month. Each of these congregations prioritizes worship and plants its flag in a specific mission.



At this summer's General Synod in Kansas City, Missouri, we expect to consider a resolution asking that some congregations be designated STAR churches—the acronym stands for “small town and rural.” One common denominator among thriving small congregations is that they tend to be clear about where to invest their energy, often concentrating on a single ministry for which they are widely known. It may be a food pantry or community shelter. Some make their building available to other nonprofits, and others focus on a particular justice issue.

But a clear, tightly focused mission does more than ensure you're leveraging ministry resources for maximum impact. Stating the values of your congregation and embodying them in a specific project helps people outside of your church see their connection with you. That's how our ministries' impact ripples through our communities—and how our congregations grow.

It can be humbling to realize that our capacities are limited. Yet it can be liberating to acknowledge that, while we can't be all things to all people, we can do one thing really well!

Here are some questions for your leadership team to ponder to help clarify your “one thing” ministry:

- What are the signature ministries in the life of our church?
- What is the most glaring unmet need in our community life these days?
- What should we say “no” to so we can better say “yes” to our most compelling and high-impact ministry?

Catalyst Grants

“Behold, I am doing a new thing.” — Isaiah 43:19

Try something new, in partnership with your community.

Catalyst grants exist to support innovative ministries in the Wisconsin Conference, encouraging congregations to stretch to meet local needs, in collaboration with individuals and organizations from the wider community.



Short-term grants of up to \$5,000 are available for projects expected to be completed within one year. The strongest grant proposals will include collaboration with the wider community and will deepen a congregation’s commitment to working for justice.

Past Catalyst grants have support projects that include:

- An exhibit of quilts created in Arizona by migrant and U.S. native children designed to educate local residents about immigration and share the personal stories of recent immigrants.
- A food pantry for high school students whose families face food insecurity.
- A community concert and entertainment series whose proceeds support a local free clinic as well as a food pantry.
- A local meal program rebuilt in a way that generates wider support from other community organizations.
- A [free clothing closet](#) for the county.

What are the unmet needs in your community? And what is God calling you to do about them? Once you’ve pondered those questions, learn more and apply for a Catalyst Grant at wcucc.org/resource-center/catalyst-grants/.

Prayer of Examen for Congregations

The Wisconsin Conference United Church of Christ believes God is still speaking. A question for us as the church is: How do we listen for God together? In Christian spirituality we speak of collective listening for God as an act of *discernment*. Together, we attempt to discern where God is calling our congregation—in outreach, staffing ministries, missions, and other areas of our common life—at a particular time.

The process outlined here, based on the *Prayer of Examen* taught by St. Ignatius of Loyola in the 16th century, can be used at a governing board meeting, during a church visioning retreat, or at times designated specifically for discernment. It could be used to discern about a particular moment in the life of the church or to reflect on a process or season. In multi-staff churches this process is appropriate for staff meetings as well.

The Congregational Examen

This process should not be rushed, so allow ample time for reflection, silence, and sharing. Each person present may want to take notes or record thoughts that come to mind.

Prepare your group with guidelines for your group process, drawn from Parker Palmer's *Circles of Trust* model:

- Each person speaks while the others keep silent.
- Each person uses “I” statements to express their reflections or views.
- When a person is done speaking, others may ask clarifying questions to make sure they understand the specifics of what the person has said.
- No one evaluates, judges, or attempts to fix or solve anything raised by another. At this point, trust the sharing, one by one.
- When each person is done speaking, honor a time of silence before the next person in the circle begins speaking.

Begin a time of Thanksgiving

- In silence: We try to become aware of the reality of God's presence and action in our congregational life.
- In silence: We reflect on the reality that all of life is a gift.
- Together, one by one: We thank God for those specific gifts we have been given in this moment or season of our church life and name them aloud. We close this section with a brief prayer asking for the abiding grace of an attitude of appreciation.

Pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit

- We ask to become aware of the Holy Spirit and for the Spirit's wisdom to see our congregational life honestly and to become more open to God's working with us and in our church life.

Look back of the past season/month

- Keep in mind the events of the past moment or season of your church life. You may be reviewing a liturgical season, the month since the last board or committee meeting, or an entire program year. It may be helpful to post the following questions or give each person a copy.
- Where was God in all of this?
- When were we connected to love?
- Where were the places where we have seen or heard God?
- Try to notice the places where joy, sadness, anxiety, peacefulness, and other strong feelings emerge.
- How did we feel God calling us through those experiences?
- How did we respond to God's call?
- Each person is given time to speak and reflect in response to one or all of these questions.
- Do not judge yourselves but do strive to be honest about your experiences.
- How do these look in the light of God's love for God's church?

Face sorry, pain or anxiety

Go around the circle again, with these questions:

- Where do we need help and healing? A greater awareness?
- Pray, asking God for the specific grace needed in any particular situation.

Look toward the future with hope and trust

And go around the circle again:

- Where do we feel God is leading us next?
- Ask for a sense of God's power—trusting that God will provide what is needed for next steps.

The goal is not to emerge with a new plan or series of action items from this prayer time itself. It is to take what you notice and hear in this prayerful conversation into your planning, board meetings, visioning retreats, and congregational life. When you use this process and incorporate it regularly into your congregational life, you may find that you are able to make decisions, reach consensus, or experience creativity in new ways.

Experience takes on new meaning when we reflect on it in God's presence.

Understanding Your ‘Where’

Evan Pence, a research analyst with the UCC’s Center for Analytics, Research & Development and Data, or CARDD, explains an important tool congregations can use to learn about their local communities.

In lieu of a standard blog post this week, I thought I would do something a little different: introduce readers to a favorite data tool of mine. The community profile builder is a data access tool operated by the Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA), the largest publicly available collection of religious data and a hub for up-to-date research on U.S. and world religion. In contrast to many data resources, however, the ARDA has made detailed information relatively easy for the non-specialist to access. The profile builder is a great example of this. Simply type in a zip code and select a map location/search radius, and one can access a host of data useful for church planning or simply learning more about your neighborhood. Yet it isn’t something that those outside the world of church data would necessarily hear about (though longtime readers may recall [a post](#) on the ARDA’s maps from way back in 2013).

The profile builder draws primarily on the U.S. Census American Communities Survey and the U.S. Religion Census, a once-per-decade census conducted by the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies (an organization whose sitting president happens to be CARDD director Erica Dollhopf). The data primarily fall into the following categories:

- Congregations Listed in the Selected Region
- The 5 Largest Religious Groups in the County
- The 5 Biggest Religious Group Changes in the County
- Housing, Income, and Employment trends
- Gender and Age Demographics
- Educational Attainment and School Enrollment
- Family Structure and Marital Status Data
- Information on Race/Ethnicity, Languages, and National Origin

To illustrate, let’s take a look at the neighborhoods immediately surrounding the UCC national offices in Cleveland. We start by going to the landing page and inputting the zip code for downtown Cleveland, 44114.

The screenshot shows the ARDA website's 'Community Profile Builder' interface. At the top, the ARDA logo is displayed alongside the text 'THE ASSOCIATION OF RELIGION DATA ARCHIVES'. A search bar on the right contains the text 'Search the ARDA...'. Below the logo, a navigation menu includes links for 'US RELIGION', 'WORLD RELIGION', 'DATA ARCHIVE', 'RESEARCH', 'TEACHING', 'CONGREGATIONS', and 'ABOUT'. The main content area features a large blue banner with the text 'US RELIGION' and a background image of a world map. Below the banner, the 'Community Profile Builder' section is titled, followed by a brief description: 'This tool assists church and community leaders in accessing free online information about their communities. The initial map shows the location of other churches in your area and the Community Profile Builder provides you with social, economic, and religious information on the community or neighborhoods you select.' A text input field is present with the value '44114' and a 'Create Profile' button below it. To the right of the input field is a small image showing a group of diverse people.

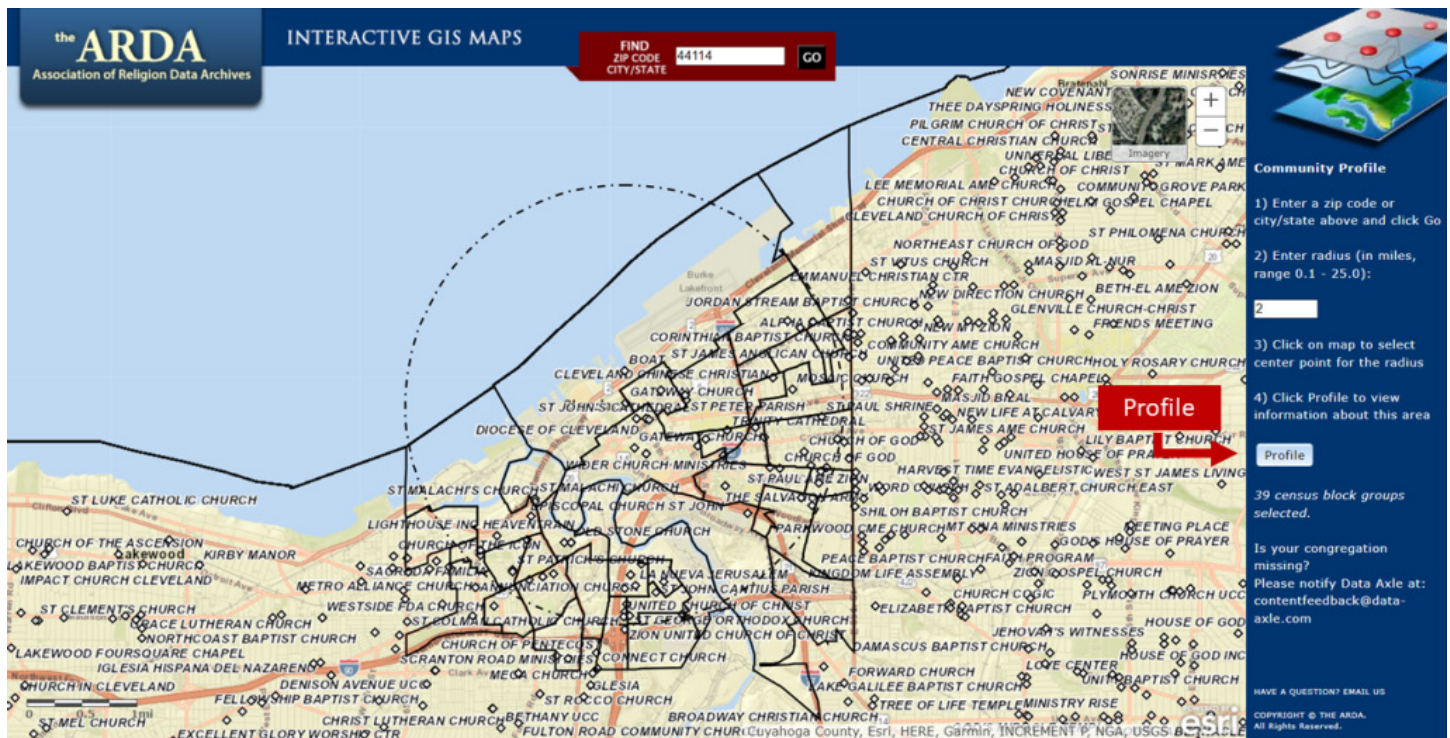
Hitting “enter” takes us to a page like this:

