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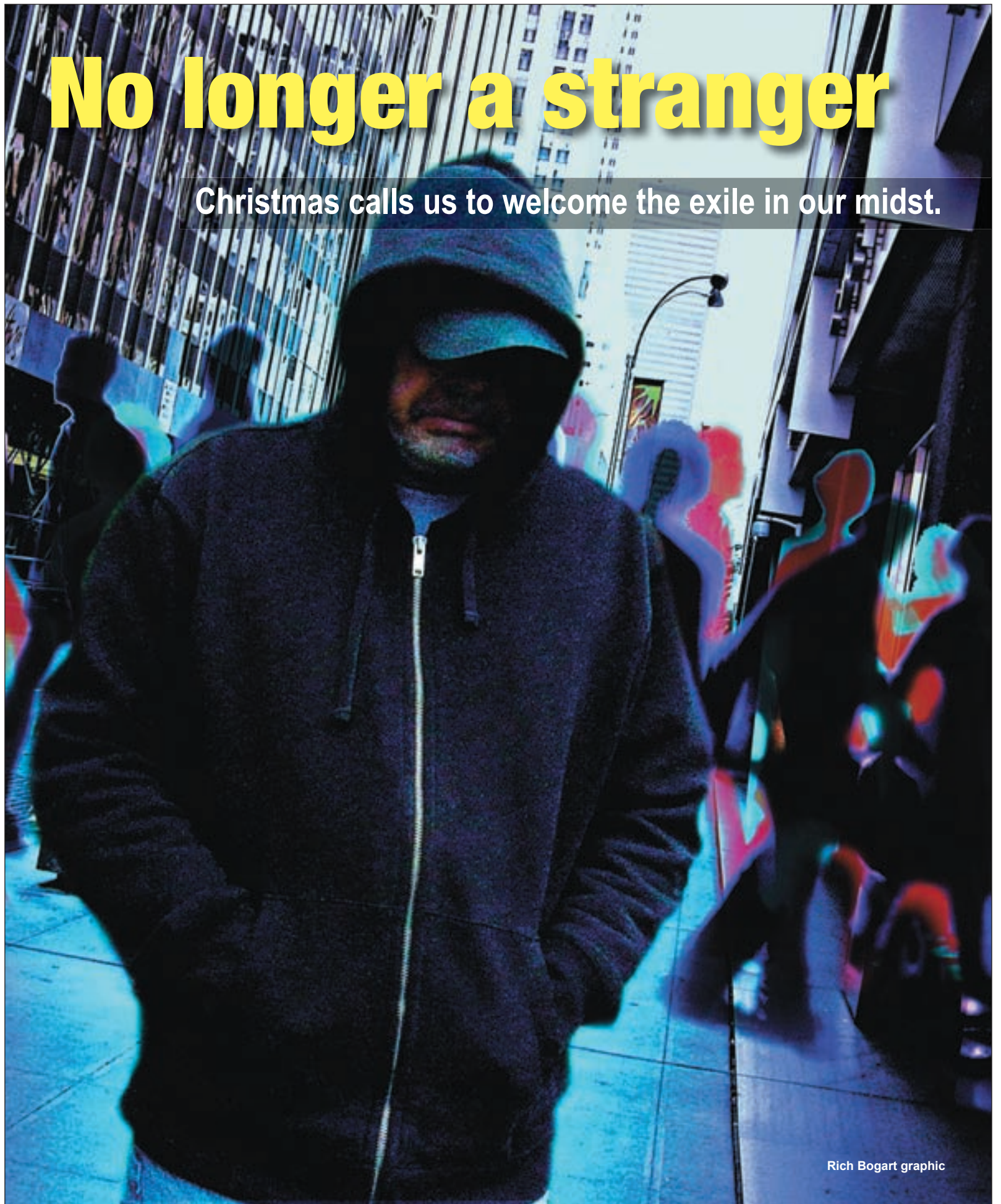
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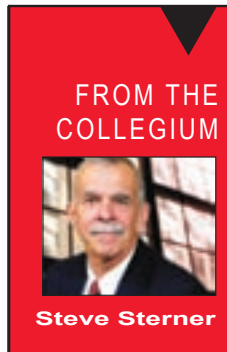
No longer a stranger

Christmas calls us to welcome the exile in our midst.

Rich Bogart graphic



We are not our only hope



FROM THE COLLEGIUM

Steve Sterner

Every year, as Advent draws closer, my yearning for the Advent/Christmas message and meaning intensifies.

