

“A New Day is Dawning”

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Thank you for honoring me with the invitation to serve as the preacher for the Opening Worship for this year’s Annual Meeting of the Iowa Conference, United Church of Christ. It’s good to be home, and it’s good to be with you. As I pondered and prayed about what word of hope I might bring to you this evening that would illuminate our theme, I sensed that the Spirit was moving me to remind you of things that you already know. I know that you know these things, because the wisdom that I intend to impart is wisdom that I first learned from you. Since I know that not every word the younger generation reflects back at their elders is necessarily perceived as a blessing, my prayer tonight is that what I share will be a blessing to you.

I am reminded in offering this prayer that as parents, teachers, and church leaders, we’ve got to be careful what we say and do, because the kids are listening and watching. Many of my closest friends are now raising children. When I think about what my peers were like when we were in high school and what they are like now as parents, I realize that their becoming parents has changed us all. We have cleaned up our vocabularies and manners. We have become more thoughtful and patient, and we have become more intentional about our habits and practices. In short, we have learned—some of us the hard way—that our kids are paying attention to us, and that what we say and do really matters to them.

If you agree, say, “Amen.” Now, turn to your neighbor and remind them, “We’ve got to be careful what we say, because the kids are listening.” Then turn to another neighbor and say, “We’ve got to be careful what we do, because the kids are watching.”

As one of the offspring of the Iowa Conference, I’m here to let you know that I was paying attention to what you said and did while I was growing up, and I’m here to remind you of what I learned. I’m here to invite you to practice what you—hopefully we all—preach. I’m here to remind you that a new day is dawning and that God wants us to be co-creators in making this new day a blessed day. Let us pray...

II

The youth did an awesome job this evening of presenting an improvisational rendering of the Genesis 1 creation story, which reminded us that change is an inherent part of God’s creative process, and that God created us to be co-creators in this divine endeavor.

As people of faith and people who take the Bible seriously, we are familiar with the Judeo-Christian creation stories and the phenomenon of change. As members of the United Church of

Christ, and as native Iowans (most of us), we are also intimately familiar with the creation story, and with the phenomenon of change.

Consider how much things have changed since our grandparents were children. Ponder how much things have changed even in our lifetimes. Note how many things have changed in the UCC as a whole, and the Iowa Conference, just since I left for college in 1981. The national offices have moved to Cleveland, and our UCC and Disciples of Christ international mission boards have united. The design of and members of the Iowa Conference staff have changed several times. Pilgrim Heights is operating under a new business and organizational model. Mayflower Home is now Mayflower Community. The Iowa Conference office will soon be for sale. And the changes continue.

III

All of these changes, and more, have taken place on a larger cultural landscape which, as we are reminded by Genesis 1, has been shifting since the beginning of time. Da Vita McCallister did a great job, in her presentation earlier today, of summarizing the cultural changes that have occurred in our society, and describing how those changes have shaped our young people and their horizons in ways quite different from previous generations.

Those who registered for my workshops tomorrow will find a copy of a paper that I wrote for this occasion in your meeting packets. It's titled "A New Day is Dawning: A Prospectus for the Renewal of our Congregations in the Iowa Conference UCC." This paper describes the larger cultural changes that we've been living through, particularly in Iowa. It suggests how these changes have shaped our churches and the challenges and opportunities before us, and it proposes a strategy for how we move forward in faith as church leaders in ways that position us to be *agents* of change rather than *victims* of change. I wrote this paper because I believe that we cannot fully perceive what God has in store for us in this new day, and we cannot effectively fulfill our partnership in this creative process without first understanding how we arrived at our present situation as a church and as a society. What are the cultural shifts that I am talking about?

In his book *The Postmodern Parish: New Ministry for a New Era*, (Kitchens 2003) Kitchens defines three major shifts in the dominant U.S. culture. These are: 1) the shift from a modern to a post-modern world view; 2) the shift from a Christian to a post-Christian context for ministry; and 3) the shift from a denominational to a post-denominational religious sense of identity and mission.

The composite effect of these cultural shifts on our churches is that the authority, position, and influence of pastors, churches, and denominational bodies have been substantially eroded, and many of the models for ministry that worked well for us in the first half of the twentieth century—and with less and less success in the late twentieth century—have become obsolete in the twenty-first century.