The screenshot shows the ARDA Interactive GIS Maps interface. At the top left is the ARDA logo (Association of Religion Data Archives). The main header reads "INTERACTIVE GIS MAPS". A search bar contains "44114" and a "GO" button. The map displays a large area of Cleveland, Ohio, with numerous church locations marked with red dots and labels. On the right side, there is a "Community Profile" panel with a list of instructions: 1) Enter a zip code or city/state above and click GO; 2) Enter radius (in miles, range 0.1 - 25.0); 3) Click on map to select center point for the radius; 4) Click Profile to view information about this area. Below the instructions is a "Profile" button and a question: "Is your congregation missing? Please notify Data Axle at: contentfeedback@data-axle.com". At the bottom right, there is a small "esri" logo and copyright information.

At this point, things look pretty cluttered—there are a lot of churches in the area! Zooming in, though, we can make out the office’s N Street location. From here, we simply input the mile radius we’d like (the default is 2) and click the precise location we want to center on in the map.

This screenshot shows the same ARDA Interactive GIS Maps interface but zoomed in significantly. The search bar still contains "44114". A red circle with a radius of 2 miles is centered on a location labeled "UCC National Offices". A red arrow points from the "Radius Entry" field in the "Community Profile" panel to the center of the red circle. The "Community Profile" panel now shows "39 census block groups selected." and the "Profile" button is highlighted. The map shows street names like N Marginal Rd, N Lakeland Ave, and N Broadway Ave. The "esri" logo and copyright information are visible at the bottom right.

This zooms us back out to view all the census block groups touched by our radius, where we click the “profile” button and find our results:



So, what are the characteristics of the area? You can [go here](#) and follow the steps to see the full profile, but here are some of the more striking data that I noticed (the charts below are my own, but others can be accessed directly on the ARDA page by clicking on the links provided with each sub-report).

As of 2020, the Catholic Church is the largest religious tradition in Cuyahoga County, both in terms of congregations and adherents.

- The number of Catholic adherents was 339,163, more than twice that of the next-largest group (Non-denominational Christian churches at 149,150) and around 45% more than the next four combined (221,599).
- The adherence rate for Catholics in the county is 268.15 per 1000, or 27% of the general population.

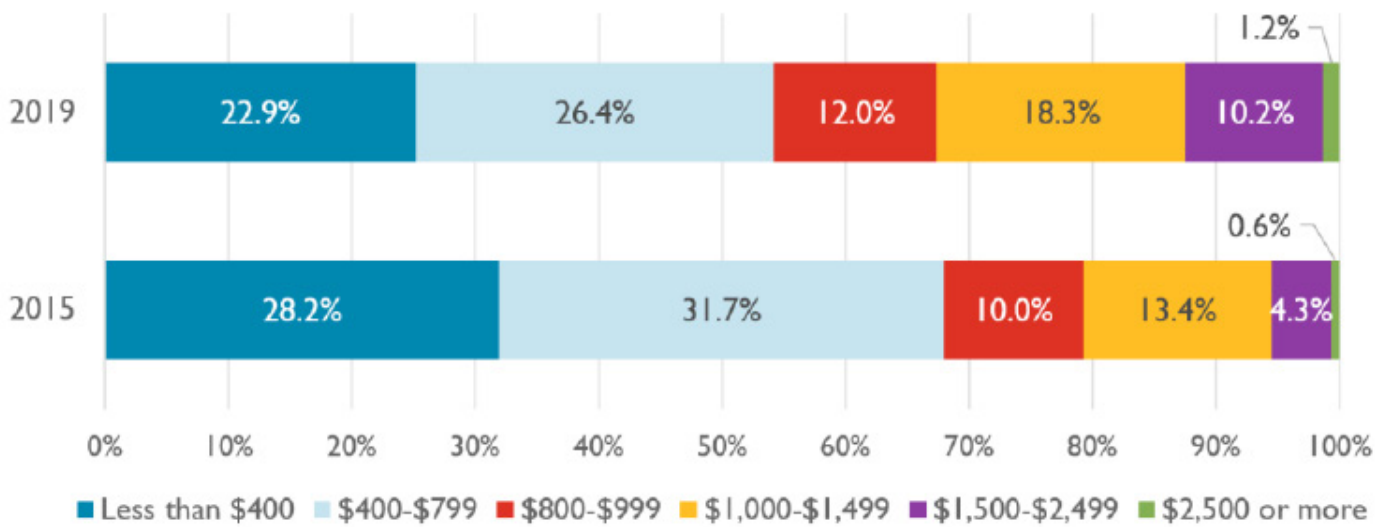
Non-denominational Christian, Black Protestant, and Islamic congregations are the fastest growing in terms of adherents.

- By absolute values, the fastest-growing religious group in the area is the Non-Denominational Christian Church, which the ARDA classifies as an Evangelical Protestant tradition.
- In relative terms, the fastest growing was the National Missionary Baptist Convention of America (NMBCA), a prominent African American Protestant convention. The NMBCA had a remarkable 1,243.7% growth between 2010 and 2020.

Downtown Cleveland and the surrounding 2-mile radius have witnessed substantial increases in housing costs.

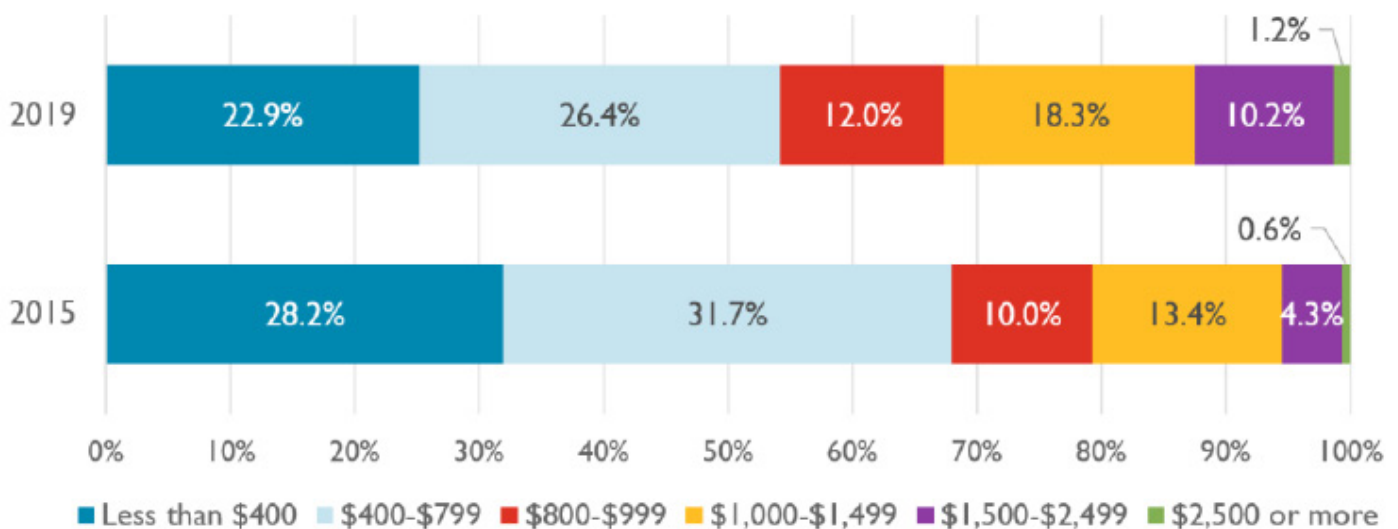
- Housing in the region is relatively dense (49.1% of addresses having 10 or more units) and is principally rental-based, with 67.9% of units being renter-occupied.
- Of rentals in the area, the fastest growing were those in the \$1,500 to \$2,499 and \$2,500+ ranges, with the former going from 682 to 1,738 units (a 154.8% increase) and the latter going from 87 to 209 (a 140.2% increase). Rentals under \$800 declined by 1,034 units in the same period (9,426 to 8,392), an 11.0% decline.
- Though the cost of homes in the region is well-below the national average, the number of homes under \$150,000 declined by 8.4% between 2015 and 2019, with a slim majority of homes in the area (50.8%) falling in the \$150,000+ range in 2019.

Housing Units in Selected Area by Rent



The region immediately surrounding the UCC national offices has very high poverty.

