

Address of the Conference Minister
Connecticut Conference, United Church of Christ
2004

God spoke at the beginning of time, and there was land and sea and sky, a profusion of living creatures, stars and planets, beasts and human beings.

God spoke and Moses stopped at a bush that seemed to be burning with the suffering of God's people, and God spoke and he went up a mountain, there to receive the Ten Commandments that guide us to this day.

God kept speaking, through prophets like Isaiah and Amos, through the psalmists and wisdom writers. God even seems to have spoken through a donkey to Balaam and then through Balaam himself!

God spoke through Mary who sang of God's way of bringing down the powerful and lifting up the lowly, and she gave birth in her faithfulness to Jesus Christ, our living Savior.

God in Jesus spoke to all humanity in parable and beatitude, in question and confrontation, in deeds of healing, in sacrament and story.

God spoke to Paul on the road to Damascus, and the gift of his blindness helped him see.

And God has continued to speak through priests and reformers, through Puritans and pilgrims, through prophets and those of uncommon wisdom right down to our time. Through John Robinson, who taught our forebears, "God hath yet more light and truth to break forth from His holy word". Through theologians Jonathan Edwards and Horace Bushnell. Through Lemuel Haynes the first African American to be ordained, in 1785 right here in Connecticut. Through Antoinette Brown Blackwell, the first ordained woman. Through those who rose up on the Amistad and those who rose up to defend them. Through Nathanael Guptill and others like him who guided this great church through its uniting. Through countless saints down through these years who have heard God speaking and stood for what is right, by God's grace.

And by God's grace, God is still speaking!

Yes, Gracie Allen is an unlikely theologian. But God has used unlikely people throughout all of human history. And so when she wrote her final note to George Burns, saying "George, never place a period where God has placed a comma," she inspired us. Just that single way of saying it has opened doors to faith for so many who believed the doors had been slammed shut with an exclamation point, never mind a period. That is what The Stillspeaking Initiative is all about.

When I was very young, I had the privilege of serving on the national Executive Council of the United Church of Christ during the presidency of Dr. Robert V. Moss. Bob was a New Testament scholar from Hickory, NC who served as our President from 1969 until his death in office in 1976, during a time of great upheaval, especially about war, civil rights and sexuality. As we all struggled together to discern the faithful response of the Church of Jesus Christ to the challenges of those times, the Executive Council convened in Nebraska. On that Sunday, Bob preached. I will never forget the powerful sense I had that morning of being in the presence of a true prophet of God's word. In one line, he captured the essence of the United Church of Christ's ongoing theological engagement: "There was no theology of the cross before the cross," he said.

That is the kind of challenge we have before us perennially: the cutting edge of theology, engaging reflection on the demands of our time. The dialogue we need to have is about how we discern God speaking to us, and wanting us to speak, in our day.

We will always live in the tension between the period and the comma, in the time between the Amen and the Alleluia.

Every one of us works in our own way to discern the faithfulness required of us in our personal lives and ministries and in our Biblical and theological understanding. Because of the uniqueness of our personalities and life experiences, we come to different conclusions. And because life is a journey with God, sometimes we even change our minds. Our life together between the period and the comma is richer because of our diverse viewpoints. We can teach one another and learn from one another. We can resist the world's insistence on polarization and live as a Christian community, loving one another not *despite of*, but *because of* our differences.

Our Christian Unity

Tonight I want to remind us about who we are as we gather for this Annual Meeting. Most importantly, we are one Body in Christ, given to each other *by* Christ. Our unity is not an achievement, not a goal, not even a purpose. It is a gift. Given by Christ so that we might be a faithful community. Given so that we might learn to live according to Christ, not according to the one-issue polarizing ways of the world. Given so that in all our differences, we might focus on Christ as the center and head of our communion in faith.

From our earliest days as a denomination, we have tried to incarnate this unity. Nothing could be more counter-cultural. The Preamble to the United Church of Christ Constitution says we were formed "in order to express more fully the oneness in Christ of the churches composing" the United Church of Christ, "to make more effective their common witness in Him, and to serve His kingdom in

the world.” Notice the language there: *“to express more fully the oneness in Christ”*. Our oneness is inherent in our being Christian; it is the commitment to *expression* of that oneness that draws us together. Again, it is not an achievement reached by compromise, not a goal we lay on each other, but a gift of Christ himself.

Our incarnational theology is rooted in the passage taken as the motto of the United Church of Christ, from John 17:20-21a: “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one.” Our unity is given, but it has a purpose, that others may believe through our word, our testimony, our mission, our incarnation of God’s loving ways.

