

"The First Church in 2010"

What is the church? Ask this question of seminary trained clergy from the United Church of Christ tradition and you will get an answer that sounds something like this: The church is the Body of Christ gathered by the Holy Spirit where the Word is rightly preached and the Sacraments are properly administered. This ideal definition reminded me of reality for pastor Jenkins who went to see his doctor for advice about his wife's snoring. The doctor asked, "Does her snoring really disturb you?" The pastor replied, "does it disturb me? Why it disturbs the entire congregation!" (Enc. Of Humor, p. 46).

What is the church? Ask this question of seminary trained Ministers in the Unitarian Universalist tradition and you might get: Our community of faith is an Association of members in covenantal relationship with each other around core principles, sacred teachings from all faiths, and diverse spiritual practices. Now this reminds me of standard commentary on church. The problem with the mainline church is that too many church members are singing "Standing on the Promises," when they are merely sitting on the premises (ibid, p. 16).

What is the church? Ask this question of Sunday school children in our church and we might hear: Here's the church, here's the steeple, open the doors and see all the people . . . doing mysterious things. Which reminds me of the time a Sunday school teacher was very keen on religious ceremonies and had spent an entire session talking to the class about the correct way to pray. "Now," she said finally, "suppose we want to pray to God for forgiveness. What must we do first of all?" "Sin?" suggested one little boy (Enc. of Humor. p. 34).

What is the church? When we open up the scriptures and ask this question of the leader of the new church start in Corinth in the first century A.D. we find this answer: It's a community of faith in God whose members are like the hands, feet, eyes, ears, fingers, nose, arms, toes of Christ who follow the teachings of Jesus; who unite together to contribute differing gifts of talents, time, and treasures for the continuance of the earthly work of Jesus; and who treat

individuals as equals. This definition reminds me of church signboards (ibid. p. 14).

Work for the Lord. The pay isn't much, but the retirement plan is out of this world.

Since you can't take it with you, why not leave it here?
The Lord loveth a cheerful giver but also accepteth from a grouch.

What is the church? When we open up the Bible and ask this question of the gospel writer Luke, we find that he portrays the church as a community of disciples who are empowered by the Holy Spirit: A community of faith which believes that the spark of Divine light which gives life to the hearts of humanity is fanned into flame by the Spirit of the Risen Christ. This reminds me of the time a very dignified pastor was visiting a lady in a nursing home who was confined to a wheelchair. As he stood to leave, the lady asked him to have a word of prayer. He gently took her hand and prayed that God would be with her to bring her comfort, strength and healing. When he finished praying, her face began to glow. She said softly, "Pastor, would you help me to my feet?" Not knowing what else to do, he helped her up. At first, she took a few uncertain steps. Then she began to jump up and down, then to dance, and shout and cry with happiness until the whole nursing home was aroused. After she was quieted, the solemn pastor hurried out to his car, closed the door, grabbed hold of the steering wheel and prayed this little prayer: "Lord, don't you ever do that to me again without a warning first!" (ibid. p. 12-13).

What is the church? In my Annual Report I wrote about how our congregation answered that question in 2009. *What's the church? Ask this question of ten people and you will get ten different answers. One of my favorites is: The Church is a Place of Healing. In Isaiah 61:1-3, the prophet beautifully describes the Healing Spirit that calls forth, passionately engages, and energizes God's people in every generation.*

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion—to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory.

Last year our community of faith did a lot of praying, supporting, and caring of those who were ill in mind, body, spirit, and soul. We gathered up food, gave blood, provided funeral services, sponsored a domestic violence support group, empowered teens in SAFETY.NET, visited the sick and shut ins, sent cards, housed the New Way of Life AA meeting, helped local families, partnered with wider church healing and reconciling ministries, networked in REACH, worshipped weekly and praised God daily. With the help of God, we did what we could even as we were personally hard hit by economic shortfalls, job cutbacks and losses, relationship problems, health issues, addictions, tragic accidents, and the death of our own loved ones.

Because The First Church was a place of healing in 2009, our building benefited too. The old front doors gave way to new ones. Fresh paint now covers the old peeling black trim. The organ doesn't squeak anymore. The elevator goes up and down. Heat is warming the sanctuary. And, we've got a new refrigerator! No doubt about last year: The First Church was anointed and blessed for the Lord's work of healing. I wonder, how will the Holy Spirit call us to action in 2010?

*Grace and peace,
Rev. Ashton*

Last year I was grateful to be an active member of First Church where we did not forsake the Healing Work of the Spirit. I was filled with joy whenever we were able to meet others at their point of need with compassion and justice. I was thankful that we ordered our life and governed ourselves in such a way all year long that we were able to increase in faith, affirm and value each others as equals in the eyes of God, and become practiced in serving the Lord with gladness in a variety of ways.

I wonder, how will the Holy Spirit call us to action in 2010? I've already heard thoughts from many of you. What is the UCC or UUA doing about the environmental global crisis? Can we get a Book Club going for learning about different kinds of spirituality? Can we use our space to help out with W.B. Food Pantry needs? Can we have a Music, Gospel Theatre, or Band Camp for Children this summer? Can we start using the OWL curriculum in our religious education program? Can we host another compassionate justice lecture? How can we best use our income from the cell tower? Can we do something special next Christmas when Eagle Scout candidate Stephen finishes the crèche scene? Can we get another seminary student to come here? Can we have a sunrise Easter service? Can I just come to worship and feel safe in the goodwill of the Lord? Do I have to be a church member and do I have to commit to term requirements to serve on the committees that develop the programs that sustain the going life of this church? Can I belong to First Church without becoming a member? Can I be baptized in the Town River?

Today we gather for Annual Meeting. Once a year we meet for the practical reason of voting on a budget that will support the building, program, and staffing needs of this church. We hold annual meeting to make innovative changes to the basic ABC's of congregational order and governance. We hold annual meeting to give authority to those who will serve as organizational leaders to help individuals offer their hands, feet, eyes, and ears in unified service for the Lord. Once a year we meet to renew our covenant and to bless the presence of the Holy Spirit among us. Amen.