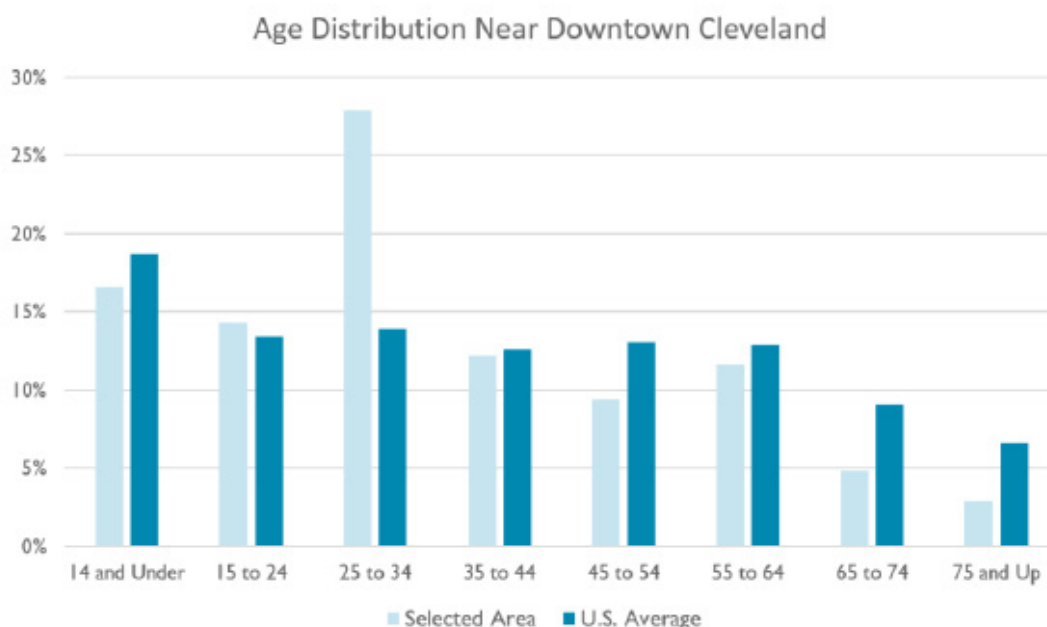
Housing Units in Selected Area by Rent



- In 2019, 42.7% of households in the area made less than \$25,000, more than twice the national average of 19.6%. This figure is lower than the 51.6% reported for the same bracket in 2015, however.
- The percentage of households below the poverty level (which factors in family size) was 40.9% in 2019, down from 47.7% in 2015 but nearly 3 times the national average of 13.7% at that time.

Though the older population is growing, the region surrounding the UCC national offices skews younger than the U.S. as a whole.

- 58.8% of residents in the selected region were under 35 in 2019 compared to a national average of 46.0%.
- As might be expected from its proximity to downtown, young to middle aged adults comprise the largest share of residents. 25- to 34-year-olds alone accounted for 27.9% of the selected population in 2019 vs. 13.9% for the country as a whole.



The region is far more diverse in terms of race and ethnicity than the U.S. on average.

- While the United States was 60.1% non-Hispanic white in 2019, the area surrounding the UCC offices was only 40.1%.
- Non-Hispanic Black residents were the second largest group in the selected area at 40.2%, though the 2019 population was somewhat smaller than the 2015 (declining by 3.5%)
- The fastest-growing populations by race or ethnicity were non-Hispanic Asians (up 16.3% between 2015 and 2019) and Hispanics (up 10.5%).

Overall, the data provide a strong sense of the challenges Cleveland has faced in recent years and what avenues may be present for community support and church involvement. Why not take a couple of minutes to see what your community’s profile says about it?

Spreading the Word: 5 Keys to Telling Your Story

Understand what makes news

- Innovations
- Problems and solutions
- Milestones
- Community partnerships
- Fundraising initiatives

Use four components to tell any story

- **News:** Tells the audience what's important and new
- **Impact:** Tells the audience how your news will affect your church and community now and in the future. Who benefits? Who suffers? What can the audience do about it?
- **Context:** Provides the background and history of what brought your church to this point, tells the audience what's normal or surprising, and shows how similar surprises have been dealt with elsewhere.
- **Human dimension:** Puts flesh and blood on the facts you have presented. How does your news affect real people? What emotions are in play? Make your audience feel something.

Know your audience

- UCC clergy and lay people
- Members of the local community
- Allies
- Ecumenical partners
- Donors

Make the most of social media opportunities

- Post consistently to grow your social media following
- Interact with your audience, e.g., respond to comments and questions
- Use analytics to figure out when your audience is most active

Build relationships with media organizations

- Create and maintain a list of media contacts
- Find information ways to get to know local journalists
- Let them know you appreciate the coverage

The United Church of Christ in Wisconsin: Where God Still Speaks

By the Rev. David Bowles
Text: Mark 9:33-41

One of our church members, who chairs the stewardship committee, wrote to our group recently about an upcoming meeting. “I was thinking about playing off the new UCC theme of ‘Where God is still speaking,’ such as, ‘Where God is still speaking, and we listen and serve.’” Her understanding of this idea, and of the Wisconsin Conference’s newly tweaked identity campaign, feels spot on to me. After all, if God continues to speak, it must be because someone still listens.

Our world, of course, is inundated with more information than ever. We can google anything our heart desires on our smart phones and instantly receive information about whatever piques our interest. When I was a young man, such questions tended to drive me to the public library, which meant catching a bus and spending half a day there, or all evening on a school day. I loved it, and yet it was anything but convenient and easy. At the same time, however, the quality of the information available to us today feels terribly uneven and frequently of questionable value.

Too many of us get most of our information from social media, a notoriously poor place to find good information. You may have seen in recent days, as I did, that a man was arrested in North Carolina for carrying weapons and essentially menacing people there to help in the wake of Hurricane Helene. He had seen—yes, on social media—that FEMA was withholding relief supplies. He acted upon the information he found without questioning its validity or veracity, and now he sits in jail. Information may be ubiquitous, but the ability to distinguish accurate information from misinformation has sharply declined. Many responsible organizations, including many churches, advocate for teaching people media literacy: how to know who you can trust.

“Evangelical” is a word American churches are currently battling over. Traditionally, more conservative and charismatic traditions have claimed it for their own, and yet, more and more, theologically liberal churches aim also claim it. In its verb form—from the Greek *ευαγγελίζω*—it means simply “to bring or proclaim the good news,” which many generations of Christians have understood to mean “go out and win converts.” However, the verb “to proselytize” better fits such a notion as winning souls to Jesus.

I did the proselytizing thing as a young man in the faith tradition of my youth, learning a foreign language and going overseas to knock on doors in hopes of persuading people to embrace our particularly industrious iteration of the church. Ambitious, for sure, because we hoped to gather all the world under one banner, remaking everyone in our image, bending all minds to our way of thinking, squeezing everyone into the one-size-fits-all approach that never seems to fit anyone



properly. With so little authentic concern for where people were in their lives, such an approach proved not only to be disruptive in the lives of our proselytes, but sometimes also deleterious, even destructive.

So, what then does evangelism look like in something like the UCC, and particularly in the Wisconsin Conference, “where,” we declare, “God is still speaking”? To my mind, again, we cannot speak of God still speaking if we are not also listening. Indeed, we know God is still speaking because we hear God speaking. We don’t claim that God speaks only to us. On the contrary, we invite everyone to come listen with us, to hear for themselves what God continues to speak.

I’ve chosen an unusual gospel passage with which to explore these ideas. In Mark, this passage begins a series of lessons in which Jesus teaches the profound difference between this world and the world of the kingdom of God. In this world, of course, we hope to be eminent and prosperous, to be first among our peers, to be acknowledged for our achievements, and perhaps even to rise to positions where we might lord it over others. However, in the kingdom of God that Jesus proclaims, everything works differently, as though the world itself stands on its head. To be great in this other world (something we still desire, interestingly), we must be servant of all, for here the last will be first, and the first last. Such a proclamation still disorients us. We often remain, even as disciples, devoted to the principles of our profoundly human world.

To illustrate his point, Jesus takes a child in his arms and declares, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.” We tend to misunderstand the point Jesus makes. We tend to see this as a call to welcome the vulnerable, and that’s always a worthy project. In the time of Mark’s writing, however, the world was organized a bit differently. People advanced up the social ladder by offering service in the hope of receiving some reciprocal reward or benefit: The relationship was transactional in nature. You did someone a good turn in the hope of getting back even more.

Jesus defines here a different kind of service, one done for the good of the other, hopefully out of love, with no hope of reciprocity. Children, then as now, possessed nothing to help advance your life’s journey—no money, no influence, no positions of authority. Relationships with children could not be transactional, and welcoming them, as Jesus describes it, will not help you get ahead, which is what everyone in our world desires. Such service, on the other hand, done without hope of reward, done because it’s simply the right thing to do, will be to your advantage in the kingdom Jesus proclaims. It demonstrates you’re fit for that kingdom.

We learn in a passage such as this that Jesus’s invitation may be broader rather than narrower. Confronted with someone who does good in the name of Jesus without necessarily following him, Jesus tells the disciples to let such a person be. “No one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterwards to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us,” says Jesus, strongly suggesting, among other things, that even conversion and discipleship are not sudden, bracing plunges, or blind leaps of faith, but matters of evolving, developing formation. Such a stance seems also to encourage ongoing ecumenism: The good we do outweighs our quibbles. Moreover, if we still seek after reward, then it may accrue to us as offering the most basic hospitality: to give a cup of water to drink in Christ’s name will help you retain your reward.

God speaks through Jesus, of course, but do we hear it? Or how do we know we hear it? Jesus claims that God's word—whether it be the law or the prophets—communicates one thing: to love God with everything you possess and to love your neighbor as yourself, a kind of two-part, complementary love. In fact, some perceptive theologians have argued persuasively that the only way to show our love for God is through our love of neighbor. In closing, I would like to give two examples, proof, if you will, that the UCC and the Wisconsin Conference are where God is still speaking: one national, the other both local and endlessly reproducible.