As a sign of our oneness, let us read from the Preamble:

The United Church of Christ acknowledges as its sole head, Jesus Christ, Son of God and Savior. It acknowledges as kindred in Christ all who share in this confession. It looks to the Word of God in the Scriptures, and to the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, to prosper its creative and redemptive work in the world. It claims as its own the faith of the historic Church expressed in the ancient creeds and reclaimed in the basic insights of the Protestant Reformers. It affirms the responsibility of the Church in each generation to make this faith its own in reality of worship, in honesty of thought and expression, and in purity of heart before God.

In the punctuation of Christian discourse, our unity is a period. We are one. Christ gave his life so that the world might be saved, and our unity is far more profound and resilient, therefore, than some might have us believe. There are those who threaten to break with us, and some who have done it. But as the world’s pressures attempt to make Christianity narrower and narrower, I believe the United Church of Christ is called to resist such pressures. We are called to dwell in mutual hospitality to one another especially when we disagree, as I attempted to lay out in my address last year. [Excerpts from that address are in a booklet in your registration packets, and I ask you to read it before you come to tomorrow’s sessions.] Such mutual and prophetic hospitality puts the world on notice – we are a different kind of community, marching to a different drummer, one whose cadence beats with inclusion and a passion for justice and peace.

Yet we are called to live in hospitality not only to one another but also to the world that has yet to grasp the saving message of Christ. It is for that purpose that the Church exists. In other words, our mission cannot be separated from our Christian unity. We don’t choose one over the other. We don’t settle for a least common denominator. We strive to discern the path of faithfulness and then name it to one another. As Christians, we are called to a radical transformation of the world and that includes us. When the demands of the Gospel put us at odds with one another, we remain committed to our unity even though we differ. This is one of the gifts of the United Church of Christ.

In our way of being the Church, we don't all have to agree in order to remain in covenant. We don't have to swallow hard and salute a single direction. Our polity not only allows but also celebrates such diversity among us. Our resiliency is our strength. We are a unique and precious part of the religious landscape with gifts for just such a time as this. While more centrally controlled churches all around us are breaking apart, we come together to confer, church to church. No hierarchy. Only the power of Christ and the presence of the Holy Spirit to insist that we honor one another and God in our speaking and our listening.

Our Common Witness

The Preamble speaks of our being united to make more effective our common witness in Christ. I believe that common witness is uncommonly threatened right now. Our people have begun in the past two decades to lose their vision of our shared wider mission.

In the same time, wonderful, creative and exciting relationships have sprung up church to church within Connecticut and in places all over the world. In some respects, this is a dream come true, for in these relationships when rightly lived out, our lives become less isolated and the rest of the world is made more real.

In other respects, this new day presents difficult challenges. Not all churches can mount direct mission relationships. Not all churches that undertake these projects demonstrate Christian humility or staying power. And after all, God's mission in the world is not for our sake and how we feel about it, but for the world's sake and its salvation.

The common witness for which the United Church of Christ was brought into being is under a severe test. Tomorrow you will receive financial reports that document the decline in Our Church's Wider Mission in these past few years. I find it alarming not just because of the large impact this decline has had on our ability to serve you as the Conference, but also because that loss has impacted our global and national mission even more. Every time one of our churches cuts \$1,000 from its giving, it is cutting \$630 from that global mission.

Many of you have by now heard me preach in your churches. You have heard me testify to the amazing, empowering and faithful mission that your gifts support, a testimony I can give personally because I have traveled all over this nation and all around the globe, seeing our mission at work. I have worshipped with a brand new church in a school cafeteria in the middle of the California desert, a church you brought together in a place where the only other options were fundamentalist or Roman Catholic. I have been greeted by a little girl in Uganda after the worst of the wars there, who told me "Thank you, your church has helped us live!" I have seen with my own eyes the quiet service of medical missionaries whose living witness to Christ has brought his Word and healing to

people in central India. I have encountered Christians in Taiwan who thanked us as the United Church of Christ for refusing to start our own denomination there, choosing instead to work with indigenous churches. I have heard Indira Gandhi say to a delegation of us, "The United Church of Christ will always be welcome in India because you respect our people." Time and again I have heard the stories from places all over the globe where the longevity of our mission presence, coupled with our quiet sensitivity to cultural and religious mores, has resulted in far more effective and faithful work than can ever be told.

