



The Minnesota Conference United Church of Christ

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Eastern Association Email Newsletter

EA Email, August 27, 2004

08/27/04

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1. Greetings: Dear Colleagues in Ministry,

I have spent much of this week thinking about **chatter** – not the sort we are being taught to perceive as predictive of terrorist activity but rather as idle talk. “Chatter” first came to mind on Monday evening when I read Richard Hays open letter to United Methodists in the August 24 issue of The Christian Century. He begins, “Let us stop fighting one another . . . about issues of sexuality, so that we can focus on what God is saying to the church about our complicity in the violence that is the deepest moral crisis of our time.” His point is not so much that (what he terms) “the sexy issues” are unimportant but that they are not most important. He reminds us of C.S. Lewis’s observation that one of the devil’s favorite tactics is to distract our attention with nominally good causes from the matters of first importance so

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that we continue on the gradual road to hell. Robin Meyers makes a similar point in [The Virtue in the Vice](#), my Tuesday evening reading, when he observes that we have been “so busy searching for weapons of mass destruction that we have failed to recognize an even greater threat: words of mass deception” – what I am calling “chatter.” Wednesday morning’s [Star Tribune](#) carried an editorial about Dina McGreevey, wife of New Jersey’s former governor, James McGreevey, that concluded: to talk about a candidate’s personal life rather than his or her economic policies is, in effect, to participate in a shell game, a “slight of hand that diverts out attention.” And later that day an e-mail from a colleague in ministry concluded: “The more I listen the more I sense that the conversation about centralized or decentralized staff becomes a huge distraction from dealing with the real issues.”

In all of this I am reminded of a remark I read some years ago: “All the noise comes from the shallow end of the pool.” Because I have long been a regular early-morning swimmer, it has stuck with me as a telling image. There is no question in my mind that one of the great challenges we face as individuals, congregations, Associations, and Conferences is to stay focused on what is of first importance. Chatter is all around us. The cacophony of the superficial pervades the cultural waters in which we swim. Our faith calls us to get into the deep water.

Hays ends his article by calling his Christian colleagues to a time of fasting: “to clear our heads and hearts, **to practice the discipline of detachment from what we suppose to be our needs, and to focus on hearing God rather than lobbying for our own agendas.**” Good counsel for a UCC people seeking to be attuned to the still speaking God. May it be so among us! Karen Smith Sellers.

2. News from clergy, churches, and staff: We hold in our prayers **Rev. Kim Mammedaty** and the **Council for American Indian Ministry**. Kim, who is a member at Minnehaha UCC and a member of the search committee for the new Conference Minister, has resigned her position. The CAIM board met last weekend.

I ask your prayers also for **Rev. Matt Geiger**, who served previously at Minnehaha UCC in Minneapolis and at First Congregational Church in Moorhead. Matt has metastatic esophageal cancer and after consultation with his oncologist has decided to stop chemotherapy. Matt continues to serve as an Associate Minister at First-Plymouth UCC in Lincoln, NE. You may send notes and cards to Matt at the church: 2000 D Street, 68502, or by email at matt@firstplymouth.org. His work phone number is 402-476-7565.

We have received notice of the death of **Rev. Bill Edge**, who served as the **first full-time director of CUE** Seminaries of the Midwest (1974-1980). Bill brought significant leadership and dedication to CUE in those very early years. We offer prayers of thanksgiving for his life and ministry and prayers of comfort and peace for his family and friends.

Finally, I remind you that this Sunday, August 29, is the celebration of the authorized ministry of the **Rev. Doug Allen** at **Emerson Congregational UCC**. After today, please use his home address: 9860 Linden Drive, Eden Prairie, MN 55347 and send emails to: dougathome1@juno.com.

3. Last call to register as a participating congregation in the Identity/Still Speaking Campaign:

Announcement has been made week after week in this email, an article has appeared in [The Voyager](#), and a special mailing went to each congregation. Yet we continue to receive feedback that you have not heard about this. One last time: **September 1 is the deadline** to sign up to be a participating congregation in the **God is Still Speaking** identity campaign. If you sign up, you are asked to share your **web-site address (national will help you form a web page for free)**; form a “hospitality committee” or enlist an existing committee; send a leadership team to a **regional training event**; and try to attend an **afternoon worship service** in our area on November 7th—(more on this later). The National setting will arrange for, and underwrite, the cost of the “media buy” for commercials that will be aired between November 15th and Christmas. The commercials will drive viewers to <http://www.ucc.org/>, which will contain “find a participating church” database, organized by zip code. **You must have a web page and have attended training to be listed on the Stillspeaking site. There will also be a link on this page that allows people to search through a database of all UCC churches, including those not participating.**