I attended General Synod in Indianapolis last with my daughter, both of us voting delegates, both of us going to Synod for the first time. My daughter, Esperanza, possessed of a heart that overflows, I see as a barometer of God's Spirit of Love. Every day at Synod, and typically multiple times a day, she would break simultaneously into smiles and tears, touched by the mundane presence of God's love in the lives of Synod attendees. Usually this happened in the spaces between official proceedings, when individuals approached microphones to testify to God's love in their lives. Very often, these individuals also smiled and wept, for very often they were marginalized folks, unwelcome in the faith communities of their childhood, where dogmatic traditions prevailed over Jesus's injunction to welcome those who come seeking God.

My daughter spoke boldly of the manifestation of Christ's hospitality and welcome in the lives of real people. "Isn't this the gospel of Jesus?" she asked. "Where people find redemption in community because of the love of Christ, especially after others have denied and rejected them?" She makes a strong point I find it hard to argue against. "I love this church," she said many times a day. "I love that we have a home in this church and that it's here to be a home to others who have a home nowhere else." Another good point that we would do well to proclaim.

At the local level—and speaking of our two small faith communities in Rusk County, as I'm sure I also speak of your faith community where you are—we offer welcome, including, happily and kindly, to those who have been denied and rejected elsewhere. Indeed, a sizable portion of our communities consists of folks who lost their faith homes for numerous reasons. We gladly extend refuge and hope that the home we offer transforms seeking people from refugees into family. It seems to be working.

Demonstrating that we hear as God continues to speak feels relatively simple. I reflect upon communion and the Last Supper, how Jesus shares communion even when he knows that in his midst is someone who will betray him. And so we throw open our doors, and we proclaim that in the name of Christ you are welcome here, and we assemble upon the altar the Bread of Life and the Cup of Blessing, and we erect nothing—no impediments, no hurdles, no obstacles, no barriers, no tests, no shibboleths—to stand between you and God, whom we know as love. Why would we deny anyone what everyone needs? If this isn't good news worth proclaiming, then I don't know what is. Amen.

Order of Worship with Communion Sunday

Call to Worship

Pastor: Sunday rolls around again,
And again we assemble as the people of God
To pause and listen for God's word.

People: We come to listen,
For God, we acknowledge, is still speaking.

Pastor: God speaks still, and those of us with ears
To hear, listen.

People: We listen attentively, for surely in God's word
Wisdom resides.

Pastor: And in God's wisdom we find truth revealed:
Love gives our lives purpose.

People: Love contains the power to diminish our differences
And strengthen the bonds between us.
Let us worship our loving God together.

Invocation

Pastor: Let us pray.
Gracious God, we gather to hear the words
That Jesus proclaims, that by our love
For one another others will know who we are,
Will know that we belong to Christ.

People: Speak to us still, O Holy One,
For we attune ourselves to the rhythms, the insight,
The music, and the wisdom of your word.
We strive to make of our spaces
Welcome places for all who seek you.
May we make of our church a home
For those who desire refuge in the embrace
Of your love and grace. Amen.

Hymn of Praise

Prayer of Confession

Pastor: In our humanity, we discover that we have many flaws.
Your kingdom lies at hand, and yet we also desire

Success in this world, accomplishment and its reward:
Recognition and the fruits of prosperity.

People: Through the wisdom of your Holy Spirit, O God,
Form us into beings more desirous to conform
To your will. Shape us, that we might seek to give aid
To those who can do nothing for us in return.

Pastor: Reciprocity looms large in our human world,
And it is not of itself a bad impulse to want
To do a good turn in the hope that good will return to us.

People: In your kingdom, however, we are asked to go
Even farther, to give with no hope of receiving
Something in return. For in your kingdom,
We will find contentment in doing good,
Satisfaction in learning that we help build
A better world merely through caring
And offering ourselves in care and compassion.

Silent Confession

Words of Assurance

God's grace we know to be a gift.
And yet Jesus counsels: "Go and do likewise,"
And "Bear fruits worthy of repentance."
As we grow in Christ, we make our way
To God's kingdom.

Thanks be to God!

Passing of the Peace

The Reading of Scripture: Mark 9:33-41

Children's Moment

(This might be an opportunity to reinforce with children the ways in which God blesses them in their lives, with their relationship with the church and its people as only one example. The idea that blessings can be received and given, like an exchange of gifts, would also be an appropriate matter to share. And finally, encouraging the children to bless the lives of others as others bless their lives might round out and complete such a message.)

Reflection

See pages 16-18

Hymn of Response

The Morning Prayers (a pastoral prayer) and the Lord's Prayer

Merciful God, we acknowledge that you continue to speak to us today, as you spoke to prophets in ages past. We gather again today to listen to your word and to let its nurturing, root-like tendrils reach into our depths. Touch our hearts with your Spirit, bringing us at one and the same time both peace and energy, that we might boldly share with others in and outside the church the love we have received from you. Help us to move beyond the transactional nature of our many relationships to seek to share your love and care through warm acceptance and genuine welcome. In your mercy and grace, you receive us all openly. May we extend to the people in our lives the same hospitable welcome. May our church feel like home for anyone who hopes to approach you, O God. And may you always be the guiding star of our life's journeys, ever drawing us into your kingdom, where justice, peace, and liberation await us like a cup of refreshing water to the parched and thirsty. In the name of Christ we pray. Amen.

Offeratory Prayer

We give in the hope that our giving blesses others.
 We give not to receive, for already God has blessed us,
 And so we give out of gratitude.
 We praise your name, Holy God, and give
 As you have given, a thanksgiving people,
 Humbled and empowered by your Spirit.

Doxology: Praise God from Whom All Blessing Flow

Prayer of Dedication

All: Bless these gifts, O God, and continue to nurture us
 That we might be sanctuary people in a world divided,
 Hurt, and ailing. May our communities be places
 Of refuge and healing, where we teach of the love
 We hear you speak to us still.

Prayer of Invitation

As we gather at God's table,
 We seek to commune together with Christ.
 We do well to remember that the greatest commandment
 Remains this: to love God with all we possess,
 With all our heart and capacity. And we do well to recall
 That no better way is given us to show our love
 Than through love for our neighbor,
 That is, through love for one another.

We approach you God, whom we love, by coming
 To this table where the gifts of God are spread
 And offered to all who seek to know you better
 And to follow Jesus as modern-day disciples.

In the spirit of love of you, O God, we place no barriers
And no obstacles between you and the one who seeks you.
As you invite all to follow you in Jesus, so we invite all
Who wish to follow you to celebrate with us
These gifts of bread and wine. May our spirits
Be nourished by these gifts. May we gain
The wisdom and strength from you, O God,
That we need to do your will in the world
For the benefit of all peoples everywhere.

Communion Prayer

All: In one hand we take a small piece from a common loaf.
Sharing one cup, we drink of Christ's new covenant of unity.
With one voice, we lift up our prayers to you,
The one great God, who embraces our differences
Yet rejoices in our unity in this one communion act. Amen.

Words of Institution and Sharing of the Bread and Cup

Prayer of Thanksgiving

All: We give you thanks, Gracious and Merciful God,
That you see fit to include us in your work
To reconcile the world and its inhabitants to yourself.
We give you thanks for providing us with these gifts,
And for the charge that we remember Jesus,
His ministry and his teachings, which challenge us always
To be better and to do better by the grace you give us,
Grace beyond measure, grace without cessation.

Closing Hymn

Benediction

Retire from this place of refuge in peace
And go into God's world as disciples,
Taking with you the words of love and care
That God still speaks to those who listen.
And bless the world, as God has blessed you,
By opening your heart and giving of yourself.
Amen

The Camino – “Journeying from Strength to Strength”

By the Rev. Karen Gyax Rodriguez

Scripture References:

Psalm 84:5-7 (delight in journeying from strength to strength)

Other stories from scripture that speak of journeys/pilgrimages include:

- *Abraham’s story of following God*
- *Moses leading the people out of Egypt*
- *The Emmaus Road passage in which Jesus meets the walkers after the Resurrection*
- *The Magis’ journey to find the Christ child*

The journey to the transfiguration and back to the “real” world again



In the clamor of all the noise and image pollution, in all the distractions, in the relentless pace that pulses through our personal calendars, how do we have our ears tuned to hear the still-speaking voice of God? With levels of anxiousness and depression at all-time highs, threatening the social, mental, emotional, physical and spiritual health of all ages – our souls are crying out for the sweet voice of God’s love for us. Pastoral leaders question whether they can lead on one more week, not to mention stay in the ministry for the long haul.

In my own moments of being dangerously tired and spent in ministry, it was God’s voice compassionately calling out to me through contemplative practices that brought the good news back to me. Spending time in spiritual practices that allow us to gaze into the love of God and sense God’s loving gaze back brings life to our souls. Strengthening our contemplative relationship with God helps us integrate how God has spoken to us in our past, what God is doing in our lives now, and how God will use our faithful journey in the big picture for the future. At the intersection of our unique life story and the God who was, is and will be we discover our authentic spiritual witness and become bearers of God’s good news. Most recently it was the contemplative practice of pilgrimage that brought the good news of God’s voice, still speaking.

In April of 2024, I had the privilege of walking 90 miles of the Camino de Santiago, in the northern areas of Spain. The Camino traces the missionary route of St. James, ending in Santiago de Compostella—St. James of the starry field—where his remains are buried. While that is the formal ending place, the goal of reaching it becomes less important than the daily journey, the pilgrimage. Pilgrimage is about walking the journey. As a pilgrim continues to walk, the steps work in transformative ways, leaving the person different from the person who began the journey.

Pilgrimage offers a model of living, of moving and of having our being in the One Spirit (Ephesians 4) and allowing that Spirit to work in transformative ways. Psalm 84 speaks of a pilgrim finding their strength in God and “setting their hearts on pilgrimage.” In this they move from “strength to strength.” In the Message translation of Ephesians 4:1-4 we read:

4 1-4 In light of all this, here's what I want you to do. While I'm locked up here, a prisoner for the Master, I want you to get out there and walk — better yet, run! — on the road God called you to travel. I don't want any of you sitting around on your hands. I don't want anyone strolling off, down some path that goes nowhere. And mark that you do this with humility and discipline — not in fits and starts, but steadily, pouring yourselves out for each other in acts of love, alert at noticing differences and quick at mending fences. You were all called to travel on the same road and in the same direction, so stay together, both outwardly and inwardly.

