

Pastor's Sabbatical

Beginning July 1, 2017

We wanted to share some important news. The verbal announcement UCG's Vice-Moderator, Doris Jane Conway shared during worship on Sunday, June 4th is reprinted below in its entirety, with this preamble from Pastor Dwight:

"As your pastor, I'm very grateful for this expression of care and concern. A couple of months ago, I began sharing with church leadership some of the extraordinary stressors our family was likely to face this summer, with two family members graduating and moving on to new adventures, our need to downsize to begin preparing to repay school loans, and my own doctoral thesis deadline looming at the beginning of winter. Our UCG leadership, very thoughtfully, proposed moving a planned 2018 sabbatical up to 2017, so that we could make some of the adjustments we need to make this summer. This was a very kind gesture! Thanks to you all. I'll do a lot of good work on my thesis in the coming months, to be sure! Thanks for keeping our family in your thoughts and prayers this summer, as it will surely be a time of some uncertainty and change. Grace & Peace!"

– Pastor Dwight Davidson

An Announcement about the Pastor's Up-Coming Sabbatical

"I think at one time I saw a picture of Pastor Dwight's kids next to a big sculpture of the Buddha. This reminded me of something I'd read about images or pictures of the Buddha--an insistence that they are not intended to be objects of worship, but rather to be reminders to all who see them that every person that they can grow into or deepen their understanding of . . . love, compassion, empathy, respect, equanimity, and strength.

And the ideas of "deepening" and "growing" lead me to this announcement. The Board has decided to grant Dwight a sabbatical leave, which was due to him at the end of this year. The leave will be for four months, fully compensated. The purpose of the sabbatical is for Dwight to work on some downsizing his family needs to attend to, and to finish the first draft of his doctoral thesis, the timeline of which was shortened by two years due to the reorganization of Andover Newton Theological Seminary (which is in the process of becoming embedded within Yale Divinity School). Dwight's sabbatical will be from July 1, 2017 thru October 31, 2017, though he'll be leaving on June 26th to participate in the Creation Justice Network Steering Committee's work at the American Baptist Biennial Meeting in Portland, OR.

The Revs. David and Kim Keether-Ball have indicated that, during this time, they could serve as interim pastors. The Board approved this, with terms to be worked out by the June 11th board meeting. They will begin to assume the responsibilities of sabbatical interim pastors as Dwight's Sabbatical begins on July 1st. During this time, Dave and Kim will not act as voting members of the Board, but will serve as ex-officio board members.

Our MTSO seminary intern, Meghan Link will be returning in the fall, and will assuming some different responsibilities from what she had last year.

A sabbatical many times means absence from the local scene. But Dwight will be working out of their home, so will still be in the area. I do want to make it clear, though, that Dwight will not be available for pastoral care or other church responsibilities. Please honor the sabbatical and do not contact him with these concerns. Contacts for church business and pastoral care during this time will be David and Kim's responsibility.

I will be serving as acting moderator during the sabbatical, so requests for contacting or involving Dwight should go through me. Today just happens be Dwight's birthday! So we take this time to celebrate that, and to focus on what he can grow into, with great gratitude for his contribution to UCG."

- UCG Vice-Moderator, Doris Jane Conway

Since many have asked!

So, many of you who have known I've been in a Doctor of Ministry program at Andover Newton since 2015 have asked, "What's your thesis going to be on?"

The thesis title is, "Helping Parishioners Unknow their Way Back to the Center of their Faith: Zen & Apophatic Insights for Christian Congregations."

What I'm doing is working to address the challenge churches face of losing people who are moving through Stephen Fowler's "Stage Four" of the spiritual life--that necessary (but not always ecclesiastically appreciated) stage of spiritual development in which people need to discard the images, constructs, and meanings they've previously identified with their (often inherited or culturally dominant) spirituality.

Western Christianity is overwhelmingly cataphatic--that is, it highly values its symbols, rituals, constructs, institutions and beliefs as tools for human maturation. But Eastern religious traditions, and the (almost entirely ignored) mystical traditions of medieval Christianity emphasize the counterbalancing necessity of "the apophatic way"--that is the way of *discarding* and *rejecting* the absolute referential power of our symbols, rituals, constructs, institutions and beliefs.

What I'll be doing is arguing that Western churches can relearn how to celebrate and to integrate the apophatic turn in our community life, educational activities & ritual actions. We do that by modifying our practice so that it more genuinely honors people's need to "un-know" reified or inherited images of "God," the "self" of "the good life," "mission," and of "proper structure," so that they can in fact experientially rediscover the roots of their spiritual lives in an authentic way. This often opens pathways to a renewed sense of connection with and of compassion for others.

My readers for the project are ANTS faculty, Dr. Mark Heim & Dr. Maria Teresa Davila, and peer reviewer Fr. Patrick Armano of the archdiocese of Boston.

- Pastor Dwight Davidson