As of August 12, 42 churches had signed up in Minnesota. Those in the Eastern Association include: First Congregational, Anoka; St. Mark's Bloomington; Cottage Grove UCC; Peace UCC, Duluth; Pilgrim UCC, Duluth; Chapel Hills Church, Edina; Union Congregational UCC, Elk River; Falcon Heights UCC; St. Matther's UCC, Forest City; First Congregational, Glencoe; Faith UCC, International Falls; Prairie Community Church of Lester Prairie; First Congregational Church of Minnesota, Minneapolis; Linden Hills Congregational UCC, Minneapolis; Lyndale Congregational UCC, Minneapolis; Lynnhurst Congregational UCC, Minneapolis; Mayflower Community Congregational Church, Minneapolis; Minnehaha UCC, Minneapolis; New Brighton UCC; First United Church of Christ, Northfield; St. Paul's UCC, Plato; Robbinsdale UCC, Robbinsdale; Union Congregational UCC, St. Louis Park; Cherokee Park United Church, St. Paul; New Spirit UCC, Savage; Clark Memorial UCC, South St. Paul; Parkview UCC, White Bear Lake.

Sign up now on line at ucc.org/stillspeaking and go to program opt-in. Your church's ID number is in the back of the Conference Directory. Call with your questions!

4. Message from Rev. Nancy S. Taylor, Minister and President of the Massachusetts Conference UCC on the Still Speaking Initiative: As you preach and teach about the Still Speaking initiative in your setting, you might value this message from Rev. Nancy Taylor:

In Eats, Shoots and Leaves, her elegant little book on punctuation, Lynne Truss opens with this story:

A panda walks into a diner. He orders a sandwich, eats it, then takes a gun and fires two shots into the air. He turns to leave. "Why did you do that?" asks the confused waiter. The panda produces a badly punctuated wildlife manual and tosses it onto the counter. "I'm a panda," he says. "Look it up." The waiter finds the relevant entry and, sure enough, reads the explanation: "**Panda:** Large black-and-white bear-like mammal, native to China. Eats, shoots and leaves."

The comma is a highly significant punctuation mark. It can make a huge doctrinal difference, as Cecil Hartley pointed out in his 1818 *Principles of Punctuation*. Consider the difference between the following: "Verily, I say unto thee, this day thou shalt be with me in Paradise," and: "Verily I say unto thee this day, thou shalt be with me in Paradise."

The first version is how many Protestants interpret Jesus' words from the Cross to the penitent thief (Luke 23.43): the thief will go straight to heaven with Jesus ...this very day. The second promises Paradise at some later date and leaves Purgatory nicely in place for the Catholics.

Yes, a comma is highly significant. Consider the difference between: "Comfort ye my people" (please go out and comfort my people) and: "Comfort ye, my people" (cheer up, you lot; it might never happen).

So much depends upon the comma. That is part of what lies behind the UCC's *God Is Still Speaking Initiative* and the phrase, "Never place a period where God has placed a comma: God is still speaking." The *Initiative* calls us to humility – to a posture of listening, openness, and receptivity – to the voice of the still speaking God. The *Initiative* recalls the parting words of Puritan pastor John Robinson to the Pilgrims who set sail in search of religious freedom: "Remember, there is yet more light and truth to break forth from God's holy word." In other words, God is still speaking.

5. Update on Conceal and Carry from David Lillehaug: Because the Minnesota Conference United Church of Christ voted at the 2003 Annual Meeting to join the lawsuit challenging provisions of the Minnesota Citizen's Personal Protection Act of 2003 filed by the Edina Community Lutheran Church and other religious bodies, we received this week an update from the attorney. You will likely recall that on July 13 Ramsey County District Court Judge John Finley ruled that the Conceal & Carry Law violated the Minnesota Constitution because it had been tacked onto an unrelated natural resources bill. Last week, the Minnesota Supreme Court denied the State's petition for "accelerated review" (a bypass of the Minnesota Court of Appeals). And earlier this week Judge Finley denied the State's motion to "stay" his ruling of July 13 —i.e., he rejected the proposal that the law be revived and continue in effect during the course of appeals. Additionally, the first case filed against the law venued in Hennepin County District Court where Judge Marilyn Rosenbaum decided to put the case on hold while the Ramsey County case makes its way through the appellate courts and to keep in effect the temporary injunction against the law obtained in May, 2003.