Since last we gathered with the shepherds in Bethlehem, listened to the angel choirs, and marveled at the child in Mary's arms, much has happened to us. Not all of it has been pleasant.

Tragedy has come from nature and of human origin too. Dreams have been deferred, if not

shattered, by economic whirlwinds. The guns of war are silenced only by our blocking out their long running fusillades.

There is never a time when the hope of the Advent season is not relevant for us, but this year it is a season that seems to be coming just in time. This year I almost feel like a castaway clinging to the last piece of wreckage in hope, almost vain hope, of rescue.

But then it comes. The familiar texts are dusted off. The focus begins to shift.

This year Psalm 80 calls us to our first Advent worship. It holds a verse repeated three times: "God, bring us back, let your face shine on us and we will be safe."

We are reminded that our salvation will not come from our work or our ways. The travails of markets and the trumpeting of nations will not redeem us.

There is hope because we are not our only hope. There is God. And God is ready to welcome us again.

The light that even now begins to pierce its way through the darkness of our despair is the face of God again visible to our hearts and in our minds.

This is no ordinary hope. It is not founded on just getting strength to go out and face the world all over again. It is a call to hear the proclamation of God's alternative to our reality.

Mary sings about it. Carols proclaim it. The way to our salvation is to embrace the world of God's alternative imagination.

That world is built on hope, not on fear.

It is defined by courageous compassion and joyful justice. It is the Good News of God's love for all creation.

So, over the next few weeks, as we renew the rituals and read again the great texts of Jesus' nativity, my prayers will be with you. My hopes will be restored with yours.

May this be a season when you let God bring you back, back to the hope and promise of a just and peaceful world, the only world in which we will ever be truly safe.

O come, O come, Emmanuel!

The Rev. Stephen Sterner is the UCC's interim executive minister for Local Church Ministries and a member of the UCC's five-person Collegium of Officers.

The way to our salvation is to embrace the world of God's alternative imagination.

UCC PHYSICIANS NETWORK RESUSCITATED

The UCC Physicians Network is seeking the input of physicians who find their spiritual home in the UCC. The Network was organized several years ago to provide opportunities for physicians to work together in addressing issues of mutual interest and concern, and to meet some of the unique spiritual needs of physicians who are part of the UCC.

On June 26, 2007, General Synod 26, meeting in Hartford, Conn., passed a resolution calling for churchwide study on "Legalization of Physician Aid in Dying": <ucc.org/synod/resolutions/physician-aid-in-dying-final.pdf>. Justice and Witness Ministries has been asked to assemble a report based on this resolution to be presented to GS 27 in 2009.

UCC physicians interested in contributing to this report are urged to contact chairperson Larry Smith, UCC Physicians Network; phone 717/542-3402; e-mail <lbs004@hotmail.com> or Barbara T. Baylor, UCC minister for health care justice, phone 216-736-3720; e-mail <baylorb@ucc.org>.

INSURANCE BOARD ISSUES NEW CALENDARS

The UCC Insurance Board has introduced its first ever loss prevention calendar to participating churches. The 2009 calendar, whose theme "52 Weeks/52 Ways We Care About Your Church," provides a unique tip each week aimed at reducing a church's risk of incurring some type of loss. All 2,400 IB participants will receive a calendar.

The IB produced the calendar "in an effort to reduce the disruptive impact to our churches' ministries that comes from losses and claims," says Cathy Green, UCC Insurance Board CEO and president. "The more value-added services and products that we can offer from a prevention standpoint, the less likelihood our churches have of sustaining an interruption in their services," Green continues, "We take that responsibility seriously."

Participants will receive advice about everything from preventing slips, trips and falls to thwarting would-be arsonists. Many of the tips refer readers back to checklists that can be found on the UCCIB's website <insuranceboard.org>. For more information or additional copies, please contact Elizabeth Vance, UCCIB marketing coordinator, at 216/736-3243 or <evance@insuranceboard.org>.

NOMINATIONS SOUGHT FOR WOMEN'S AWARD

The UCC's Ministry for Women's Concerns is seeking nominations for the 2009 Antoinette Brown award to be granted at General Synod 27 in Grand Rapids, Mich.

Women nominated need to hold ordained ministerial standing in the UCC. The award is given to two recipients who exemplify the contributions that women can make through ordained ministry; have



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provided outstanding ministry in a parish or other church related institutions, including women in specialized ministry; and have a sensitivity concerning the challenges and possibilities of women in ministry and advocacy on behalf of all women in the church.

