



**Wisconsin Conference
United Church of Christ**

Be the Church

by Lisa Hart

*Protect the environment.
Care for the poor.
Forgive often.
Reject racism.
Fight for the powerless.
Share earthly and spiritual resources.
Embrace diversity.
Love God.
Enjoy this life.*

Several years ago, the United Church of Christ rolled out its “*Be The Church*” campaign. This catchy slogan went on everything, including large banners, t-shirts, bumper stickers, coffee mugs and tote bags. I know people from other denominations who purchased some of these items because they liked the message. One told me, “I just wish our denomination had thought of this first!” The message seems so simple. It’s a list of instructions based on the teachings of our faith. Yet, it isn’t always as easy to live out as it seems...especially if we are to do it as the church, and not just as individuals. It takes patience, cooperation, understanding, and commitment.

On the first Sunday of January, I was blessed to worship and work with our congregation in Genoa City. Prior to worship, as I toured the church, I noticed a *Be The Church* banner hanging on a wall. Their pastor, Jennie Swanson, explained that they were using the *Be The Church* message to guide who they are as a congregation. I was there to consult with the adults working with their Sunday School. They were recognizing a variety of needs in the youth and children in their Sunday School and were exploring how to best meet the needs of these young people. As I reflected on my reason for being there, I recognized that they were embracing diversity, while sharing their earthly and spiritual resources to share their love for God with the young people in their congregation. They already serve these young people well, but they were striving to do better.

To truly *Be The Church*, we have to reach beyond our walls. Little did I know, within an hour, I would witness this congregation jump into action to reach beyond their walls. As we listened to the Epiphany reading, we heard the first of what would be many sirens that day. A cell phone rang and someone behind me quietly took the call. More sirens passed by. At one point, I heard

what I suspected was an explosion. Mid-sermon, Pastor Jennie stopped and acknowledged that we were all distracted by what we were hearing. She, and others in the congregation, are connected to emergency services and had been notified that an apartment building a few blocks away was burning and fire departments from many surrounding communities were being called to help. Pastor Jennie offered words of reassurance, we prayed and then continued with worship.



At the close of worship, we received an update on the situation. The residents of the apartment building had suffered devastating loss and had been evacuated. The downtown area was closed and the Red Cross had been called in. I watched as the congregation immediately jumped into action. Suggestions were made about how to best offer help, phone calls were made, and plans were underway to open the church as a day shelter for anyone who was in need. Some of us moved tables and chairs to create a welcoming space for those who would be arriving, some made calls to arrange for food to be brought in and contact was made with the Red Cross. Some of the younger members went out to help guide people to the church, while at least one neighbor, who was unaffiliated with the church, came to offer his assistance as he “assumed this was where people who needed help would come”.

I’ll admit, I assumed that the meeting that had brought me to Genoa City would need to be postponed, but, once things were organized and people were in place and ready to receive those in need, we went ahead and held our meeting. The adults I met with were just as passionate about how to best serve the youngest members of their congregation as they were about making sure the needs of their community were being met that day. While they addressed this need in their congregation, they trusted that the critical need in their community, at that moment, was being met by others in the congregation.

When we emerged from our meeting, I was amazed at how quickly the church had transformed into a day shelter. Food was being served in a common room, volunteers were signing people in and answering questions, Red Cross workers were conducting crisis intervention interviews, and piles of clothing and bedding for those affected by the fire were being sorted and spread throughout the sanctuary to create an organized distribution system.

As I made the drive back to Madison that afternoon, I reflected on all I had experienced at First Congregational in Genoa City. It made me think about the difference between talking about what it means to *Be The Church* and actually embodying *Be The Church*. We do need to talk about it, to help people understand what it means to *Be The Church*, but we can’t stop there. To truly *Be The Church*, we need to embody what we have talked about. The congregation in Genoa City did just that. They did not spend time asking *if* they should do something, they knew they were *called* to do something. They rearranged their schedules, postponed plans or coordinated with each other to work around schedules that could not be changed. They communicated with each other about who was doing what. They communicated with emergency officials to determine the need and then respond to it. They responded immediately to meet the needs of the neighbor and the stranger in their community. I left them that day, feeling surrounded by God’s love and filled with prayers of thanksgiving for all they were doing.