



The Confluence of Church and Culture

by Franz Rigert

A few weeks ago I preached at Prescott UCC, the place where the muddy Mississippi and the crystal clear St. Croix come together . . . well that's the perspective from the green and gold riverbank! In geographical terms this is called a confluence – the place where two rivers flow together to become one. A parishioner told me that from a high vantage point one can see the churning of the waters for several hundred yards until the rivers finally settled into one calmer, albeit cloudy, flow.

This image has stuck with me as a fitting metaphor depicting the confluence of Church and Culture during these challenging days. They don't come together very smoothly. There are competing forces and lots of turbulence. Yet many community based ministries have become the very nexus place where the Gospel and grass roots agencies partner to make the world a more just and compassionate place. I think of monthly community meals, clothing closets, food pantries, afterschool tutoring, and overnight shelters just to name a few.

A similar word, which Cameron Trimble and others are using to talk about "collaborating for the common good," is Convergence. Our Conference Shift Initiative is based on the theory that the Church of the 21st Century will be a composition of many intersecting partnerships. Counterintuitively, the Church of tomorrow will choose to focus more passion on its mission and less worry on its maintenance. The majority of its ministry may take place in community settings alongside an array of stakeholders.

Consider these Shift confluences and convergences we are navigating together:

1. Here in the Wisconsin Conference UCC, we continue to value our relational connections between churches and clergy, and we seek to prioritize our care for one another. We celebrate the many ways this is happening through district meetings, communities of practice, mentorships, ordination and installation ceremonies, Associate Conference Minister field work, congregational partnerships, associational and conference gatherings and especially through Facebook and other forms of social media. We're in this together, and the spirit of collegiality among us is remarkable! **"How good and pleasant is it when God's people dwell in unity" (Psalm 133:1)**
2. With our Digital Resource Center now launched (www.wcucc.org) we are busy collecting as many resources and ministry stories as possible. Rachel Payden, member of our

Board and daughter of Rev.'s Debbie & Tom Payden, has agreed to be our resource curator. She will gather all sorts of information for our website so that we can share best practices, emerging ideas, networking contacts, etc. All resources are welcome including mission projects, community based ministries, confirmation curriculum, justice work, worship ideas, governance and staffing guidance, etc. We want to hear your stories, and we invite you to share resources for the benefit of other churches! Please email Rachel: rpayden@gmail.com. **“To equip the saints for the work of ministry” (Ephesians 4:12)**

3. We have several available coaches who have been trained to journey alongside clergy as a sounding board, particularly when congregations are interested in exploring a new direction for ministry. Though these coaches are seasoned ministers, their expertise in coaching is one of *process* not *content*. Their purpose is to support and guide ministers (and vicariously their congregations) through new ministry initiatives. We invite all authorized ministers to consider this vital human resource. If you are interested please email Tisha Brown: tbrown@wcucc.org. **“The wise hear and increase in knowledge; they understand and acquire skills” (Proverbs 1:5)**
4. Partnership is a key word for the Church of tomorrow. Around the Conference we have several congregations moving into “shared pastoral ministry” – one clergyperson serving two nearby congregations. Such collaboration eases budgets, attracts fulltime pastoral candidates and inspires congregations toward renewed vitality because they can set aside the functional question “Can we make it?” and focus on the faith question “Who are we called to be?” There are so many collaborative possibilities around spiritual formation, Vacation Bible Experience, mission projects, work trips, bible studies, contemporary faith conversations, justice issues, and on and on! **“Because of your partnership in the Gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, the One who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 1:5-6)**

The wisdom writer of Ecclesiastes reminds us that ultimately “all streams run to the ocean” – all of our efforts to BE THE CHURCH find sacred confluence, holy convergence. There is no turf to protect on the river of grace. It's all about working together in pursuit of a better world, where love reigns, for all God's people.

Shalom,

Franz