Nominating forms were included in the November all-church mailing packet sent to UCC local churches, Conferences and Associations. Forms are also available online at <ucc.org/women>. Nominations will be accepted through Dec. 31, 2008.

The award, first presented at General Synod 10, is named for the Rev. Antoinette Brown (1825-1921), the first woman ordained to ministry in the U.S. A selection committee comprising representatives from the four Covenanted Ministries, the Council of Conference Ministers, and a former Antoinette Brown recipient, will consider nominees for selection.

NY CONFERENCE ISSUES 'BICYCLE CHALLENGE'

The New York Conference is organizing a group that will travel by bicycle June 12-26, 2009, from Syracuse to Grand Rapids, Mich. Riders will raise money for a new fund established by the Conference to help churches in their "green" efforts. Cyclists will stay with local UCC congregations on this journey through four states and Conferences.

The "bicycle challenge" invites others across the church to bike (or walk) to General Synod. Those who can't travel to Grand Rapids by human-powered means are encouraged to choose travel methods that use less fossil fuel and produce fewer greenhouse gases.

A release from the New York Conference says, "Together can we become a symbol of Christians' love and care for God's creation."

The churchwide effort will draw public attention to North America's disproportionate fuel consumption and its negative environmental impact. With less than five percent of the world's population, the U.S. is the world's oil-thirstiest nation, using more than 25 percent of the world's annual oil production.

Contact the Rev. Michael Caine, New York Regional Conference Minister, <cainem@uccny.org> or Catherine Rolling, UCC Minister for Environmental Justice, <rollingc@ucc.org> for more information on this ride, to organize your own group, or to let them know who from your Conference will be traveling by bike.

SINGLE GOVERNANCE BOARD RECEIVES GO-AHEAD

The fall meetings of the four Covenanted Ministry boards, and the Executive Council, have all resulted in votes to proceed with the formation of a single United Church Board (UCB) that will govern the UCC.

Their approval sets in motion the next phase of the Governance Formation Team II (GFT-II) plan for ministry oversight in which the chairs and vice-chairs of each board, and the Executive Council, will meet with their counterparts in January 2009 to reconcile, if possible, any differences in their actions.

Among the differences that must be resolved by this group is representation in the UCB from the Council for Racial and Ethnic Ministries (COREM). A recommendation from the Justice and Witness Ministries board proposes additional representation from each of the five COREM bodies. This motion would raise their representation from two to three members each, resulting in a UCB size of 90-93 instead of 85-88.

Non-GFT-II actions by two boards also affirmed the continuation of their leadership, nominating the Rev. Stephen Sterner (Local Church Ministries) and the Rev. Linda Jaramillo (Justice and Witness Ministries) to renewed terms as executive ministers of their respective Covenanted Ministries. These nominations will be presented for approval by the General Synod meeting in Grand Rapids, Mich., next June.

SYMBOLS OF SUFFERING AND HOPE DOT NATIONAL MALL

'Tents of Hope' pitched as reminder of Darfur genocide

Over 300 colorfully painted refugee tents were erected on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., the weekend of Nov. 7-9 to call attention to the ongoing genocide in Darfur, Sudan.

The "Gathering of the Tents" was the culminating event of the year-long Tents of Hope campaign, included speakers, panel discussions, workshops, music and displays. The campaign, which urges President-elect Obama to put ending the Darfur genocide at the top of his agenda in 2009, included participants from 360 cities in 48 states.

Among the speakers was Al-Ghali Yahya Shegifat, president of the Association of Darfur Journalists. In May 2008, he was arrested and brutally tortured for several months by the Sudanese government. An international campaign, led by Amnesty USA and International PEN, helped to secure his release. Mr. Shegifat, who is currently seeking political asylum in the United States, spoke at several events during the weekend.

UCC Wider Church Ministries staff members Susan Sanders and Derek Duncan, along with youth delegates from Pilgrim UCC in Cleveland, attended the Washington event.

Danny McCallum, a seventh grader from Shaker Heights, Ohio, accompanied the group, and was one of the youth who raised awareness of Darfur and support for the Tent of Hope sponsored by Pilgrim.

"I had heard about Darfur from my sixth-grade teacher, and then from Susan Sanders at church," said McCallum. "I realized it was like another Holocaust, and not many

people knew about it." McCallum decided he needed to educate people about the genocide saying, "That is the only way there will be any change."