Setting our hearts and minds on pilgrimage will change the qualities of our days. It will allow us to join God in the Story, and to know that our unique story is one of sacred beauty and worth. It offers us an opportunity to be with God alone as one leaves everything familiar behind and trusts the steps, trusts what God will reveal along the way, and trusts the sheltering sanctuary God provides along the way. After just eight days of the Camino pilgrimage experience, I had my own sense of Jesus as a transfigured one, the beloved Son, turning to me in God's love. Slowing my life to the pace of walking, I experienced the transforming love of the resurrected One.

On the Camino we began each day with the prayer I shared as a Threshold prayer: "I calm my mind, I open my heart, fully present, I enter the thin places within and without."

"I Calm My Mind"

So much threatens to overload of minds and our thinking. We are constantly connected. Unless we are intentional about it, there is little space, little margin, little freedom from being accessible at all times. Our minds are bombarded with audio prompts and visual stimulation. Fear of not being up to date or missing out on something (FOMO) races into our thoughts. We wake up and reach for our "smart phones," which seek to map our thinking and responding before we've even gotten a first cup of coffee. Worries, concerns, anxieties consume us. With the presence of social media, we have become more and more anxious. And if we allow our days to begin this way, or at some point become distracted in this way, we find we can waste hours on those paths that go nowhere.

Rather, if we can begin with steps of pilgrimage – where we let go of distractions, and we allow our minds to become calm – we sense a different affirmation of momentum. We let go demands upon us. We let go of expectations. We entrust ourselves to the unfolding of a day. We begin to put one foot in front of the other and just walk, just go, and trust that God is there, walking with us and guiding us. Putting aside anything that brings anxiousness to our minds, we calm our steps with the gift of peace.

(Another optional illustration)

Fernando Ortega has a beautiful song, "Grace and Peace." (If possible, sharing the piece would give an experience of calmness). Ortega repeats this calming phrase from Paul's writings – "grace and peace from God the Father and our Lord, Jesus Christ." The piano plays chords that rock back and forth like gentle waves. Its rhythm is a slow beat that could give cadence to steps. As the words are repeated, you feel the sense of grace and peace going deeper into your soul.

In calming our minds, we get in touch with the unique truth of our being. We take that truth into our day's journey. We step confidently and with strength, knowing God's deep affirmation of us, and not needing any other affirmation from any other place. Calming our minds is a step of strength.

“I Open My Heart”

One of the most profound experiences of my trip on the Camino had to do with forgiveness. One traveler on our trip was a woman I had known for over 35 years. We studied together in seminary. I didn't feel I knew her well, but I was willing to open my heart, risking a deeper relationship with her. After finishing our walking for the day, she offered to buy me a cup of coffee. We sat down in this beautiful cobblestoned courtyard and began to talk about some of the stories from 35 years ago. One of my stories included a deep wound that I had just determined would never be healed. It was deeply buried, and the only person who really knew about it was my husband. I had no intentions of ever sharing that story with anyone. I thought it would go with me to my grave. But, in only what can be considered a prompting of the Spirit, I opened my heart to her, and she to me, about pieces of this story we didn't realize we had in common. Time shifted into timelessness, Chronos into Kairos time. And the loving presence of Christ, the compassionate heart of Christ began to beat with us as we shared. And then it happened, the deep psychological and spiritual wound became a sacred wound—and a transformed wound.

Being on pilgrimage with others means that we take the time to walk together and open our hearts to God and to one another. We live in a culture that is hungry for connection, for true compassionate connection. We live in a time when we've buried the wounds and only show the shiny parts. We hide our wholeness and dare not bring it out in the open for fear of rejection. But if we take the chance to open our hearts, that's when God can make sacred the truth of our wholeness. God can speak in affirming ways about the deepest wounds we carry. We are no longer alone in the burdens we bear. We were never meant to be isolated. We were meant to be met on our journeys by the compassionate heart of Christ. There is strength in opening our hearts.

“Fully Present”

Another story from the Camino was about the birds. Without the normal distractions of TVs, radios, podcasts, music playlists, earbuds or headphones, we all noticed the birds. There were beautiful birdsongs that I had never heard before. There were European robins, Eurasian blackbirds, Cetti's Warbler, Common Chaffinch, Zitting Cisticola—over the course of our eight days of walking, I heard 38 different birdsongs I had never heard before, including a real Cuckoo bird. I found that when I came home, I had the same excitement to hear the birds of my back yard. I loved the robin song in a new way, the redwing blackbird song in a new way.

Pilgrimage allows one to notice things we might not pay attention to. We can move through our days on autopilot. Some of us might even call it sleepwalking. We've known those times when we end up pulling into our driveways, without having paid any attention to the route along the way. Being fully present means we aren't multitasking. We're moving at a more methodical pace. We are looking around and looking at one another. We are noticing and we are reflecting, and we are seeing the image of God in all created things around us. And we are open to how God might be speaking.

The Prayer of Examen invites us to look at our days and reflect upon where we saw God. And then we're invited to look at our days and ask where we missed seeing God? If the translation of “Baca” means “weeping” the psalmist seems to indicate that it is just by going through the valleys of weeping, with our hearts set on pilgrimage, that weeping turns into pools, into springs. It's a beautiful suggestion that suffering may be transformed into new life. Seeing the suffering along our ways,

being fully present to it, brings its own blessings of strength. It affirms the movement of strength to strength.

“I enter the thin places within and without”

The thin places, the liminal places, the places where the boundaries between common and sacred become very thin. N.T. Wright believes that the “kingdom of heaven on Earth” has already come. With the resurrection of Jesus he believes that God already initiated the new heaven and the new earth. And God continues to tell the story through us as we walk with God. Our stories are crucial to the whole.

If the contemplative practices, like pilgrimage, can allow us to abide in the liminal spaces, in the sanctuary spaces, I believe we become illumined with a holiness that draws people towards Christ’s love. Maybe some would call this indirect or passive evangelism. I, however, believe it is powerful. It is invitational and affirming. It respects the beauty of each person and allows them to walk out their own calling as beloved of God.

Contemplative practices have allowed me to move from strength to strength. Contemplative practices have encouraged me to share the love I’ve known. For me, it is one way that God continues to speak and to draw all people to God’s loving embrace.

Amen.

Exegesis on Psalm 84:5-7

“Blessed are those whose strength is in you; who have set their hearts on a pilgrimage. (Hebrew – mesilla)

Having strength for life’s journey is a theme of this psalm. The word mesilla (pilgrimage) means highway or road. In this psalm, it seems that the road spoken of is the road to Zion, or at least to the temple of Jerusalem. But the psalm also speaks about the journey, it’s importance, the importance of the motivation of the heart on the journey, being “set” on pilgrimage, and the experiences along the way.

The psalm speaks of passing through the valley of Baca, which may mean a few things. There are three Hebrew words that are similar:

- Baca (balsam tree)
- Bakah (weep of wail)
- Bekeh (weeping)

The same word found in 2 Samuel 5:24, is translated in the Septuagint as weeping, but the NRSV translates that verse with the word Balsam tree in that verse.

What is shared by the psalmist, whether making a pilgrimage through some kind of sorrow, or through an arid valley, the ones on pilgrimage “make it a place of springs.” Where one goes from strength to strength.

(This story may or may not be used as a beginning illustration.) There is a story about a Midwestern farmer traveling to Times Square in New York City. In the clamor of all the sounds and sights, they told their companion they heard a cricket. Their companion was dumbfounded: How could the farmer possibly hear a cricket in all the noise? But sure enough, not too far from where they were standing, in a darker corner, the farmer found the cricket. The farmer had their ear tuned to hear the cricket.

Order of Worship for The Camino

Threshold Moment (could also be used as a unison Call to Worship)

(Worship. We cross a threshold into a worship space that is set apart and sacred to us. Whether it is an actual church building, or a place in our home where we watch an online worship service, or it is the first step of a walk into nature. God welcomes us into this space where we have been invited as beloveds of God. With our heart warmed by God's welcome, embraced by God's love, we let our minds, our hearts and our Spirit align with God's companioning presence)

Threshold prayer

I calm my mind
 I open my heart
 Fully present
 I enter the thin spaces within
 And without
 (take a moment to breathe and center)
 Amen.

Welcome

(What a gift it is to worship with: others in a building or online together; the accompanying presence of natural sounds, birds, wind, water; the pet companions; silence; music, etc. We have companionship of the faithful. We extend welcome and gratitude to one another. This may also be a moment to share in the passing of the peace.)

Affirmation of Gratitude

- Invite people to think about something they are grateful for already, today.
- Invite people to share with those around them, something they are grateful for.
- Invite people to offer to the larger body what they are grateful for as a harvest of gratitude.

Affirmation of Gratitude

Loving God,
 You are an abundant giver.
 There is nothing that I have that you have not given me.
 The way of your kin-dom is the way of generosity.

Help us to honor you with our resources.
Free us from the deceit of riches.
Lead us on a path of generosity, for your glory, God.
For the abundance of our own lives and for the sake of others. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

Eternal Companion, thank you for your company on our road today. We share with you what is true to us in our lives right now.

We share those things that have caused us to grieve and lament on this day. We honor that which is known to us as loss. You join us in our journey of pain, of suffering, of loss. With you we walk with others who have also known the truths of pain and suffering.

We share with you our questions regarding the ever-unfolding understanding of your nature

- who you are and how your image manifests itself in us;
- who you love and how you call us to love;
- who the body of Christ is meant to be and how we accept the beauty of Christ's body.

We share the petitions for our needs and for the needs of others.

We share our confessions and seek your forgiveness.

Through all the highs and lows of our lives you guide us from strength to strength. We string together these gifts of strength, these pearls of great price, marveling at the strand of abundance you have brought to our lives and sharing them with you as an offering.