IV

Iowa is no stranger to the post-modern, post-Christian, and post-denominational challenges, or to the cultural shifts that created the context for them. In addition to enduring major cultural shifts, Iowa has also been shaped by changes in the U.S. agricultural economy. My experience growing up in rural America reflects these changes and related challenges.

I was born in Spencer, Iowa, and spent the first twelve years of my life living on my Grandma Nehring's farm seven miles north of Albert City. My father sharecropped with extended family in the Albert City area. Like most farmers, my dad struggled mightily amidst the turbulent changes of the agricultural economy in Iowa during the mid-1970s. Commodity prices were low, the cost of production was high, land values and mortgage rates fluctuated, and the weather was crazy. The struggles of rural life were overwhelming for him and for many, and he, like too many others, became one of the casualties of the farm crisis.

Following my father's death in 1975, my grandmother sold the farm to my aunt and uncle, and my mother and twin sister, Marlene, and I moved to Reinbeck, in order to live closer to our mother's parents, who farmed outside of Toledo. Our family joined Union Congregational UCC, and Marlene and I attended and graduated from Reinbeck High School. I matriculated at Lakeland College, in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, where I served several dairy farming congregations during my college years. Times were equally tough for dairy farmers in Wisconsin as for diversified farmers in Iowa. My experiences of growing up in rural Iowa and serving country churches in Sheboygan County, Wisconsin taught me what many of you know, too: that not all changes in life are for the better.

Since I left home in 1981, there also have been some significant population shifts in Iowa. In the 1980s, Iowa experienced a dramatic outmigration of young people who left for educational and employment opportunities in other states, and didn't come back. In the 1990s and in the new millennium, the population has grown through immigration and new births and the stabilization of the economy. Meanwhile, most of our seniors have retired in-state, so that we now have one of the highest percentages of citizens over 65 of any state in the nation. (US Census Bureau 2007) The conflation of these demographic changes has created tremendous stress and new challenges, as well as opportunities, for our state. I suspect that our religious communities and educational and health care systems are feeling these effects the strongest. Times have changed. When you consider how many changes Iowa has experienced just in my lifetime, it's no wonder that many Iowans share my mother's view: "Only wet babies like changes."

The long-term effects of these changes in the dominant culture and in rural American culture can leave us not only resistant to change, but feeling like victims of change. People respond in a wide range of ways to victimization. Some flee their circumstances. Some turn against their loved ones and friends. Some blame God. Some others turn their negative feelings inward and become self-destructive.

God hopes for better for us. Genesis 1 is a reminder that our Creator longs for us to experience the abundant life envisioned since the beginning of time. God longs for us to be change agents,

rather than victims of change. God calls us to be co-creators of a bright new day, and to live into it together.

As a youth growing up in this Conference, I came to understand through a whole cloud of witnesses that God was calling me to be a *change agent* rather than a *victim of change*. Leaders in my home church and in this conference educated, formed, and affirmed me as a child of God and as a person called to ministry. As a result, I set my sights on higher education, and I followed God's call to ordained ministry. A legion of you, like Jan Lovig, served as my teachers, counselors, advisors, and chaperones. John Syster taught me that women could be pastors. Betty Peterson, our church treasurer at the time, affirmed my call to ordained ministry, and Scott Libbey served as a constant inspiration of excellence in ministry. The handful of clergy women who were serving as pastors in the Iowa Conference when I was a teenager made me their mascot and enthusiastically encouraged my vocational and educational process.

LeRoy Franz, my grandparents' pastor, took my mother and me to visit Lakeland College, where I matriculated in 1981. I was inspired to enroll in Andover Newton for the M.Div. during a trip that John Syster led our youth group on when I was in high school. I received scholarship support from Lakeland and Andover Newton and from First Congregational Church in Waterloo and First Congregational Church in Newton—thanks in large part to Jim Kvetko and David Raymond, the pastors of those churches who advocated for me. Selva Lehman served a seven-year term as my ordination advisor. Allan Mitler and Union Congregational UCC put on a phenomenal ordination celebration for me. In Africa, they say that it takes a village to raise a child. Iowa Conference, thank you for being my village.