Seeing the array of tents displayed on the National Mall was encouraging for McCallum; but he is convinced there is much more work to do. "One thing that motivates me is seeing the pictures that children in the refugee camps have drawn," he said. "Their drawings show blood and death and destruction. I want to make it so their life isn't like that."

McCallum believes the experience of being on the team that organized his faith community to action has been a valuable one. "I know this project has helped me — I'll be able to lead in other ways because of it. Whether that is raising funds or support or getting people together for a cause."

"The Tents of Hope campaign was successful because it used the decentralized, community-based approach we find in the UCC," said Tim Nonn, national coordinator of

Tents of Hope and a member of Petaluma (Calif.) UCC.

He continued, "At the local level, the Tents of Hope campaign worked so well because our national steering committee trusted local clergy and laity to reach out in their communities to involve other congregations, schools and civic groups."

Nonn expressed his belief that local communities called together in compassion were at the heart of the program's success. "We all learned together to trust in a God of hope who is present among the Darfuri people and in our efforts to help them. We can apply this important lesson to many hopeless situations in our broken and suffering world. God is always present with us," he said.

More than 5 million Darfuris are dependent on international relief operations. But the World Food Program and other relief organizations have suspended operations in parts of Darfur due to government attacks on relief convoys and UN camps. Some relief groups have been forced to entirely withdraw from the country since the Sudanese government stepped up harassment of relief workers several months ago.

UCC Wider Church/Global Ministries and Justice and Witness Ministries, along with the UCC Central Atlantic Conference, provided creative and administrative support to this movement.



Tents of Hope from around the country are displayed on the National Mall in front of the U.S. Capitol building.

Gary Jean photo

UCC minister offers to die for death row inmate

By Jeff Woodard

The peaceful tone of the Rev. Marvin Morgan's voice belies the passion of his message: It's time to get "personal" in eliminating the death penalty. Morgan's willingness to take the place of Troy Davis on death row in Georgia appears to be the ultimate gesture.

"If each of us were to be placed in shackles and led to the execution chambers, knowing we are innocent ... try to imagine what that must be like," says Morgan, minister of pastoral care and counseling at First Congregational UCC in Atlanta.

On Sept. 22, Morgan and Davis' friend, Steve Woodall, hand-delivered to the office of Georgia Gov. Sonny Perdue a letter requesting that Davis' execution be prevented. "If you are not willing to do so," Morgan wrote, "I, Marvin L. Morgan, do hereby request that you (the State of Georgia) take my life instead of that of Troy Davis, and allow Troy to be set free. I am available immediately to be taken into custody so that this request may be carried forward."

Morgan said they were told Perdue was unavailable to meet with them. "We waited until 5 o'clock and he still wasn't there. We refused to leave and were arrested for trespassing," Morgan said, adding that Perdue never responded to the letter. But the next day, the 11th Circuit Court of appeals granted Davis a stay of execution, his third in the past year.

Davis, now 39, was convicted in 1991 of the August 1989 killing of Savannah Police Officer Mark Allen MacPhail. Since the trial, seven of nine key prosecution witnesses have recanted their testimony. Others have come forward to implicate another man in the killing of the 27-year-old MacPhail.

"There is an apparent lack of any physical evidence connecting Troy Davis to the murder," says Morgan. "It's hard to understand that in the face of overwhelming doubt, that a parole board could deny a cry for clemency."

Morgan says he wholeheartedly embraces the death-penalty position held by Amnesty International. "It is, in every sense, the ultimate denial of human rights. The audacity of the state to act in a premeditated matter



UCC minister the Rev. Marvin Morgan (c.) is arrested by Georgia police.

to kill another human being — in an effort to prevent other human beings from being killed — doesn't make a lot of sense to me. Regardless of the method used, it is inhumane, degrading punishment."

Since 1977, more than 1,100 people have died in executions in the U.S., including more than 40 in Georgia. During that same period, says Morgan, more than 100 have been released from death row on grounds of innocence or new evidence surfacing.

Morgan says he plans to work with anti-death penalty leaders such as the Rev. Timothy McDonald of the Concerned Black Clergy of metropolitan Atlanta to help save Davis' life. "We must keep this issue before the public. First one person offers to die, then 15, then 20. We won't stop."

Jeff Woodard is a member of Pilgrim Congregational UCC in Cleveland.

