

*A Waking Time*

The State of the United Church of Christ  
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It is a truism of post-moderns that location makes all the difference, that as important as what is seen may be, who is doing the seeing is perhaps even more important. Equally true of this world view is a deep suspicion of big pictures that sweep aside particularities and, in the process, silencing some communities or perspectives while privileging others. Thus one ought to approach the topic, “The State of the United Church of Christ,” with a certain modesty. What I see and experience in Cleveland or in my travels across the church may have a breadth and scope that some of you lack., but what you see and experience in your more focused places of ministry gives you a depth and subtlety of perspective that I lack. Visiting a local church to represent the wider church on an occasion of celebration is very different from a visit by an area minister to guide a congregation through the trauma of conflict with its pastor or to respond to angry accusations about a national church seemingly gone awry in the culture wars of our day.

My title, *General* Minister and President, appears to be impossibly complex for the church.. It has been rearranged in an endless number of combinations. The other night on CNN Paul Zahn introduced me as the General Manager and President. I wish! In spite of this, the word General is a suggestive one, implying something of an overview, a concern for the whole, the *general* rather than just the *specific*. So what do I see from my “general” vantage point? Well, I see particular places, individual institutions, distinct personalities, and specific settings of ministry. Here are a few, all encountered this fall in my travels:

- A small rural parish in western Missouri led by a gifted young pastor who undoubtedly could be called to a more “prominent” place but who finds deep joy and satisfaction in his relationship with a congregation that still reflects the best values of the Evangelical Synod in a warm and open piety, a commitment to deeply spiritual community, and compassionate care for those in need.

- A large, dynamic, and sophisticated congregation in Lawrence, Kansas that is engaged in the exciting task of reclaiming the power and courage of its origins 150 years ago when students from Andover Seminary founded the church and the town as an abolitionist outpost in the dangerous days of bleeding Kansas.
- A group of four energetic and gifted women pastors serving and, I suspect, slowly transforming rural congregations in Sheboygan County, Wisconsin where congregations still bear names like Schwarzwald and older members can remember learning the Catechism in German, and learning it uniformly from pastors with beards!
- A century old congregation in Evansville, Indiana that is quietly but effectively claiming the United Church of Christ values of extravagant welcome and justice seeking in a cultural context where that is not always easy.
- A large, diverse, and growing congregation on the north side of Chicago that has persistently reinvented itself around worship and courageous witness since the years shortly after its organizing when the founding pastor and the congregation parted ways because the pastor wanted the church to embrace a rigid Lutheran orthodoxy in the emerging Missouri Synod, while the congregation clung to a more irenic and open understanding of the faith, an openness that is now attracting young people in their twenties and thirties who gather once a month after church in the pastor's home for brunch and who demonstrate an excitement about their faith journeys.
- An old German Reformed church in Hagerstown, Maryland that accepted an abandoned shoe factory next door - some gifts really do come labeled "some assembly required" - and is in the process of transforming it into transitional housing for the homeless and a center for social service delivery, as well as its "mother" congregation a few blocks away that has been one of the pioneers in our "God is Still Speaking" effort. When word of the ads' rejection by the networks was announced, this congregation bought 100 additional spots on their local cable outlet!
- A Congregational church in Cleveland that is one of the last remnants of Euclid Avenue's old "millionaires row," a congregation with an Hispanic pastor, a growing African American membership, and a tenacious vision of embodying our multi-racial,

multi-cultural vision.

- A venerable old country parish in once rural Connecticut, now being drawn into the far flung cosmopolitan reach of Boston that is seeking to blend ministries of justice and peace with spiritual direction and spiritual discernment.

The places go on and on and we forget these places to our peril, especially in times of uncertainty or anxiety. And to these places I could add groups of pastors - active and retired - in Washington, DC, New Jersey, Iowa, Connecticut, and Vermont with whom I have spent precious time this fall, pastors who display energy and enthusiasm, sometimes in the most challenging of circumstances, who belie the easy notion of a crisis of morale among clergy in the mainline churches. Or groups of laity coming to the Church House to be trained for our Still Speaking Initiative who sense that they are part of something transformative in our common life. Or seminarians who increasingly reflect a healthier mix of those who are young and those called in mid life, who demonstrate passion for the future of the United Church of Christ. What is the state of the church? If you look in these places, the state of the church is good, very good.