Through our national and global mission, you are present to refugees on the border of Afghanistan, to Chinese villages where AIDS is rampant but unspoken of, to countless places where intelligent and sophisticated negotiations for peace are underway. Your basic support dollars ensure that we have global mission desks for each sector of the world, occupied by people who are well connected throughout their region of responsibility, ready to respond at a moment's notice to times of crisis in human rights, war, famine, or disaster. Those same dollars reach out in evangelism and new church starts, youth ministry development, legislative monitoring and AIDS awareness in our own country. They take our representatives to global and national ecumenical tables where our witness is unique among the churches and our voice essential. They extend your arms of love to those you can never meet on behalf of Jesus Christ.

Do our churches really want to cut off the relationships, expertise and staying power built up over these centuries of experience? Do you want to make it impossible for a missionary to accompany our partner Ricardo Esquivia in his work in Colombia? Is it truly your desire to withdraw into yourselves? I cannot believe that is the case. What I do believe is that our people do not know where and how their gifts are at work. In the past, we have been reluctant to spend mission dollars on trumpeting our story. Now, however, it is clear that we have to do more, just at a time when there are fewer dollars. Pastors, this is a part of your responsibility – to learn and tell the story, with frequency. Lay leaders, take home with you this word and visit with your Church Council and mission committee. Help them understand the essential nature of our common witness!

Here at home in Connecticut, you strengthen and support the other 254 churches joined in our covenant. You support faith based community organizing through ECCO in New Haven, the Naugatuck Valley Project and the Interfaith Coalition for Equity and Justice in greater Hartford. You help over 75 churches a year find new pastors in a spiritually centered and prayerful process that shapes their future. You assist churches in times of conflict; train churches and clergy in prevention of misconduct; teach moderators and deacons and pastoral relations committees about their roles. You give 1100 young people life-changing experiences at Silver Lake each summer, and offer hospitality for retreats to another 3000 people throughout the year. You give staff time to Andover Newton, to Amistad America, to the Center for Ministry and Career Development and to New Samaritan Corporation. You help churches improve their

stewardship campaigns, their investment and planned giving programs, their financial and personnel administration. You support three new church starts in the Latino, Korean and African American/Caribbean communities.

There are ironies in our life together. At the same time at which the United Church of Christ is resisting the narrowing definition of Christianity, our churches seem to have bought into their own narrow definition of mission. Time and again, I find myself in conversations with churches that assume “mission” means only feeding the hungry, sheltering the poor, and other similar charitable ministries. These are indeed a significant and important part of our ministry as Christians, but they are not the sum total of our mission as the Church. It is as though we have become so captivated by Jesus’ teaching about “the least of these” in Matthew 25, that we have been unable to see the larger picture.

Let’s review our mission statement, adopted by the Annual Meeting in 1998:

Created by God,
Called by Jesus Christ,
Guided by the Holy Spirit,
We are the Connecticut Conference,
the United Church of Christ in Connecticut.

We come together as Local Churches and Members to equip one another to proclaim the Gospel to the communities of Connecticut and to the world by teaching the Good News of Jesus Christ, doing the work of reconciliation and justice, and living faithfully in daily life. Amen.

Since the very beginning of the Christian Church, its mission has indeed been about the poor and the hungry, the captive and the oppressed. It has been about co-creating with God a new human community in which justice and reconciliation prevail. It has also been about strengthening and extending the church itself as the Body of Christ, ensuring that all people – no matter who they are, no matter what they do or where they are on the journey of life – that all people know they are loved just as God made them. It is about ensuring that the Gospel is proclaimed with vitality among our churches here in Connecticut as well as on the island of Bali and in the great Rift Valley of East Africa. The mission of the Church is not simple acts of charity alone. Indeed, our mission is far more complex and far more subtle than it is presently understood within our churches.

I know that much of the interest in local churches in offering “hands on” mission is because we are such an activist people – we love to roll up our sleeves and make a difference. Praise God for that! It is not all that long ago that we had to press hard to help people see beyond the global mission to the one right at our back doors. We prayed for people to open their eyes and they have, and this is good.

Yet as long as definitions of mission that are narrow and sometimes self-serving prevail, we are out of sync with the scriptural understanding of mission. You see, the mission belongs to God. It isn't something the church *does*. It is what the church *is*! Our local churches don't each possess a mission. They each are a mission. *God's* mission, not their own. Together as the Connecticut Conference, when we unite to express more fully our oneness in Christ, that is Christ's mission at work. Our support for one another, our caring when challenges come, our encouragement as opportunities arrive, these are the mission at work.

So this evening I stand before you to challenge you to go back to your churches and sit down with other key leaders to talk about how you structure your support for this imperative mission. Maybe the time has come that we need to take a new look at how congregations decide on their mission giving through Basic Support of Our Church's Wider Mission. Perhaps it is your deacons or your church council that should recommend a mission support goal for OCWM. Often they are far more aware of the crucial difference this Conference makes in the lives of our churches than is a mission committee, which so often is focused on local social and charitable work. How you do this will vary from church to church, but I urge you to have this conversation, to take seriously this responsibility!

