

**Prayer in Three Movements** by Rev. Dr. Karen Smith Sellers

Special Meeting of the Minnesota Conference United Church of Christ

Wayzata Community Church September 26, 2009

Texts: Philippians 1: 3-11 and John 17: 13-23

Sisters and brothers in Christ: of all the tasks involved in preparing for today's meeting, perhaps none was more challenging than determining what word to offer during this time of worship. Days of prayerful searching for God's good news to us, convinced me that what is really needed is for us to pray together. So I invite us into this "prayer in three movements."

Author, Anne Lamott, once said that **all prayers** boil down to these two: "thank you" and "help me." Movement one is, "thank you." We are reminded of this as we read Paul's letters – whether to Corinth, Thessalonica or, as we've just heard, Philippi. Repeatedly, Paul begins, "I **thank** God every time I think of you."

As we gather today, we, too thank God for the abundance and blessings of our lives, for who we are together in Christ's name, and for all that led us to this day:

- For the courage of the Board to make a difficult decision last May, exercising its best judgment, seeking to be faithful in its elected role, and initiating an important conversation;
- For the passion of those who rallied in many ways before and during the Annual Meeting on behalf of our ministry at Pilgrim Point Camp;
- For the decision of the gathered delegates to postpone the budget vote, buying time for vital work;
- For those churches and individuals who gave generously to keep Pilgrim Point Camp open in 2010 and beyond;
- For the commitment of a reconstituted Board to seek common ground and a shared solution;
- For the investment of time and talents of those from the Board, the Pilgrim Point Camp Committee, and the Outdoor Ministries Team who gathered September 11-12
- For all who are here today ...

We give thanks also for all those involved in the many ministries of the Conference:

- for congregations participating in the Vitality Initiative Pilot and coaches who will train to serve them; for youth leaders engaged in ongoing equipping, educators gearing up for another program year, musicians opening a window to the Spirit;
- for the witnesses of our local churches – reaching out in interfaith conversation, breaking ground for affordable housing, supporting youth mission trips, supplying food shelves, celebrating long histories and envisioning futures;
- for all those who serve on Conference committees, teams and task forces to increase the faith formation and Christian discipleship of children, youth, and adults; identify and empower lay and clergy leadership; strengthen, build, and invite congregations; and increase our prophetic witness.

In the summer season of lakes and loons, recreation and rejuvenation – folks from across this Conference continued to give that most precious of resources, their time – to sustain in countless ways our shared ministries.

After the September 11-12 working session, I asked our facilitator, Steve Sterner, Executive Minister of Local Church Ministries, for his complete honesty about what he observed during his time with us. The first words out of his mouth were: "Karen, **you have great leadership in the Minnesota Conference United Church of Christ.**" How fortunate we are! We have so much to celebrate – an energetic, devoted and hardworking staff, hundreds of remarkable volunteers, 137 local churches filled with women who are strong, men who are good looking and children who are above average – the gifts of our baptisms and the blessings of our vocations – the assurances of our faith, God's steadfast presence and the Spirit's breath blowing among us.

In the first movement of our prayer, I echo Paul's words: "I thank my God every time I remember you. I am confident of this, that the One who began a good work among you will bring it to completion. And this is my

prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best.”

Yes, first, “thank you.” But then, “Help me, help us.”

Our associate conference ministers, both wise and gifted in many things, urged me to stay away from facts and figures today. I have tried. But there is no doubt that the circumstances in which we find ourselves are unprecedented.

- For the past 45 years membership in the mainline has been declining at 1% per year and the population of the US growing at 1% per year. During that period the UCC has lost over 1 million members. Our Conference accounts for about 30,000 of those, resulting in our current membership being just slightly more than half of what it was in 1962.
- 53% of UCC local churches have annual operating budgets of \$115,000 or less – and most congregations worship in buildings that are more than 75 years old. With predictions of trebled energy costs in the next decade and a continuing increase in health care costs – local church expenses threaten to consume or exceed available resources.
- When corrected for inflation, OCWM receipts are 60% of what they were twenty years ago. Imagine what they might be a decade from now!
- The UCC membership has the oldest median age of any mainline church!