But you know, and I know, that we could look at other places. Places where congregations and pastors have forgotten our roots in religious liberty, our tradition of an irenic piety, our historic commitment to human dignity and justice, and have traded it for an alien, narrow, and exclusivist piety, places like Wethersfield, Connecticut and Hickory, North Carolina, places where you and I have gone not for celebration or encouragement, but for inquisition. Or conferences that have endured excruciatingly difficult and disappointing leadership crises this year - Pacific Northwest and Ohio to name two - or lower intensity conflict that can be equally corrosive, as in Florida around issues of camps and covenant. The national setting of the church has been through its own tough times this fall as we reduced staff and eliminated some programs, moves that make us healthier from a financial perspective and which, I'm happy to report, have actually unleashed energy and creativity among a staff too long burdened with uncertainty. But these financially necessary decisions are painful and diminishing nonetheless. At the recent Council for Theological Education meeting we heard reports of creative programs and exciting initiatives at each of the seven Seminaries of the Church. But persistent financial worries cast ominous shadows over the future of at least some of our schools. Just this week, as most of you

know, two gifted leaders in the United Church of Christ who have served in a variety of settings with courage and grace resigned - Olivia White and Bill Johnson - both of Wider Church Ministries. These resignations come at the end of long and difficult discernment processes involving Olivia and Bill, the Board, and the Collegium. The Board and staff continue to serve faithfully and well, but it is not an easy time. Along with these unexpected transitions across the church there are the host of transitions that come in the normal course of careers - Bernice Powell Jackson, Wilson Yates at United Seminary, Nancy Taylor in Massachusetts, John Schaeffer in Montana-Northern Wyoming to name just a few. What for a while seemed like an abnormally high number of transitions is now beginning to feel more like the norm. In spite of the obvious fact that good people are, more often than not, waiting in the wings, the instability of tenure in leadership cannot be good for us. What is the state of the church? If we look in these places, we would have to say troubled.

Is there a way to offer more than a catalogue of particulars, both good and ill? We can't ignore the particulars, for this is where the Body of Christ is literally embodied in the life of the United Church of Christ. To ignore them is to ignore our polity and it is to run the emotional risk of daily whiplash between hope and despair. More than a few of us in this room know what its like to walk around with both razor blades and band aids in our pockets! Further, everyone in this room is not just a leader of a particular setting in a particular place. We are all leaders - together - of the whole United Church of Christ. What can we say - in the "general" sense - about the state of the United Church of Christ?

I think it is both helpful and appropriate to be considering this question in the midst of Advent, that purpled time, regal and repentant, when ancient promises are heard again even while the Baptist's axe is laid to the tree, when women sense the stirring of redemption within and men are bewildered and struck dumb in public before their neighbors, when Rachel weeps and Mary sings, when poverty plays host to unexpected royalty and Herod 's empire trembles. A United Church of Christ pastor of blessed memory, Arnold Kenseth, put it well about Advent when he prayed, "The darkness in us deepens, O Lord, awaiting your light." Whatever the state of the church, it is measured in Advent time.

The Consultation on Common Texts offers this collect for the First Sunday of Advent:

Unexpected God,

Your advent alarms us.  
Wake us from drowsy worship,  
From the sleep that neglects love,  
And the sedative of misdirected frenzy.  
Awaken us now to your coming,  
And bend our angers into your peace.

I believe we are in a “waking time” in the United Church of Christ, a waking prompted perhaps by a sense of the urgency of our circumstances, but certainly as well by the alarm of God’s advent. Waking time is often an ambivalent and ambiguous time. It can be a time of strange dreams that reveal our truest worries, frustrations, and fears. It can be a time of anticipation and of temptation - to greet the day with enthusiasm, or to bury the head under the pillow against the cold of still dark hours? It can be a time for attentiveness to the Stillspeaking God or to mindless talking heads spouting ideological rants on the radio. It can be a time for dragging ourselves back into dreary routine or for an eager launch into a new day of opportunity. It can be time for the Psalmist’s “this is the day the Lord has made,” or a time to grope for the snooze alarm. I think we’re in “waking time” in the United Church of Christ.

