

Offering Reflection 11/19/17

My name is Jolyn O'Hare and I'm going to talk about my journey to my current understanding of where we are right now in the life and journey of our beloved church.

When I first came to CCC in 1988, I was drawn by our covenant, which I had read in the entryway the Saturday before. Those words sounded to me like they might describe a place that took people as they were and didn't have rules about belief or expression – it felt like a “real” place. On my first Sunday I knew I had found my home.

Over the next 25 years or so I mostly just came on Sundays and to various events. I wasn't actively engaged in the life of the church until Easter Sunday 3 1/2 years ago when Patricia Robinson asked me if I would consider being co-moderator of the board with her. Such a thing had never crossed my mind, but I had been wanting to get to know Patricia better, and I was honored that the board thought I could make a contribution. I checked in with myself, and got a “yes,” and you voted me in.

The three years I was co-mod were rich and busy ones. There's more to consider and do than you might think (unless you've been there), to keep our beloved community in balance, and those I've served with on the board, and those I've worked with as team leaders and members, are the most committed, thoughtful, and caring people I've ever worked with.

About 2 years ago, the board began talking about the need for a visioning process, and discernment of a way to sustain our congregation through the coming years. We didn't get very far with an action plan for that because Rev. Curran's departure and the related activities around that took a lot of attention. By the time our first interim minister Alan came, we were focused on the process of search for a new minister, and the related congregational conversations and workshops that helped provide the information for our church profile. I was hopeful that those workshops would help us clarify our vision and way forward for revitalization and sustainability for CCC, but much of what I heard was that we should keep doing what we do, get people in the door, and they would love us and stay. And that does happen, as we know. However, as someone pointed out to me, we have been doing what we do for a few decades now, and our numbers have declined. I think we will need to shift our focus if we want to be sustainable.

Meanwhile, some of the board, membership, and search team members started reading the book *Real Good Church*, which is about the transformation of a small and waning New England church into a larger, vital, and exciting place. Many of you have read this book too, and Irene has led recent book studies on it. The demographics for that church are nothing like ours – they are on a busy street in a community full of young people – but the very clear message I take away is that revitalization of a church takes focus, dedication, and a strong agreed-upon vision or mission. Everyone needs to be supportive of, and most need to working toward, the same goal.

I'm going to mention a couple of other resources that have informed what is now my very strong commitment to revitalization at CCC. One is the book *Spiritual Defiance*, recommended to me by Ann Eichhorn. This book looks at the very beginnings of our faith

tradition, and brought home to me, in a new strong way, how radical Jesus was for his time, and how engaged and open and strong was the initial community that grew up around his teachings: welcoming all, supporting all, passionate about living a meaningful community life. Those people were inspired.

There was something about this recognition that shifted my thoughts about community. Some of you are probably ahead of me on this, but I had been thinking that we needed to bring in new people to bolster our numbers, to enliven our congregation, “so we could enfold them into us”. So they could help us, grow us. I began to get excited about getting to know these people, about their hopes and dreams and challenges, about what they are seeking. Seeing how we could help them, grow them. Pay it forward.

With this new focus I read another book, *Beyond Resistance: The Institutional Church Meets the Postmodern World*. This book was written by John Dorhauer, the General Minister and President of our denomination – United Church of Christ (UCC). He talks about the changes in experience and participation with “church” over the last few decades, and the challenges that ALL denominations (even evangelicals) are having trying to maintain the church of the past. Most churches have stories of the glory days that are no more. He is very clear that churches that want to survive and thrive must do so out of a sense of mission, a wish to serve those they don’t know yet. It can be as simple as providing a safe space for community and growth, but there need to be opportunities for people to engage in a way that serves them, to provide easy entry to community and support. With my new focus on service to the new among us, I have wondered – could that be our mission?

Then there is this video called *When God Left the Building*. This DVD is going into our church library for any who would like to view it. (You can also see it online.) It focuses on some New England churches where it becomes pretty clear there are only a handful of people left and their biggest focus is on keeping their building running so they have someplace to see their friends on Sunday. Not very enlivening. Some of this video is depressing, some is pretty wild, but it gave me hope. We are not those churches. We have energy, and I see a strong wish to continue our life together and to engage with others we haven’t met yet.

I give you these resources in case you might want to see them, but more so you hear how I have come to know that we need to do something about sustaining our beloved community. There is a nation-wide (and probably world-wide) conversation going on about the future of churches, and we’re caught up right in the middle of that future. If we miss doing something definite, we could become too small to recover. I am committed to supporting us in whatever direction the congregation wants to go. But we may need to have more ongoing discussions over the next weeks and months. We have the ability to sustain CCC for ourselves and for others we haven’t met yet. So, this week while I am giving thanks, and over the next few weeks of rest, I will take Irene’s suggestion to bring the possibilities into my heart and see where Spirit leads. Blessings on us all.