6. Interfaith Day of Conscience: I regret that the news on the Interfaith Day of Conscience called by the National Council of Churches in the USA and other faith-based organizations did not get to you until Tuesday. It is not too late, however, to respond to the great needs in Sudan/Darfur. Our call to focus on the things of first importance surely includes giving attention to this humanitarian crisis. Please continue to pray for peace for the people of Sudan. To assist those affected, make gifts payable to the Minnesota Conference UCC, marked in the memo portion "Sudan/Darfur Crisis," and send to us with a note asking that the money be forwarded to Wider Church Ministries. To advocate on behalf of the people of Sudan, contact President Bush through UCC Take Action: www.ucctakeaction.org/action/.

7. Update on Hurricane Charley: Florence Coppola, Executive for Natural Disaster Ministries, wrote:

Immediately after Hurricane Charley, I traveled to Florida and was privileged to visit with United Church of Christ pastors and local church members that have been impacted by this deadly hurricane. From Punta Gorda to Port Charlotte to Winter Haven to Lake Wales to Daytona the damage is great. This will be a long recovery. We had opportunity to pray together and to make plans for recovery. It is with gratitude that I serve in this ministry that assists people in rebuilding their lives. The United Church of Christ will play a central role in this recovery. Please share these stories.

Pastor David Neumann has a way of consoling his parishioners in the aftermath of Hurricane Charley. "I tell them we're on that Saturday between Good Friday and Easter," said Neumann as he stood in front of his damaged Port Charlotte church. "We've got one foot in each day, and soon we'll be at Sunday. We'll rebuild and we'll make it."

Monday morning [August 23] at Pilgrim United Church of Christ (UCC), volunteers are moving about under the hot sun. One volunteer is saving several downed trees by propping them up again with ropes. Two women are leading a small train of children around a playground, signs of the newly reopened Pilgrim UCC preschool.

Hurricane Charley damaged the church's sanctuary, blowing out several windows and tearing up a section of the roof. Neumann said they are fairly sure the entire roof will need to be redone. The rest of the church's buildings only suffered minor damage, which in turn made its large fellowship hall into a busy shelter and recovery center for the area. "Our church was the special needs shelter for Charlotte County for the first two nights (after the storm)," explained Neumann. "After those folks were transferred out of here, we still had people coming in from off the street, so we stayed open. We've been the only shelter open ever since in Port Charlotte."

Hundreds of people are homeless in the city, he said. Across the street and next to the church are two trailer parks, both riddled with severe damage. "We have many parishioners who live in those parks," Neumann said. "The saddest thing is that some folks have already packed up what they could and moved away. I know more will do that as well, but right now we're still trying to locate everyone."

All of Pilgrim UCC's members suffered damage of some type, according to Neumann. The big issue now, he said, is the lack of electricity. With the harsh August heat, many who cannot get to cooler conditions are prone to heat illnesses.

But the help is rolling in. The church's shelter, run in cooperation with the American Red Cross, is

full of donated food, beds for people to sleep on, and crowds of volunteers from near and far. Other UCC congregations are calling from all over to see how they can help. A team of volunteers from Maryland and California came to assist the teams going door-to-door in the community. The last church Neumann served even sent a donation. "The community and church folks are all helping so much," Neumann said. "It's been wonderful."

In a time when many volunteers are local folks with their own damaged homes to attend to, Neumann said he thinks it's even more helpful to have folks from outside the region be present. "People here are so stressed and overwhelmed, but you just do what you have to do."

Across Florida, some 13 UCC congregations suffered damages to their church buildings. UCC Florida Disaster Response Coordinator Bill Wealand said he's been checking in with all the pastors. An ecumenical 800-number is now set up in the local UCC Florida conference office for people to call with their needs. (1-800-432-8311)

Assistance is rolling in for Wealand and the UCC as well, who said 237 modular homes were just donated. "We'll be using these in Charlotte and Polk counties as both housing for volunteers and affected residents," he said, adding that volunteer groups from all over the country are already signing up to come down. "We're going to be in the recovery and rehab work for the long haul."