“Unexpected God, your advent alarms us. Waken us from drowsy worship.” There is much drowsiness in our life and, sadly, in our worship. I recently read portions of a diary written by Leslie Newbigen, one of the first bishops of the Church of South India. It contains fascinating reflections on that church in the year of its birth based on his own pastoral visits to the parishes of his diocese. At one point he contrasts the worship he experiences in former Anglican parishes with those of Congregational churches. “Why is it,” he asked, “that churches which give maximum freedom and responsibility to each local parish and pastor for ordering and leading worship, often give that responsibility such minimal attention?” Drowsy might actually be a polite way to put it. Drowsy worship. Drowsy leadership as well in many local churches and elsewhere.

But there are signs of awakening. The *Worshiping Into God’s Future* project is a crucial recognition that an awakened church will be alert and alive in the sanctuary. Ministry issues, for all of the focus on multiple paths and for all of the passion diverse folk in the church bring to that question, is really about strengthening - awakening - pastoral leadership across the United Church of Christ. Lilly funded efforts in Nebraska and Massachusetts on pastoral excellence are a recognition that pastors cannot sleepwalk and expect congregations to be vital. New leadership

development initiatives bubbling up within the Council of Conference Ministers remind us that the ministry of episcopé is both crucial and cannot be left to chance. Passionate conversations about evangelism as the core value of the United Church of Christ tell us that announcing the Good News of Jesus Christ in our communities and inviting persons to faith and discipleship is not something someone else does while we nap. The United Church of Christ will no longer chug along the tracks while pastors and people snooze in sleeping compartments. I see signs that the United Church of Christ is rousing itself from drowsiness. It is waking time.

“Unexpected God, your advent alarms us. Wake us from drowsy worship, from the sleep that neglects love.” The covenants that order love among the parts of the United Church of Christ are easily neglected and often have been. Loyalty no longer holds us together. Shared memory, common stories, a common heritage no longer bind us into one family. New every morning is your love, and newly needed from us every morning in ordered and accountable ways! The restructure of the national setting of the United Church of Christ was at its heart an attempt to bring renewed life to the covenantal tension between the parts and the whole. The recent report of the Restructure Evaluation Oversight Committee of the Executive Council suggests that we may be on the right track, but with a long way to go. How can we clarify the role of the Executive Council in relation to the Boards of the Covenanted Ministries? What is the form and function of General Synod in relation to the rest of the church? How do the members of the Collegium serve their “part” while remaining officers of the whole? And what is the distinctive ministry of the General Minister and President in that body and for the church? How do we vision together, not just for the parts, but for the whole? What might it look to include Conferences in an ongoing process of restructure and renewal? Sleep, or lazy assumptions, do neglect love. It is waking time.

It is also waking time for a church that speaks of inclusion and welcome. The 1993 Pronouncement to be a multiracial, multicultural church remains largely unattended by many parts of our church and every setting has miles to go before we sleep. Barriers remain for the full participation of persons with disabilities. Far too many of our churches remain frightened of what would happen if they publicly declared themselves “open and affirming.” Embraced slogans about covenant are not the same thing as tended love for one another in all our difference. These are

places where the beckoning day and the seductive, comfortable bed may be easiest for us to perceive.

And it is waking time for recognizing that autonomy cannot be an excuse for failed or neglected accountability. The “Manual on Church” under development from PLL is a sign of stirring. The planned conversation at February’s Annual Consultation on the mutual expectations of conferences and the national setting is a sign of stirring. The support of small membership and large geography conferences by all of the conferences is a sign of stirring. The increased readiness I sense in Committees on Ministry to challenge pastors to consider seriously the implications of their ordination vows for their support of the faith, life, and witness of the whole United Church of Christ is surely a sign of stirring. Bill Green tells us that we’ve done a good job of inspiring generosity in the United Church of Christ. We just haven’t done a good job of inspiring generosity to the United Church of Christ. Stillspeaking and more focused financial development initiatives nationally and in conferences show signs of stirring. It is waking time.