And we give you thanks as we pray this prayer that you prayed consistently and taught your disciples to pray: *The Sharing of the Lord's prayer*.

Invitation to Communion

As Jesus understood his earthly pilgrimage would soon come to an end, he wanted to pause and introduce a bit of eternity into the ordinary, so that every time we paused on our journeys to eat the bread and drink the cup, we remember the much bigger picture and ever companioning presence. He invited those who were in the room when he ate his last shared meal on Earth to a table of remembrance and re-orientation. It's not that we must come to his table, but that we may come. It's not that we feel strong and confident enough, but that we come truly as we are, in all our fragility and weakness. It's not that he invites us to express our opinions, but that we seek his presence.

Offering Invitation

From the abundance entrusted to us, we share our offerings for God's work among all of God's people.

Benediction

Now grant us strength and grace, O God,
Sufficient to the remains of the day,
That we might move through its unfolding
In humble obedience to your will
And in sensitivity to your Spirit
And in joyful expectancy
of your coming kin-dom...
Be filled with hope, joy and peace by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Children's Message Resource

There is a delightful, powerful children's book called *The Walk, (A Stroll to the Polls)* by Winsome Bingham. A grandmother takes her granddaughter on a walk, where they stop at homes, at the barbershop, and at many community places inviting members of the community to join them on the walk. The walk, which arrives at the polls, emphasizes the journey, the joining of others on the journey, and the community journeying together to keep working for the things of justice.

‘Other Side Evangelism’ Sermon

By the Rev. Nathan Holst

Reflections on Exodus 3: 1-15 and Mark 7: 24-30

The exegetical and worship resources can be used to prepare services and sermons on our identity and to invite people into our communities of faith.

This morning we’re taking a slight detour from the lectionary to focus on evangelism. Let me give a little context. When I was recently asked to create worship resources for the Wisconsin Conference that connected evangelism to the UCC God is Still Speaking campaign, I must admit I was a little hesitant. Like many but not all in our denomination, I have mixed feelings about evangelism and the ways it has often focused on conversion to a particular (and I might add narrow) understanding of faith and the church. I do value and believe that the UCC has something unique and wonderful to offer to all people, and perhaps especially to those who have been excluded in faith communities. I want to grow a church where people and their questions are welcome. But we have had so much history of evangelism being tied up with colonization and power-over. The message is often, “come and join, but think like us or you’re out.” This is the thinking that makes me hesitant when I consider the idea of evangelism.



But then my partner Sarah suggested the scripture passage about the Syrophenician woman, which we heard read this morning. “Huh”, I said. “I’ll have to think about that.” And then Spirit started pouring in idea after idea.

Almost immediately the concept of “Other Side Evangelism” presented itself to me. In Matthew, there’s a passage where Jesus tells the disciples to get in a boat on the sea and “go to the other side.” They’re terrified because the other side of the sea is where the Gentiles are and you don’t go there. That’s off limits. But Jesus pushes the disciples, like he so often does, to create a wider vision of where love can take them. He calls them to encounter God in unexpected places—to become mystics, as Penny put forth to us last Sunday. This idea of going to the other side on it’s own is worth a whole sermon, but what happens when we think about evangelism in light of this concept? I think it flips the usual script. Instead of going out to find people and bringing them to our church, it pushes us to encounter the God of the other side, that place where we’ll meet people who might not be familiar to us. It’s the place where we hear God speaking and where we are all transformed in the process. It may be that some of the people we encounter on the other side come back with us to the place we call church, but it may also be just as likely that the community we create in the encounter is what we call church. This is Other Side Evangelism.

So why, you might ask, didn’t I choose this “other side” scripture from Matthew as the gospel this morning? And what does Moses and the burning bush have to do with all of this? Well, let me start by

saying that I think Jesus and Moses both have “other side” moments in each of these stories, moments when God shows up in an unexpected way and widens their vision of where they are going. Both can be stories that we look to when we consider how we hear God speaking. Both can help us discern how we want to engage growing a vibrant church.

It may go without saying how the story of Moses and the burning bush connect to a still speaking God. Moses encounters God in the wilderness, where he is reoriented to his calling as a leader and prophet. God speaks and sends him on a mission that will transform him and his people. While it may not speak directly to evangelism, I think of it as a banner scripture in engaging a still speaking God.

In order to further engage this idea of other side evangelism, let’s dive a bit deeper into our gospel, this story of the Syrophenician woman. This has always been a fascinating story to me. Jesus is trying to avoid attention, but this woman finds him and falls down and begs for healing for her daughter. Instead of the usual compassionate words we’re used to hearing, Jesus puts a boundary on his mission and adds an insult, calling her a dog who takes away food from his people. She responds with grace and humility, effectively saying dogs need crumbs too. As a result, Jesus lets her know her daughter is healed.

Traditionally, theologians engaging this story have emphasized the universality of relationship between God and people, as well as lifting up the truly faithful people, even embodied in a gentile woman. But like Christian writer Loye Ashton, I find it meaningful to engage this passage with a little more risk, perhaps in the spirit of going to the other side. If we’re willing to wrestle with the possibility that Jesus was embodying (and can we say modeling?) being changed by encountering God in a new way, this opens us up for some rich engagement with other side evangelism. What if this story is about Jesus’ other side moment? We could even think of this as a time when Jesus sees a side of himself and of God that he hadn’t yet fully seen. Jesus has been pushing the disciples to open their vision further than they previously imagined, and now here is a moment where he too is confronted with his own teaching. Loye Ashton asks, “Could the story of the Syrophenician woman be a kind of ‘conversion’ moment for Jesus, in which he realizes how (maybe in a very human moment of physical and mental exhaustion) he has lost sight of the point of his mission and has to be reconnected with it by someone assumed to be outside of it?”¹ What an articulation of other side evangelism. If we take in this way of engaging this story, we can follow Jesus into moments when we encounter God in unexpected places. This is a powerful place where God is speaking. And it is an outsider who helps reorient to the vision of ever expanding love. Where are the places where we in the church need to encounter God, to have our vision and mission reoriented by those on the outside? How might we think about evangelism as a process to help us discover where God is still speaking?

One of the parts of other side evangelism that I love is the site of transformation. Traditionally, you might say an evangelist goes out to convert and transform others. The site of transformation is the other person. But when we flip the script, it is the person going out to seek others who is transformed. And that’s exactly what is happening for Jesus in our scripture. As Dawn Wilhelm puts it, “Not only is the Syrophenician girl healed of demon possession, but we recognize that a further transformation has taken place in Jesus, who experiences a change of heart and a shift in direction as he ministers among Gentiles.”² Perhaps this can be a good measure of effective evangelism in our churches: when we go out, expecting to encounter God in others, we are transformed in relationship.

When I lived in Portland, Oregon, and worked at Sisters of the Road, an affordable café serving mostly houseless folks, I had other side moments all the time. I had spent time with folks living on the street before, but it was an intense experience to be in constant community practically every day. I was almost always outside my comfort zone, but over time I saw how the experience transformed my perspective. I began to see the depth and beauty of the culture that survives and even thrives with street life. I learned to reach out in relationship, even when I wasn't sure exactly how to do it or what I would find.

All of this experience helped shape how I engaged ministry at a local drop in center when I served alongside people in my most recent church. I remember thinking about how those serving behind the counter appeared to come from a pretty different class and cultural context from those being served in front of the counter. Besides a bit of conversation in the line, there wasn't a lot of interaction between the two groups. After everyone had been served, I decided to do what I always did in Portland—to get some food and sit down at the table with houseless folks to get to know them better and share some conversation. I invited some of our other church members to join me, but they declined. They may have had good reasons, and I do have a deep respect for the diversity of each of our callings. In addition, what I consider an other side moment may look different than someone else's other side moment. Perhaps it wasn't the right space or time for our group to reach out and spend time together. But this image of our divided groups did stay with me, and it made me wonder how many other moments we have in our lives and the lives of our churches where God might be calling us, where the other side moment is ready and waiting for us to show up, to reach out and be transformed in what we encounter. What might have emerged if our group had built deeper relationships of mutual care and trust? Would we have thought about it as evangelism, but the kind where we emerge as a new community? Are there places in your life, what you consider an other side moment, where you are gathering the courage to encounter a person or situation?

God is calling each of us to the other side, whatever that may look like in our lives. Jesus has been an example for us and given us the invitation. Let's turn evangelism on its head so that the other side—the people and situations we encounter that bring us to our growing edge—evangelizes to us, converting us into a renewed community of vision and transformation. God evangelized to Moses in the burning bush, pushing the limits of what he thought he could do. The Syrophenician woman evangelized to Jesus, helping him expand his own understanding of his purpose and pushed him to see that the community was bigger than he might have originally thought. Like Jesus, let's take those opportunities to see what's there on the other side. Let's go together to find that life that the Spirit has in store for us. Amen.

‘Other Side Evangelism’: A Worship Resource

By the Rev. Nathan Holst

Texts: Exodus 3: 1-15 and Mark 7: 24-30

Introduction to the theme:

When we hear the word evangelism, many of us think about going out to bring people into church. While Jesus did issue the call to “make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19-20), a phrase often cited in evangelism efforts, it is worth remembering that he also called his disciples “cross over to the other side” (Matthew 14:22). In his ministry, Jesus was often less about bringing people into a building and more about going out to push the edges of relationship to where there would be an encounter with the holy. When we think about evangelism in this context, we flip the script to discover a kind of evangelism that leads us to the “other side,” to encounter a God who is still speaking in unexpected places. This is what happened for Moses and the burning bush, and this is what happened for Jesus in his interaction with the Syrophenician woman (the suggested texts for this service). When we engage what we might call Other Side Evangelism, we are following Jesus into unknown places and listening to where God is still speaking. It is there, in going out of our buildings and meeting strangers in their context, where we are all changed into a new kind of community.