Several churches have already voiced their enthusiasm for having some of the modular homes set up on their grounds to house the incoming volunteers. Wealand said the pastors of the affected churches are in a state of shock and adrenaline at this point in time. "All of us are worried for them and we have offered substitutes to them if they need a break," he explained. "We're also offering counseling if needed, but many pastors are saying their churches need them right now. It might take a little more time before they decide to utilize the help we've offered."

Back at Pilgrim UCC in Port Charlotte, church member Dawn Koehler is smiling in the shelter. "We've gotten to know all these folks so well, we've become one big family," she said, pausing for a moment at a table loaded with canned goods. "We're touching not just lives here, but hearts." Koehler is leading the charge around the shelter, helping make sure people have what they need and that volunteers are in the right places. She's seen the emotions and reactions of affected residents firsthand. "I've had so many people say that they never had faith before this, but that they've found it now," she explained. "We want to make sure we meet all the needs here, especially the spiritual ones."

Many people who visit the shelter just need a listening ear, she added. "They just need to share. And after they share their stories over and over, it's like a butterfly coming out of a cocoon. They start moving around the shelter more and you see their personalities starting to come out."

The shelter has movie nights, game nights, and other times for everyone to gather together in fellowship. The church's youth group is also very active in the disaster response, with many of the youths both going door-to-door with supplies and adopting the senior citizens in the shelter. Koehler said that bond between the elderly and the young has been extremely beneficial to all involved.

Note: The United Church of Christ responding to a request for immediate relief funds sent \$10,000 from the One Great Hour of Sharing Offering and Emergency USA Special Fund to the UCC Florida Conference. An additional \$10,000 was sent to Church World Service as part of our ecumenical commitment. Anticipating a long recovery process for persons affected, and in order to allow the UCC a greater response, an additional \$75,000 is being sought from UCC members and friends. Please continue to pray for persons impacted and for recovery workers.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

1. Pray for people who live in communities affected by hurricanes.
2. To help those affected by disasters you may, gifts may be made payable to your congregation, marked for "Emergency USA (hurricane recovery)" with the request they be sent through your Conference office on to Wider Church Ministries.

OR

3. Send gifts, made out to Wider Church Ministries and marked in the memo portion "Emergency USA (hurricane recovery)" to the Office for Global Sharing of Resources; Wider Church Ministries; 700 Prospect Avenue, Cleveland, OH 44115.

OR

4. Make a secure on-line donation now by clicking on the Emergency USA button on this page. You may note in the "Comments" section: Hurricane Recovery.

8. **Tax Guide for Churches and Religious Organizations:** At the most recent meeting of the Eastern Association Council a request was made for additional resources to assist congregations with financial and personnel matters. With this in mind, I call your attention to the [Tax Guide for Churches and Religious Organizations](#). This should be available at <http://www.irs.gov/> or at 1-800-829-3676. Conference Treasurer, Steve Sorensen, has made this available to members of the Finance Committee. The 25-page booklet has lots of helpful information about tax-exempt status, jeopardizing tax-exempt status, unrelated business income tax (UBIT), employment tax, recordkeeping requirements, etc. I commend it to you.

New Overtime Regulations: I remind you also that new regulations regarding overtime went into effect August 23, 2004. They will require many churches to amend their personnel policies and procedures. The new regulations change the requirements for exemption and change the minimum salary required to be exempt from overtime pay. Frank Sommerville, an attorney and certified public accountant who wrote an opinion for church business administrators, urged churches to study all positions to determine the applications of the new rules. He further urges that all revisions to personnel policies and procedures be

reviewed by an employment lawyer before they are adopted.

....More...

Dear Colleagues in Ministry,

Many of you have expressed gratitude for the weekly "greetings" that accompany the Eastern Association EmAil. Accordingly, I have made an effort to include one each week. I fear, however, that under the press of the demands of this position that this week I pressed "send" before giving myself adequate time to reflect on a possible and definitely unintended implication of what I wrote.

My purpose was to call us to reflection on the critical faith issues in our individual, congregational, Association, and Conference lives. On a second reading, however, it seemed to suggest that issues of human sexuality are not important and/or that the vital conversations we are having about them are instead "chatter." Forgive me if that is what was communicated, because that was clearly not my intent, nor is it what I believe.

My concern has been to call all of us to faithfulness and to clarity of mission as a conference. In retrospect, borrowing from Hays's article and using the example of sexuality was an unfortunate choice.

My apologies, Karen Smith Sellers

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