

Take off Your Bibs and Put on the Apron!

By Rev. Laurie Crelly and Rev. James Pennington, Spirit of the Lakes UCC

We often hear the lament that mainline churches in America, of which the United Church of Christ is a part, are losing membership and are clearly a dying breed. At a recent conference held in Atlanta Georgia, we were told that three UCC churches close each week and only 0.7 churches are started every week in the United States. Sadly, in the UCC we are growing in new congregations at the rates of less than 1 percent of our total number of congregations each year. Each year, we decline by an average loss of more than 2 percent of our total congregations. This can make those of us who embrace the UCC feel hopeless, frustrated and ill-equipped to handle the challenge. In the face of such messaging, we can take this as a "call to action" or as a fact that we are unable to do anything about. This message calls us to reclaim a "fire in our bellies", believing that we have a message of hope, justice and love others are longing for in and outside the doors of our UCC faith communities!

August 3 – 7, Rev. Laurie Crelly and Rev. James Pennington had the pleasure of being in "Hot-Lanta" (Atlanta, Georgia) for the New Church Leadership Institute – A Ministry of the United Church of Christ at Emory University with seventy other United Church of Christ ministers. And, it was hot in comparison to our rather mild Minnesota summers! But we were kept in air conditioned buildings from 8:00 am until 9:00 pm at night pondering all things associated with revitalization and church planting. We met others, like ourselves, who have sensed a call to revitalization and new church start ministries within the UCC. After four full days of intense presentations, coaching and conversations we sensed an excitement for our own beloved Minnesota Conference and felt hopeful that we can catch a "fire in our bellies" with a new sense of urgency around revitalizing UCC communities of faith and planting new faith communities that are relevant and doing church "outside the box".

We believe that every UCC community of faith can develop the skill and passion to reach out to those who are spiritually hungering and without a church home with the gospel of inclusion and extravagant love and welcome! It is clear that we need to change the way we understand and do ministry, opening our bodies, minds and spirits to the way in the Spirit of God is moving in and around us in our communities of faith, in our neighborhood and in our individual worlds. It is time to understand for ourselves and our communities of faith and live fully into our calling to "be the hands and feet of the risen Christ in the world"!

This New Church Leadership Institute was chocked full of practical (and sometimes impractical but "intuitive") instruction on how to effectively mobilize the church, reach out to others and share a progressive, justice-seeking inclusive Gospel message clearly possessed by the Minnesota Conference of the UCC. Participants received practical guidance from seasoned veterans of church revitalization and new church planting like Jim Griffith, author of [The Ten Most Common Mistakes When Starting a Church](#). Jim was one of the founding pastors of Willow Creek Church and has coached over 1900 new church starts. He pointed out that the culture of excitement and momentum created through a new church start is an important factor in growing a church. The mission, vision and culture of a new church start has an outward focus, re-inventing the church in "out of the box ways". The new church

start reaches out in creative ways to its community, both neighbors and strangers alike. Griffith noted that one of the big mistakes an established community of faith makes is when it becomes too inward focused or believes that visitors will come without being invited. We no longer live in the "Build it and they will come" world. We live in an era of networking, texting, Face book and Twitter. We need to be out in the community with high touch and high tech engagement. One presenter, Paul Nickerson, stated that 87 percent of all people who come to churches do so because someone invites them! People are hungry for real, transformative and authentic face-to-face community. Paul Nickerson made the powerful point that it is clear that the time has come for the church, if it is to be faithful to the Divine Call, to reclaim prayer, faith sharing and invitation.

Rev. Michael Piazza, Dean of the Cathedral of Hope in Dallas Texas, shared stories of successful leadership development and shared ministry with lay people. It was clear from all the presenters that it begins with the spiritual leader and with leadership development. Michael was empowered by God's intuition to take a small house church of twelve people on the brink of bankruptcy and within twenty years build it into a multi-million dollar ministry that gives back over 1.3 million dollars annually through community service, charity and missions. He said, "Everything rises and falls on leadership. Churches cannot grow larger than the capacity of the leader. If you intend to do it all you will only impact about seventy people. In order to grow you must make leadership development within your congregation your top priority."

One message that struck both of us was the title of our article: "It is time to take off your bib and put on an apron". Humorous, simple, yet profound. We don't need to be fed more information about God, sitting in classrooms and church soaking up information, scripture, and spiritual truths; rather, it is time to put on the apron! Get busy serving and sharing and living the faith that others may be drawn to the energy of the Spirit we display. We don't need to KNOW more about God, we need to KNOW GOD! God talk gets stale, but sharing our stories of faith and the Divine presence in the world never gets stale. We do not serve a God of the book, of the past, of history; rather we serve a LIVING GOD of the LIVING WORD!

Your gifts to Strengthen The Church offering helped to send Laurie and James from our Conference to attend this event. Laurie attended the New Church Start track; James attended the Revitalizing Church track.
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