The worship resources in this document are intended to help you engage evangelism in the way described above, and to help you develop a worship service that strengthens your efforts to discern where God is leading you and your congregation. Please use these resources in whatever way is useful in your context.

Call to Worship

One: God gathers us together to worship and grow in faith.

All: Spirit strengthens us to seek relationships not yet kindled.

One: Jesus invites us to follow him to the other side of what we know.

All: Our hearts are open to where love leads us.

One: Let us begin our journey in this time and place.

All: Let us worship together as a first step toward where God calls us.

Gathering Prayer/Invocation

God of transformation, you gather us to nourish our spirits and prepare us for the ministry of our lives. We pray that we may see your Spirit alive in this place, beckoning us out of comfort and into that wild space where your transforming love can open our eyes. Amen.

Prayer of Confession

God of ever-expanding love, you have called us out of our walls of safety and out onto the waters beyond our certainties. You ask us to risk encountering you on unfamiliar shores, to allow ourselves to be changed in relationship with the other. But we too often choose to stay in the familiar. We confess that we deny your vision of love because we think we cannot go beyond what we know. Kindle in us a fire that transforms and renews us so that we may follow the path of discipleship. Help us to see what is waiting for us on the other side.

Words of Assurance

Even when we can't find the courage to step out, God is with us, offering us love and strength. We follow the One who knows the difficulty of being changed by challenge and joins us on this journey. The good news is that we are called and loved just as we are. May we find hope in that promise. Amen.

Story for All Ages (Children's Time)

- Book suggestion: *Who is My Neighbor?* by Amy-Jill Levine and Sandy Eisenberg Sasso
- Consider adapting ideas from Storypath: Storypath » Who Is My Neighbor? (upsem.edu)
- Some possible questions: Where is God in the story? What helps us do something or go somewhere new when we feel afraid? How do we change when we interact with someone different from us? Have you ever made a new friend like Midnight or Lemon?
- Children's prayer: Dear God, thank you for giving us new experiences. Help us reach out to someone different from us today. Help us learn about who you are when we make new friends. Amen.

Readings: Exodus 3: 1-15, Mark 7:24-30

Response to the Reading

One: We listen to hear God's word.

All: May we have ears to hear where God is still speaking.

One: We listen to hear where God is calling us.

All: May we be open to the unexpected movements of the Spirit. Amen.

Call to Offering

What does giving feel like when we have gone to the other side, to an unfamiliar place? How can encountering God in unexpected ways open us to a new or different relationship to generosity? As we share our offerings and our prayers, pay attention to what is stirring in you and how it might change how you think about giving today.

Offertory Prayer

God of new vision, we give thanks for how you change us in generous ways. We ask a blessing on the gifts that have been offered, that they might support the work encountering your still speaking voice out in the world. Amen.

Invitation to the Table

When we come to this table, we encounter God. We take a step toward the other side, to that wild place where God whispers to us in a blazing fire. We remember that we follow the one who called us to cross over to find out how love can transform us. In his life and death, Jesus embodied this way. In this meal, God reveals to us the life-giving force that leads us toward a renewed community. This is our welcome and invitation.

Benediction

As you go, may you carry the love that leads you to new life. May you boldly follow Jesus in crossing over to where God is waiting. And may you hear the Spirit speaking in the voice of the other, pointing the way to the vision of a church yet to come. Amen.

Suggested Hymns:

- *You Walk Along Our Shoreline*, New Century Hymnal 504
- *God, Speak to Me, That I May Speak*, New Century Hymnal 531
- *Won't You Let Me Be Your Servant*, New Century Hymnal 539

Suggested Contemporary Songs for Special Music:

- *Storm Chaser* by The Brilliance
- *Deeper* by Tamia
- *Dare You To Move* by Switchfoot

God is Still Speaking Sermon

Exegetical and Sermon Notes by the Rev. Dr. Sara Rabe

Texts: Exodus 15: 22-27, Luke 19:28-40

The exegetical and worship resources can be used to prepare services and sermons on our identity and to invite people into our communities of faith.

Speaking. When children are born, they live on this Earth for approximately nine to 12 months before they begin to say their first words. Before that, a baby makes babbling sounds. Around the age of two months, babies coo and sigh, indicating emotion. If a child doesn't talk in an allotted time frame that pediatricians recommend, there is an evaluation. We were meant to speak. It is part of how we were meant to communicate.

The physiological mechanism for creating speech is amazing. In our throats are vocal cords consisting of rubber band-like tissues. They are made up of layers of cells consisting of muscles with an elastic layer.¹ Air from our lungs gets pushed over these cords, causing them to vibrate. Our vocal cords are unique to each person, some being longer, some thicker.² We were created with a voice. We were created with the intention to speak.

In the beginning God spoke: "Let there be light," and there was light. God's voice was present the moment that life began, and the voice of God is demonstrated again and again throughout the Old Testament. God sets the tone of an everlasting God who is persistent and devoted to the people of Israel. All the people must do is listen and they will be spared and protected.

The scene from Chapter 15 in Exodus takes place in the early days of the wilderness journey, when the Hebrew people were about 45 miles away from Pharaoh's captivity, and conditions began to get tough. Water is scarce and the people are getting thirsty. They come to a region that has water—Marah—but they soon discover the water is bitter. This is the first struggle after the enslavement in Egypt and the people begin to complain to Moses, curling their noses at the bitterness.

Marah is 4 miles southeast of the Gulf of Suez (the crossing of the Red Sea). The Gulf of Suez is 7 miles inland from the Red Sea.³ It is important to note the level of the Red Sea at the time of the Israelites' journey because it is believed that the sea was elevated at this time, linking the Gulf of Suez to the Bitter Lakes region.⁴ The Bitter Lakes region is a series of low-lying wetland areas that become saturated when the tide from the Mediterranean Sea comes inland. The saturation of the waters becomes salified as the salt water from the Mediterranean Sea enters into fresh water sources.⁵ Thus, the water is "bitter" to the taste.



God showed Moses a piece of wood, and he threw it in the water, and it became sweet. We do not know what this wood was, but it may have been papyrus, a common plant in this region consisting of reeds. It is plausible that Moses threw a papyrus branch into the water, creating an ecosystem in which the papyrus filters the bitter waters, transforming them into a sweet and ingestible refreshment.⁶ God's creation is always working to bring about life.

It was in this place of water becoming sweet that God spoke an ordinance. "If you listen carefully to the voice of God and do what is right in God's sight and give heed to God's commandments and keep all God's statutes, I will not bring upon you any of the diseases that were brought upon the Egyptians." This is an exclamation of God's claim on Israel, a reminder of the covenant they have with God: If Israel follows the statutes of God—listens to the voice of God—then God will help the people.⁷ After time spent in Marah, they came to Elim, where there was much fresh water and 70 palm trees camped along the water.

A parallel New Testament reading alluding to palm trees is found in Luke 19—the familiar Palm Sunday narrative—where the people along the streets of Jerusalem reach for branches to spread along the road as they wait for the triumphal entry of Jesus. There is a distinct moment in this story when the people begin to speak, joyfully praising the Messiah who had come to hear of their toil, strife and struggle, and speak on their behalf, naming them beloved.

'Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!' Do we recognize this acclamation? Of course we do. It was the day the people remembered in their spiritual cells taking in the sweetness at the Reeds in the Rush of Waters that turned their bitter lives into fresh new dimensions. The people knew the power of God's voice working on their behalf to help them survive, because without this voice they would have perished. It was the papyrus that Moses threw into the water that would be the act of future generations sharing their story of an everlasting God with those in need of life-giving waters.

The people shouting hosannas and waving palm branches knew the abundant life that was about to pass before them. At Elim there were 12 springs of water and 70 palm trees. The palm branches were familiar examples of God's abundant life turning mourning into dancing, bitterness into sweetness. Death into life. If God has done such great acts for all the ancestors of faith that have gone before us, ought not this same very timeless, everlasting God, do the same for future generations to come? Ought not we share this good news with all needing new life? This is the existential question of our time in the life of our church.

Scripture began when people realized that the word of God needed to be written down. Ancient scrolls made of these papyrus reeds held the precious words. These words became as essential as fresh, sweet water to the souls of the people who read them, and for the people who heard them. When the people of Jerusalem grabbed the palm branches the day of Jesus' triumphal entry, they were claiming a voice to be heard. The Pharisees were demanding Jesus tell the people to stop. Jesus replies, "If these were silent, the stones would shout." Jesus knew the power of voice. He knew that God created humanity with the ability to speak, and it was God's ruah, breath flowing through them, stirring, vibrations of truth to be spoken. A truth that could not be suppressed.

“And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning.” (Acts 11:15) We can see the progression of the voice of God through the ages of place, mission and time. God is still speaking. I am prompted to wonder what God is still saying? How does God’s still-speaking voice call us to respond so that our neighbors can hear and know these life-giving words?

Speaking sweetness into a new wilderness time is a challenge. Many experience bitterness at still not being heard. Dominant voices posture with interruption, dismissiveness, and cut off dialog. Many times, not even aware of the held privilege of doing so. Challenging conversations of civility often go sideways into conflict. Where oh where can we find your Spirit, oh God, when we can’t even speak our truths to one another? It may take the grabbing of the olive branch in peace to come to resolution. If God has done such great acts for all the ancestors of faith that have gone before us, ought not this same very timeless, everlasting God, do the same for future generations to come?

To allow God’s voice to be heard is to allow room and space for God’s people to speak. This means an invitation to wave the palm branch for those who will never raise their hands. It means bringing into the center of the room those who are relegated to the cumbersome corners of the tables at gatherings. It means sharing time and airspace equally for conversation in council meetings. It means listening to all perspectives when it comes to input for decision making. It means listening to the voices of those who are silenced within our communities, hiding in the shadows of night for fear of being persecuted. It means opening our minds to the young ones who sit at our dining room tables who have something to say even when most days it is just a grunt. The voices of God are all around us and God continues to work in bringing sweetness out of bitterness, new life out of death.