Philippine pastor released, exonerated

Detained United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP) pastor Berlin Guerrero was ordered released to the custody of his lawyers Sept. 12, 2008, by the Philippine Court of Appeals. At the time of his release, Guerrero had been detained for one year, three months and 15 days.

Guerrero was abducted May 27, 2007, by elements of the Naval Intelligence Security Forces. He was allegedly tortured before being turned over to the Philippine National Police. Only then was he shown a copy of a warrant of arrest for murder charges.

The Court of Appeals began hearing petitions filed by Guerrero's lawyers, former Sen. Jovito Salonga and Emilio Capulong, after the case was remanded to the appellate court by the Supreme Court.

Court of Appeals Associate Justice, Martin Villarama, granted a temporary restraining order barring a regional court from proceeding with the hearings on the murder case and directed government lawyers to submit more evidence to justify the trial of Guerrero.

On Sept. 23, the appellate court dismissed all charges against Guerrero, saying an improper investi-

gation had been conducted. Along with the illegal seizure, detention and abuse, the court charged regional authorities with undue process, having not given Guerrero sufficient time to prepare a defense against charges.

Guerrero's arrest stemmed from allegations that he participated in a murder in 1992. Court documents pointed out that Guerrero had been living a normal and public life, and carrying out his pastoral duties, when the case was revived after 15 years.

"The Court cannot condone such injustice and travesty of rights of an ordinary citizen charged with a serious crime during and after preliminary investigation when the information based on an invalid proceeding had been filed in court. The patent disregard of the laws and rules in the conduct of preliminary investigation by the investigating Judge



Guerrero (r.) is shown with the Rev. James Vijayakumar, the UCC's area executive for Southern Asia.

clearly constitutes grave abuse of discretion that warrants the exercise of this Court's corrective power," it said its Sept. 23 ruling.

The United Church of Christ in the Philippines is a close international ecumenical partner with the UCC and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ.) Wider Church Ministries works closely with the UCCP via a Global Ministries partnership.

CHALLENGES AFFORD OPPORTUNITIES

Change — not fear — motivates exploration, welcoming spirit

“Welcoming the Stranger” ... is an invitation to enter into the margins of society and culture, and to encounter those the still speaking God is calling us to embrace.”

When we started planning this issue’s theme, “Welcoming the Exile,” the world was a very different place.

Although the economy was leaning toward recession, the stock market hadn’t taken the plunge of early October. The U.S. Presidential race was still very much underway — and the major candidates were tied in most national polls.

Same-gender families in Connecticut had not yet been given the full privilege of marriage. In California, same-gender couples still enjoyed the legal advantages of civic matrimony.

News production cycles and story deadlines aside, we had to ask ourselves whether or not this was an appropriate time to focus on the exile, the stranger, when so much had changed in our world since mid-September.

The answer to that question was a simple yes. No matter what our current economic, political or social outlook — we are called as people of faith to constantly push against the rough edges of discomfort that grate at us when we are forced to encounter those who differ from us.

The Rev. John Fife, co-founder of the migrant rights group, No More Deaths, introduces people to the ministry of border justice by reminding us that the Hebrew scriptures speak of welcoming your neighbor as yourself only once (Leviticus 19:18). Yet the people of Israel are instructed to welcome

the foreigner, exile or stranger no less than 17 times.

Fife concludes his comments by asking, “Can you guess which one is harder? Which one was more important to Yahweh?”

The truth is, really understanding someone who differs from you is one of the most challenging things we can do. We encounter variances of language, culture, ideology and even morality that make understanding one another difficult, or may cause us to reconsider our long-entrenched positions.

From my own experiences in the UCC, I know our congregations receive exiles in many ways. We may not even name it as such, but this work happens when we make space for an immigrant community to hold a native-language service, sponsor the resettlement of a refugee, engage in sacred conversations on race, offer help to those hit by economic hard times, or hold an open-and-affirming workshop.

Each of these activities, and countless others, helps us to express God’s extravagant welcome to those who were once considered “outside.” Along the way we recognize a double blessing: because the one welcomed, and the one offering welcome, go away with their lives changed.

A Christmas journey

December marks the beginning of the Christian year and the season of Christmas,

the Advent — the arrival — of the Christ. In our churches, the season is full of symbolism and significance.

A Christmas custom found primarily in Mexico is the remembrance of Mary and Joseph’s travels to Bethlehem. The celebration is known as *Las Posadas*, Spanish for “the inns,” which commemorates the hospitality Jesus’ family received as strangers, making their way from Nazareth to Bethlehem.

