

from Rev. Elena Larssen, Associate Conference Minister

To be UCC is to be a church that embraces God in the present and seeks to transform people; we are not tied to form and structure but have the courage to re-imagine church so that it transforms lives, transforms community and transforms the world.

-Rev. Cameron Trimble, Center for Progressive Renewal

What's more important in life? To be happy... or to make a difference?

While a campus minister, I remember standing in line at Fall Convocation at Stanford and listening to a collegial debate between two of my favorite colleagues, the Catholic Community head and the Hillel rabbi. The priest preached that the goal of life was to find happiness, while the rabbi said, "Happiness isn't more important than making a difference."

In this day and age, when church-going is no longer a given in our culture, and congregational life is often swamped by busy schedules, onerous committee structures and financial fears, congregations find themselves both unhappy *and* not making the differences they wish they could. Knowing this, the Conference (that means all of us!) made a core commitment to "**Strengthen, Build, and Invite Congregations**," and together we are doing the following exciting work:

Strengthening Congregations... We are pleased to announce this year's Fall Leadership Convocation for Clergy and Lay Leaders! ***The Seven Secrets for Renewed Leaders, Renewed Churches, and Renewed Hope*** This now-annual event will be held September 30th- October 1st at the Christ the King Retreat Center in Buffalo, and our keynote speakers are Cameron Trimble and Mike Piazza, the executive staff of our new, UCC-affiliated church development and revitalization engine, the Center for Progressive Renewal: www.growtheucc.org. In conversation this morning, Rev. Trimble said, "The seven secrets highlight the core skills and competencies that every vital church should embrace. We believe in the future of the progressive church and through our focus on the seven secrets, we are trying to revitalize what it means to be UCC in our local congregations."

Building (up) Congregations... This weekend, the Vitality Initiative Program teams of eleven congregations will gather at Mayflower Congregational UCC to complete the third training in our pilot Vitality Initiative Program, working to reintroduce evangelism and community outreach in our own UCC way and in our own UCC words. In partnership with the National Offices of the United Church of Christ, we are eighteen months into this experiment, and although the work of building vitality and learning how to share our faith is extremely challenging, we have already seen the fruits of the Spirit begin to multiply and create enthusiasm in congregations from all over the state.

Inviting (new) Congregations... This weekend, leaders from eight congregations will gather for the second conversation on new church starts and multiplying our existing congregations. Together we're trying to live out the ministry that our UCC ancestors worked throughout the history of Minnesota: beginning new faith communities with hope in the gospel and joy in Christ's message.

So, what is more important... making a difference, or finding happiness? I know my answer, and if you'd like to share your thoughts with me, toss me a note: elenal@uccmn.org! I'll just say this: I see that our congregations who are working to be vital sources of faith and service in the world are both making a difference, and are very happy.

God bless you!
The Rev. Elena Larssen