



WISCONSIN CONFERENCE

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

Something Essential...Right Now

by Rev. Rob MacDougall

I met Rev. Suzie Craig at the national meeting of UCC Conference staff called AM21. Suzie isn't currently on staff, as she is retired, but she did serve in the Maine Conference and they wanted her to attend this meeting on their behalf. Suzie has a passion for small churches and Maine has an ample number of them. She and a colleague have been doing a study of about ten small churches in Maine and she is hearing some fascinating stories about their life and ministry. The stories and their learnings about vital ministry in small churches are being compiled and will hopefully be published this year.

One of the key learnings that Suzie spoke of in my conversation with her is that small vital churches are engaged in some essential ministry, a ministry deeply engaging and energizing to the church's members. This ministry is often a great benefit to the community and people where the church exists.

When Suzie said this it reminded me of a recent conversation with a member of Union Congregational Church in Three Lakes. Union Congregational recently received a citation from the Three Lakes community thanking them for some twenty years of providing needed school supplies to children in the community. The members of the church believe that supporting children's education is an essential ministry, a ministry that would be lost if not for them. Union Congregational Church is very small, around two dozen members, most of which are in their 70s, 80s and 90s. Their pastoral leadership is very part-time and often short-lived, so the church members do a great deal of the leadership.

The Three Lakes members wonder about the future of their church, but they don't let this concern overwhelm their joy in being together and the vitality of their ministry in the present moment.

John Wimbley wrote an article in which he makes this statement: "I don't think mainline denominations are in danger of dying anytime soon... When I think about the future of denominations I don't focus on the national or regional judicatories of the church, important as they are. I pay attention to what's happening in congregations. Lots of revitalizing, exciting mainline congregations – rural, small town, urban, suburban – are creating bright futures for their denominations. They are why I am bullish about the

future of denominations.” One of the teachings of John Calvin that I agree with is that the local gathered community of God’s people is really the church. It’s where people deepen their love of God and others, encounter their deepest, created self and live out their most vital callings. Judicatories exist to support the local church, their leadership and ministries, and provide a means of connecting churches for ministries and witness they cannot do alone.

There is an affinity group of small church pastors in Wisconsin that has been meeting periodically for about eight months. The participants are talking about the vital ministries their churches are involved with, and also the struggles that small churches encounter. The group is scheduled to meet again at the Conference Center in DeForest on Wed., Jan. 30, from 10am to 1:30pm. Anyone is welcome to attend without commitment. The group will be discussing a booklet, “The Celebration of Smallness,” by Samuel J. Wylie, unless of course there are more important things on the hearts, minds and spirits of those in attendance (we didn’t get to the booklet last time because of this). Let the Conference office know if you want to attend so we can make lunch arrangements (RSVP to Susan Taylor, 608-846-7880 or staylor@wcucc.org).

I hope that Rev. Suzie Craig can be with us through video conferencing for one of our future meetings. She is delightful, insightful, and big on the life and ministry of the small church: not in the future, but right now.

I was given a collection of Walt Whitman poetry for Christmas. I find him inspiring in part because he valued the present moment. He wrote:

I have heard what the talkers were talking...
the talk of the beginning and the end,
but I do not talk of the beginning or the end.
There was never any more inception than there is now,
Nor any more youth or age than there is now;
And will never be any more perfection than there is now...

Like Whitman, may we talk and worry less about beginnings and endings, and much more about this present time when we are called to faithfulness and love.