We are going through a huge paradigm shift, and more often than not we, who lead and govern during these times, are less certain that we’d like to be about a faithful response.

Because the phenomenon is so widespread – including the entire Protestant church in North America (mainline and evangelical), Eden Seminary President David Greenhaw reminds us: “It’s not your fault. It’s not your fault.” Not the leadership of the national church, not the Minnesota Conference, not any one of us is served well by blaming another or ourselves for what is happening.

But that is an ever-present temptation. In his consulting work with the South Dakota Conference, Former General Minister and President of the Disciples of Christ, Dick Hamm, wrote: “In spite of the general lack of knowledge about what the Conference does, and *some* suspicion that it probably isn’t doing very well whatever it is that it does, there is nonetheless a fairly high expectation of what such an institution *should* do and provide. An example is afforded by the search and call process. In the past, congregations often had their pick of dozens of candidates because there was a surplus of ministers compared to the number of pulpits that needed to be filled. These days, there is a shortage of ministers and conference staff members often have a lack of competent candidates to offer. The assumption is that the conference staff is ‘holding out’ or somehow not doing the job. There is anger toward the Conference Minister plus frustration with the whole denomination that comes out of a vague sense that ‘**someone should be doing something about this!**’ This is the bind in which institutions are caught these days,” he concludes, “**higher expectations but lower trust coupled with diminishing resources.** In many ways, congregations face the same challenge, though the ‘emotional distance’ between the person in the pew and the Conference is greater and thus exacerbates the feelings.”

In difficult and anxious times – the temptation is to find fault with and fight each other. In yesterday’s StarTribune, ELCA Presiding Bishop, Mark Hanson, is quoted imploring those who are unhappy with the recent decisions of their General Assembly not to take “actions that diminish our capacity for ministry.”

We hear Jesus’ prayer “that they may all be one” – but we are greater MN and metro, and we are large church and small, and our priority is the Camp or justice ministries, and we find it all too easy to name and settle into those things that divide us rather than to root ourselves firmly in that which unites us.

To pray **together**, “Help us!” is to recognize our **common** challenges. As the invitation to last Sunday’s installation of Rev. Norma Rae Hunt as revitalizing pastor of St. Paul’s UCC, St. Paul, said, “We’re all in this together.” To cry, “Help us!” is to acknowledge that we are not on our own, but may confidently rely on the communion of faith in which we participate and the one God through Christ who formed, sustained and inspires

both the Church and us. We have a shared source and common purpose. Help us not to be discouraged. Help us not to squabble with one another or gang up on our leadership. Help us to live into that prayer “that they all may be one.”

We are urged to be specific in our prayers, and we have many today:

- We pray for the long-time secretary to the Conference Minister, Betty Stein, as she and her family grapple with a difficult diagnosis and an uncertain future;
- We pray for those who have lost their jobs and homes during this recession and those who work on their behalf as counselors and advocates;
- We pray for those without health care and those who will exercise influence and authority as difficult moral decisions are made;
- We pray for those who hunger and thirst on all the continents of this globe – and for our missionaries, Tom and Monica Liddle and Don and Mary Jane Westra, in East Timor and Zimbabwe, serving on our behalf.
- We pray now in silence our own petitions.
- We pray together the prayer our Lord taught us, using trespasses.

“Thank you.” “Help us.” Yes. But, the final movement of our prayer is listening. We are a people who claim that God has yet more light and truth to break forth from the Word. We are the folks who never insert a period where God has placed a comma. We are the ones who claim that we are engaged in **listening** for the still-speaking God.

The ultimate discipline of our prayer today must be listening – for God’s Word to us. “We need,” as our new General Minister and President, Geoffrey Black, said recently, “to reinforce the things that keep us together, even when we don’t agree – to teach and learn the process of dialogue . . . [as a] demonstrated faith practice in the UCC.” We need to remember, as John Wesley reminds us through the practice of Holy Conferencing, that every person is a child of God and that through genuine openness to the Christ in them we open ourselves to God’s speaking through them – perhaps even to change our views.

“For all that has been, thanks. And for all that will be, yes.” And for the life and the love and the longing that are ours through Jesus Christ, together we say “Amen.”