“Unexpected God, your advent alarms us. Wake us from drowsy worship, from the sleep that neglects love, and the sedative of misdirected frenzy.” Those of us who have been around awhile can probably give names to some of the misdirected frenzy we have sometimes been classified and caricatured by. Our witness is often scattered, our initiatives uncoordinated, our commitments so numerous we become superficial. Time will tell if The Stillspeaking Initiative is one more sign of misdirected frenzy. But there are hints and suggestions that it is not. Over a third of our churches have formally said they want to be a part of this, and many more are informally participating. There is a yearning for the claiming of an identity that can provide a clear alternative to the gospel of exclusion, prosperity, domination, and fear that pervades so much of American religion. There is an emerging recognition that the wounded, alienated, and lonely persons in our community who wonder if there is a church or a God who cares for them are in fact an evangelical mandate for us. There is a readiness to make the noble heritage of this church and all its “firsts” more than a nostalgic and pleasant dream, but a living reality in the morning of this new day. There is a growing sense that there is a distinctive vocation for the United Church of Christ in our time and that we must claim it and give generously to it in order not only for our witness, but for the whole witness of the Christian faith to be vital and clear in

our time.

This past week has certainly been one of the more stressful and remarkable ones in my ministry. Along with the painful leadership changes in Wider Church Ministries has been the enormous gift unexpectedly offered to us by NBC and CBS. The media attention has been unlike anything I have ever seen, and the response from those inside the United Church of Christ and beyond gives all the evidence we need that our voice is crucial in these days. These have been frenzied days but not, I think, misdirected. Someone at the polls last month in Ohio was asked why she was willing to stand and wait for over an hour in the rain. “It’s the only way to get the commercials to stop!” The contrast between the message of fear and deception and exclusion that dominated the political season and the message of our “bouncer ad” commercial couldn’t be more stark. Are we willing to claim the vocation of extravagant welcome and courageous truth telling that our ad suggests and that appears to have struck such a cord? This strange turn of events could end in a whimper, or it could position us to take on a public role for which our history has prepared us and our theology has equipped us. Equipped us in ways that bear reminding. Of the countless emails I’ve received this week, one touched me deeply:

I was baptized in the Congregational Church of Algona, Iowa, and confirmed in the same church. I was a skeptic when the merger took place and was adrift for many years as a result of it. I have by marriage been attending a rural ELCA church in North Dakota for many years, but have never dropped my membership in my home church. I was elated yesterday, in fact renewed to read the story of your ads in my local paper. I have been an educator of at risk children for over twenty years. . . and have been engaged in public policy work for nearly all of my adult life while teaching. Much of that work was based on my quiet but strong spiritual upbringing. I have been appalled at the turn this country has taken relative to the spirituality of acceptance and inclusion I have grown to live with all of my life. One never knows when one’s past will make a return visit and mine did yesterday and I thank you for it. That which I learned and have lived for all of these years was not a figment of my imagination.

We shouldn’t be surprised in Advent that the Herods of this world in church and government and commerce will do what they can to silence the voice of the Still-speaking God. But we should also remember that it was a member and a leader of the faith community - Zechariah - who was struck dumb by his failure to claim the promise Elizabeth’s pregnancy portended. Benjamin Mays, Martin Luther King, Jr.’s mentor in college, once said that “social custom makes cowards of far too many Christians, including many ministers.” Reinhold Niebuhr

in his reflections on ministry in Detroit lamented the fact that many clergy lack that essential “touch of daring” so crucial for faithful witness. The question I asked at General Synod a year and a half ago remains the question for us: “Do we love Jesus more than the lure of respectability?” The earliest churches of our United Church of Christ met in meeting houses on the town greens of the commonwealth. They understood that discipleship calls us to a public responsibility. Marriage amendments and failed school levies, permission for imperial arrogance and military adventure, sanctioned indifference to the poor and unconscionable benefits for the privileged cannot remain uncontested. Could it be that we have been thrust into uncommon and uncomfortable prominence for just such a time as this?

We are in Advent - a season, an observance, and a condition. It is waking time for the United Church of Christ. “Stir up your power, O Lord,” says *The Book of Common Prayer*, “and with great might come among us.” Come among us, of course, not for our own sake, but for the world’s. What is the state of the United Church of Christ in a general sense? We are, I believe, being awakened by the advent alarm of an unexpected God. And we are being awakened for those little places all over the world whose hopes and fears are met in us and in the Child we struggle to welcome. So not alone, but with the world we conclude our prayer, “Awaken us now to your coming, and bend our angers into your peace.” Amen.