“The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims God’s handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech....There is no speech, nor are there words; yet their voice goes out through all the Earth, and their words to the end of the world.” (Psalm 19) Just as God’s voice was in the beginning of creation, God’s voice will exist to the end of the world. The truth of this for our moment in time is that God is still speaking. God is still working to renew creation, making clean and fresh living waters for parched souls. God’s voice spoke through the intuition and actions of Moses, through the physical presence and voice of Jesus, who spoke on behalf of those who were not heard, or were forbidden from speaking. God is still speaking! May we listen and respond to the still-speaking voice of God so that all may know the sweet life-giving waters of God.

God is Still Speaking Worship Resource

Liturgy by the Rev. Dr. Sara Rabe

Texts: Exodus 15: 22-27, Psalm 136, Luke 19: 37-40

Call to Worship:

One: How Holy is God to find us here, a few among the many.

Many: We believe. That is why we are here. We believe we will find the lost pieces of ourselves again.

One: In our worship we pray for God to join us, have a seat with the lowly.

Many: Provide warm welcome to the stranger -- or those estranged in heart.

One: Our ears are open, our hearts are ready

Many: To hear the freshness of God's voice speaking to us in stillness and to us still.

Invocation

Creator God, your son has taught us how to live, and our calling is to enrich the lives of others so they, too, can have life abundantly. We seek your guidance in this hour to heal the brokenness while inspiring us to proclaim your justice and love. In this worship may any bitterness of our hearts be made sweet with your awesome mercy. We pray that all may know the gift of sweet life-giving waters to flow abundantly through us this day. Amen

Psalter: Psalm 19

Reading: Luke 19: 37-40

***Reading:** Exodus 15: 22- 27

Pastoral Prayer

Still-creating God, we can't imagine our lives without you. There have been times we were stuck, feeling that confining life. Crying out to you it seemed you were silent. Our hearts were closed, and our minds preoccupied with no room for your Spirit's leading.

You speak in gentle breezes on warm days or in crisp clarity on bright moonlit nights. There is nowhere that is too far from your voice to reach us.

We pray for our church. In the strength of our community, we are sustained by your presence with us here. Even in the wilderness you show us the way. We return our thanks and praise to you. Amen

Offertory Prayer:

Abundance flows as new life blossoms in new dimensions. With this trust our strengthened faith can withstand sharing the gift of generosity. May our giving in support of your call reflect the ways we have been entrusted with this gift which has come from you. Inspire our courage to develop a generous spirit where, when we give, we feel a change within us. Bless our offerings and our pathway to give more to meet the mission and ministries around us. Amen

Benediction:

The whole wide world awaits some good news. Go out to express your faith. Use your voice. Speak your truth. Listen and respect the truth of others. Use your imagination, in that God is Still Speaking. Amen

Hymns:

- *In The Midst of New Dimensions*, NCH #391
- *We Sing To You O God*, NCH #9
- *Hear The Voice of God, So Tender*, NCH #174

Time with the Children

Items needed: Cinnamon stick, vinegar, white soda

Set out two glasses filled with clear liquid. One glass has vinegar in it. One glass has white soda.

Ask what they think is in the glasses. Tell them it is water in the glasses. Have the kids smell the glass with vinegar in it. Yuck! Water is bad!!

Tell the story of Moses putting the stick in the bitter water.

Put cinnamon stick in the glass with the white soda. Have the kids smell the sweet water.

*If able have little cups for kids to sip the sweet water.

God can help people if we listen and ask God to help.

A Commitment to Justice

Many people first encounter our congregations through their justice ministries, and that's no surprise: The Wisconsin Conference of the United Church of Christ, a community of believers committed to making the love of God real in the lives of all those we encounter, whether it's inside the walls of a church building or in the streets of our communities.

That gospel commitment leads us to serve marginalized individuals and groups—just as Jesus ministered to those who clung to life on the fringes of the society of his day. That's why you'll find UCC congregations and individual members—and allies from outside the church—advocating for the well-being of immigrants, working to preserve God's beautiful creation, engaging in the struggle for justice on behalf of the Palestinian people, and meeting the needs of older adults.

The following pages contain some of their stories.

Conference Creation Care Team

The global climate crisis calls us to repent of our destructive ways and reconnect with our Creator God and the Garden Earth that we humans were created to tend.

The Wisconsin Conference Creation Care team is dedicated to helping the congregations and individuals practice more responsible environmental stewardship. We accomplish this by connecting with one another and with other Creation Caregivers, by providing resources that include a monthly newsletter and grants that support efforts toward sustainability, and by advocating for policies and programs designed to build environmental justice in our local communities, state, nation and world.

In 2020, we encouraged the Conference to adopt the Kairos Call to Action, a decade-long focus on 10 actionable principles, drawn up by the national UCC Council for Climate Justice to reduce the greenhouse gases that threaten to warm the planet beyond the 1.5 degrees Celsius that the 2015 Paris Accord urged the world to follow. “Kairos” comes from the Greek word for the “right time,” or what Martin Luther King Jr. called “the fierce urgency of now.” Now is the time to act to better care for God’s Creation, which includes us all.

What you can do:

- Read the [Kairos Call to Action Newsletter](#), which is published regularly throughout the year.
- Follow [the Pollinator blog](#) published by the national setting of the UCC.
- Consider applying for a [Creation Care Grant](#) from the Wisconsin Conference.



The fall 2023 Creation Care retreat
at Daycholah Center

Immigration Working Group

The Immigration Working Group formed in 2014 to explore how the Wisconsin Conference could become involved in the New Sanctuary Movement. As our network widened, we connected with a Minnesota Conference group that focused on immigration issues, and in 2016 began the process of becoming an Immigrant Welcoming Conference. “Becoming Immigrant Welcoming” was a 2017 Wisconsin Conference Resolution.

The Immigration Working Group continues to help congregations implement this resolution, increasing understanding of what it means to be “immigrant welcoming” in Wisconsin with monthly Zoom meetings, online workshops, emails, and online resources. We connect congregations and individuals who want to learn more about how they can follow biblical teachings to welcome and nurture immigrants, and we share the experiences of people in around Wisconsin who are doing the work: resettling refugees, assisting asylum seekers, visiting and volunteering on the border, and advocating for immigration justice.

We are eager to connect with more people of faith who are interested in learning the many ways in which we can “love the stranger” and welcome new neighbors to our communities, our state and our nation.

What you can do:

- Ask a member of your congregation to serve as a liaison to the Immigration Justice Working Group.
- Download the “Becoming Welcoming Communities” study guide produced by the Wisconsin Council of Churches, available at <https://www.wichurches.org/becoming-welcoming-communities-immigration-reform>.
- Work with your local schools to provide activities that welcome children and families who have recently arrived from other countries.



Older Adult Ministries

The population of those ages 65 and over is booming, and it's no secret that many congregations are graying and shrinking. Recognizing and fully utilizing the wisdom, faith and experience of older adults is vital to our churches' mission today. Deepening support of congregational and community programs with older adults furthers Christ's message of hope and service for individuals of all ages.

The Older Adult Ministries' Team enhances the ministry of Wisconsin Conference congregations by providing educational materials focused on aging and on the needs and gifts of older adults—both those who are healthy and those experiencing cognitive, physical or spiritual challenges. Each month a group of 12 to 15 people, each with a passion for ministry with and advocacy for older adults, meets for intentional conversations around the issues of aging. These conversations lead to tangible steps, with a mission to support emerging needs and interests of older adults in our congregations and communities.

The Older Adult Ministries' Team can provide proven models for assessing congregations' programs for older adults. Program guides raise aging awareness, provide biblical perspectives, and stimulate intergenerational conversations that are healthy for the life of the church.

What you can do:

- Become an advocate for positive aging in your congregation.
- Talk to older adults and listen to their stories.
- Learn more about aging and spirituality.
- Gather resources and talk to an interested group in your church.
- Create an older adult ministry plan in your congregation and community.
- Contact Art and Cathy Wille at cwille2@me.com to join the monthly meetings.



Jan Aerie, Older Adult Ministries Consultant, leading an Older Adult Ministries meeting on Zoom

Palestine Justice Working Group

The Palestine Justice Working Group brings together laypeople and clergy from around the Conference who are concerned about the injustice experienced by Palestinian people in Israel and the Palestinian territories. For decades, Palestinians have suffered under military occupation and legal structures that enforce ethnic and religious discrimination. The UCC has addressed this discrimination with resolutions at General Synod and partnerships in the region through Global Ministries and other organizations.

The Working Group's focus is to promote awareness of the realities in the Middle East by providing educational resources and programming, and to keep the Conference abreast of advocacy efforts within the UCC and beyond. The group works with ecumenical, interfaith, and justice organizations within our communities on nonviolent efforts toward a just and genuine peace for all Palestinians and Israelis.



The Rev. Shari Prestemon visiting Palestinian refugees in Beirut

What you can do:

- Study the “[Declaration for a Just Peace Between Palestine and Israel](#),” the Resolution of Witness that was passed at General Synod 2021. It is our hope that congregations will study the issues presented in the resolution and updates provided by the Working Group to better understand the situation.
- Find ways to advocate for justice for the Palestinian people.

WISE

The Wisconsin Conference WISE Team—the acronym stands for Welcoming, Inclusive, Supportive, and Engaged for Mental Health—equips local congregations with information and resources that enable them to be places where mental health is openly discussed and where individuals with mental health challenges are embraced with compassion and understanding. The goal is to break down barriers of judgment and fear, provide opportunities for healing, reduce the stigma around mental illness, and prioritize education, advocacy, and connection, so that all people can find connection and hope. As WISE congregations, we strive to be the church that embodies God’s extravagant welcome.



WISE is an official designation of the United Church of Christ, and we call on congregations in the Wisconsin Conference to prayerfully consider becoming WISE for mental health. The process is designed so that as you discern, you learn. To learn more about becoming WISE, email Lisa Hart, associate conference minister for faith formation and justice ministries, at lhart@wcucc.org.