Because of your nurture, I became a poster child for UCC colleges and seminaries. I was ordained in 1988 by Union Congregational UCC and the Central Association of the Iowa Conference. I have since pastored three congregations and served in the national setting of the UCC. And I'm here this weekend, on the twentieth anniversary of my ordination, to remind you—as you taught me—that God wants us to be *agents* of change, rather than *victims* of change. I'm here to announce the vision that a new day is dawning in the Iowa Conference, a day that God is calling us to co-create and enjoy, through the renewal of our congregations.

V

To be sure, there are some things that we cannot control in this lifetime. The weather, for example, comes to mind. Iowans—particularly the farmers among us—are regularly reminded that we are not in charge of the weather. We cannot control the weather, but we can control how we prepare for it and how we respond to it. In short, we can lessen the likelihood of being harmed by severe weather. We can control how we construct our buildings, bridges, and levies. We can control the type of conservation tillage practices we use on our farms, and we can improve the quality and efficiency of our severe weather notification systems.

When severe weather wreaks havoc on our neighbors' lives, we who escape the majority of the damage can show up and help our neighbors by holding them in prayer, filling sandbags, and writing checks. I would never wish severe weather on anyone, and yet I think it's accurate to say that severe weather often brings out the best in us.

In the spring of my junior year at Lakeland College a tornado destroyed the entire town of Barneveld, Wisconsin. Among the losses of that community were five people, including a two-year-old boy. All of the business, homes, and churches, including the parsonage and First Congregational UCC, were wiped out in seconds. The pictures that I've seen of the F5 tornado that hit North Central Iowa in May reminded me of the destruction that I saw of Barneveld just a few days after that storm, destruction which left both communities forever changed.

It is common for people who have lived through a disaster to have trouble imagining that a new day is dawning for them, and that God has something better in store for them. This is why the Barneveld story is so inspiring, and why it may be helpful to hear a little about how that community's and UCC congregation's story continued to unfold.

The day after the tornado hit Barneveld, Fred Trost, then the Conference Minister, gathered cases of bottled water, nonperishable food, and clean-up equipment, a bunch of Pilgrim Hymnals and a few other worship resources, and drove to Barneveld to help the pastor, Jan Weaver, and her congregation assess and respond to the damage. Local churches from around the Wisconsin Conference prayed and wept with the people of Barneveld. They donated food and clothing. They walked the fields searching for family treasures, and removing rubble that would have otherwise ruined machinery as farmers worked the fields. An offering was received through One Great Hour of Sharing to assist with the long-term recovery of the community. Farmers from other rural churches sent feed and helped replant ruined crops. The outpouring of support for this community was heartening; yet, even as we put our best foot forward to help, pastors and parishioners alike knew that there were some losses—such as the death of loved ones—that could not be rectified this side of heaven.

Approximately a year later, while I was serving as an interim pastor for two country churches outside of Elkhart Lake and Kiel (Bethel and Bethlehem), we invited the moderator of First Congregational Church in Barneveld to preach at our Mission Fest. In her sermon, the moderator described the great ordeal that the congregation and community had been through. She described the generosity of surrounding towns and churches. She thanked us for our prayers and offerings, and she thanked us for, in her words, “helping to make [them] whole.” “Whole,” the moderator explained, “wasn't the absence of pain and loss, but the presence of healing that occurred in spite of the devastation that we experienced.” That was quite a testimony, I thought, given that the preacher was also the grandmother of the two-year old boy who was killed in the tornado.

I was reminded by the Barneveld situation then, as I think we have all been reminded this week, that we cannot control the weather: we can only control how we prepare for it and how we respond to it. We don't have to be victims of change. We can be agents of change, even in the worst of times. Indeed, this is God's call to us—to choose agency over victimhood.

VI

So the weather reminds us that we are not in charge. This awareness perhaps also puts us in touch with the fact that this ministry is not all on our shoulders. To sustain us in this ministry, we can begin by drawing assurance and guidance from the biblical and historical traditions and the spiritual practices that have sustained our ancestors.

We could start with the oldest story in the Judeo-Christian tradition, Genesis 1, which reminds us that change is an inherent part of God's unfolding work in creation and that we are invited to share in this divine work and in God's holy Sabbath.