Please hear me. The work of feeding the hungry is increasingly important as our government abdicates its responsibility more and more. The work of sheltering the homeless and supporting them is baseline ministry for us as unemployment grows and the disparities between the wealthy and the poor continue to grow. We need to do more, not less.

This, however, is not an either/or. The vitality of our local churches is crucial to this ongoing work. And the strength of your Conference is part of the reason so many of our churches are vital. Do you know how unique the Connecticut Conference is within the United Church of Christ? The average size church among us is almost twice the average nationwide in the UCC. Close to 50% of our churches have over 600 members. A good portion of the reason for this strength is historical. Yet another substantial reason is the devotion of your Conference leadership for at least 100 years now to strengthening our churches – through program, relationship-building, a liberal sharing of the wisdom from one to another, and a strong sense that every church is a mission outpost in the name of Jesus. To abandon this mission of the Church at this juncture in history would be sinful, a kind of selfishness that is almost unspeakable. Face it. It is in your hands.

Our Serving Christ in the World

There is something else I want to say while I am challenging you. Even as I remind us of who we are as one Body in Christ, given our unity with one another as a gift of Christ himself, even as I challenge us to cherish the whole mission of the Church, I also want to remind us to keep perspective on the matters before

us. There will be disagreement among us at this meeting. As your Conference Minister, I admonish you to remember all that we are able to be and do together despite differing perspectives on issues that come before us at the request of our churches or delegates. Take time to pray, to listen deeply, to hear what others are saying, and trust that the Holy Spirit will guide us in these two days.

While we meet here for worship and inspiration, for business and dialogue, and to celebrate two gifted laity with Living Waters Awards, there is an ugly war going on halfway around the world. Our young people and Iraqi soldiers and civilians are dying horrible deaths. Our nation's campaign in Iraq continues and the silence of the churches is deafening. Yet the One whose name we claim as Christians calls us to be peacemakers, to seek the path of reconciliation and mercy at every turn.

You and I may disagree about the rightness of this military venture, but to ignore its devastation is to fail to hear God speaking from the burning bush. To pretend that we can gather here and debate the right of people to have their love legally acknowledged by the state without naming the awful violation of people's lives and loves by war whether in Iraq, Afghanistan, Colombia, Sudan or the Middle East seems to me to be appalling. And so in this moment, I ask that we take a long moment of silence to acknowledge before God the condition of our world.

[Silence]

And now, as we bring ourselves spiritually back to this place, I ask your attention to one last matter that I cannot leave unspoken. I wonder if you know, as I did not, that the fine remains of those killed at the World Trade Center on September 11th have now been plowed under at the "Fresh Kills" landfill by the City of New York. Plowed under by bulldozer and backhoe, plowed into garbage and topped off with trash.

All of this was done this summer with no notification to families; indeed it was done immediately after a meeting at which the World Trade Center Families for Proper Burial specifically requested *again* that these remains be transported to an appropriate site where a simple memorial could be erected. That is all they are asking, but they have now been told that before the end of the year, that portion of the dump will be sealed with cement and overlaid with soil, and they can have their memorial there – in a trash heap. Words fail me to express my moral and pastoral outrage.

It seems to me that this is a Rorschach of our society right now. Great and towering memorials are to be constructed at Ground Zero, yet the simplest act of propriety and dignity is denied to those who have suffered the greatest loss. Grand commercial buildings will rise where their loved ones died.

As a nation we seem unable to face the horror of death; we live in denial. Denial forms itself readily into belligerence and revenge. The deeper we go into that denial, the more our lives fall apart. Pastors report increased addictions, adultery, depression and violence in our communities. Soldiers abuse prisoners; all sorts of people strike out at one another. Enemies are required for self-definition and national identity. Insecurity abounds. Generosity constricts. It all needs to be named. And it seems to me that it is not unrelated to the way we treat one another in the Church these days – with potshots and distortion of truth, with debate instead of dialogue, with threat instead of invitation.

Yet, God is still speaking. A still small voice. A thundering judgement. A coaxing, empowering word. God still speaks, from landfill and memorial, from pulpit and workplace, from burning bush and urban streets. God calls to us to be the United Church of Christ, an inclusive, joyous community of Christ's people determined to work together for justice and reconciliation among us and among all the world's people.

May it be so!

Rev. Dr. Davida Foy Crabtree
October 15, 2004