We could also take a few pointers from the pioneers who homesteaded Iowa. We could travel light, knowing that not everything that we have accumulated, as much as we cherish it, is going to be helpful or practical in the territory where we are headed. We could leave behind accoutrements of the past that will not advance the gospel in the 21st century. Check my paper for some packing tips, or better yet, ask the experts—our youth and young adults—for their advice.

In addition to lightening our load, we could take a hard look at ourselves and our traveling companions. We could ask ourselves some tough but important questions, such as these: Are we outfitted for this journey? Do we have the personal and professional capacities to lead the wagon train into this new territory, to this new day to which God is calling? In what ways are my limitations or resistance to change a deterrent to my, and our, capacity to experience God's new day? What additional competencies or spiritual growth are needed of me to advance the mission of Christ in this "post-everything" world that we are living into? With whom do I (do we) need to be partnering so that we can survive, and ideally thrive, in the new territory where we're headed?"

The opportunity to plan for my current sabbatical created an occasion for me to ask these questions of myself. I noted right away my need to learn more about the journeys, gifts, and needs of prospective, new, and returning Christians—and these are the people who are joining renewing churches across the country—since most of them have been away from church twenty or more years, and since an increasing number have no prior experience with Christianity. Having grown up in the church, and moreover having never left, ministry with newcomers is a new frontier for me. No one taught me in college or seminary to expect, let alone how, to minister with new and returning Christians. So this is my sabbatical focus. I'm engaged in a literature review, Internet research, and visits and ethnographic research on eight renewing churches in the UCC that are successfully reaching new and returning Christians. One of the added benefits of this project has been the chance to deepen and expand my network of colleagues who are engaged in church renewal projects, and to learn more about their experience of ministry with new and returning Christians.

Because the ministry is not for the faint of heart, particularly ministry in revitalizing organizations, I am absolutely convinced that we must circle the wagons as church leaders and find better ways of learning from and supporting each other in this ministry. We need to remember that Jesus sent the first disciples out to preach and teach in a world that was largely

hostile to the gospel—but he did not send them alone. He sent them out two by two, and called them together periodically for conversation, prayer, and discernment. We would do well to reclaim this important learning-serving model of leadership.

A further way to reduce stress and to co-create God’s new day in the life of our churches is to develop congregational agreements about the direction that we are moving, and clarify who is doing what. Two of the most practical and effective ways to do this, strategic planning and appreciative inquiry, are outlined in the paper.

We also need to understand the centrality of healthy spiritual practices to the vitality of our leaders, members, and our churches. Through attention to our spiritual practices we give God a chance to work on and through us, and we give ourselves a better chance of recognizing the Spirit’s guidance. Theologian Diana Butler Bass offers some helpful advice. In her recently published book, *Christianity for the Rest of Us*, Bass identifies “Ten Signposts of Renewal” in vital Protestant churches, based on a study of 3000 congregations and in-depth ethnographic studies of fifty congregations in her research pool. These signposts, which Bass also refers to as “spiritual practices,” (Bass 2006, 4-5), are common to vital congregations, and include: hospitality, discernment, healing, contemplation, testimony, diversity, justice, worship, reflection, and beauty. They are not only grounded in the Christian tradition, they are also, in many cases, common to Iowa culture. There isn’t time here to go into depth about each of these practices and the unique strengths that Iowans bring to them, but I do offer a taste of what I’m talking about in the paper.

What we learn from Bass’s research, and from reflections on our cultural context, is that there are vital and revitalizing congregations within Mainline Protestantism, including the UCC. Our churches are not predestined for death. Another hopeful insight that Bass offers is that even her model churches don’t exhibit, equally well, all ten of the practices that she describes. At best, most only embodied three or four of these ten practices. Perhaps a realistic starting place for us, then, would be discerning which one of these ten practices is our congregation’s strength and leaning into that one. As Bass demonstrates with her research results, and as we have found at Eden Church in Hayward, California, church renewal is not for the faint of heart, but it is possible, and it starts with the courage to believe that a new day is possible, and the willingness to lean into our greatest strength and press toward the horizon where God’s new dawn is dawning.

VII

Friends, believe the good news of the gospel, God invites us to be change agents, rather than victims of change. God invites us to learn from our ancestors in the faith, and to discern, appreciate, and build on our God-given gifts, and to attend to the spiritual practices of our tradition for nurture. And as we do, we will discover that God’s new day has already dawned around us. Thanks be to God.

Works Cited

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