At first glance, *Las Posadas* resembles door-to-door caroling. But the tradition culminates with an invitation into the home of an “innkeeper” who has offered to host dinner and a party — an outpouring of hospitality and joy that recognizes how difficult it is to be a stranger, foreigner or exile.

The ministry of welcome is engaged throughout this issue, including four “Centerstage” articles that explore the theology and practice of hospitality. In considering the character of Jesus and his arrival, these thoughts may inform your perception of what it means to be welcoming.

And so the theme of “Welcoming the Exile” seems as important today as it was two months ago. Yes, the world has changed. But with those changes comes a continued challenge to be a welcoming and faithful people. It is an invitation to enter into the margins of society and culture, and to encounter those the still speaking God is calling us to embrace.

**LETTERS****Praise for ‘Steeple’s’ ad**

I am writing with much appreciation and admiration for the UCC and the Steeples commercial.

We celebrated the Steeples ad, and honored the UCC, during our congregation’s “joys and concerns” Sunday, Oct. 4. One woman mentioned that she could feel the deep sincerity in the UCC’s welcome, and was warmed when she heard a favorite childhood song, “*Here is the church, here is the steeple, open the doors and see all the people.*”

I especially like that the “whoever you are, wherever you are...” expression is in the ad. We repeat that extravagant welcome every Sunday during our services. It is my favorite of the many ways our church is weaving the “Steeple’s” themes of an extravagant welcome and inclusion into our spiritual practices.

We want to thank the UCC, everyone involved and everyone who supported the “Steeple’s” project. Thank you for showing everyone just how wide the UCC and its churches open their arms to... *all the people!*

Denise Leboeuf
Haydenville (Mass.) Congregational UCC

In troubling times — hope

As it was for so many of us, the news of this week’s economic collapse has been hard. I came home so desperate looking for answers and wondering how we, both individually and

as a country, could survive. As I sat mulling in my own depression, I saw your message on television that spoke to my heart about the need for understanding and inclusion. Now, more than ever, we need to hear that we are *all* God’s children. Bless you — you made a difference in my life and I’m sure in so many others.

Tom Stevenson
Austin, Texas
via e-mail

Why not Hawaii?

The Rev. Charles Buck’s comments about the shift from a Honolulu General Synod in 2011 (“High fuel costs thwart Hawaii location for 2011 General Synod,” Oct.-Nov. 2008) are too reserved.

I find it difficult to understand why a community so entrenched in the belief of covenantal relationships can’t be responsible enough to budget appropriately for a bigger event such as a Synod in Hawaii, especially, given more than three years to plan for it.

It seems to me the Hawaii UCC Conference has to plan for trips overseas *every* General Synod, *every* National Youth Event and *every* other opportunity that exists within the greater event offerings of the UCC.

I plan on going to Hawaii for General Synod 28, even if it’s back on the mainland. I am going to support the Hawaiian UCC family I have come to know and love, from Honolulu to our Big Island friends at First United Protestant UCC in Hilo and South Kohala UCC in Hukuloa.

For all their previous efforts to get to the mainland, they deserve better than this

The Rev. Greg Larsen
Christ Congregational UCC
Fort Morgan, Colo.

‘Thoroughly Niebuhr’

Regarding the questions of The Serenity Prayer’s authorship, I have no doubt that it originated with Reinhold Niebuhr. As one who studied under him at Union, dined with him in the refectory and regularly visited his apartment on Friday evening when he had open house for free-for-all discussions, I have a sense of how his mind worked. The prayer is thoroughly Niebuhr.

It may be that he used it in various forms through the years, and others may have picked it up and used it. But that prayer, in its original, is Niebuhr!

Donald W. Morgan
Rocky Hill, Conn.

Grace is essential

I would make one comment on the article by William G. Chrystal on Reinhold Niebuhr’s prayer. The essential word “grace” is missing.

I believe that Niebuhr wrote, “God grant me the grace to accept with serenity...” For a Christian theologian of Niebuhr’s thinking, God’s grace is more essential than the human’s inclination.

Readers may be interested in Elisabeth Sifton’s book “The Serenity Prayer” as a reference.

Ed Schneider
Pleasant Hill, Tenn.
via e-mail

Combined board concerns

Contributors to the UCC’s general fund should be concerned about the proposed United Church Board (UCB). Since the inception of the UCC, directors of particular instrumentalities or covenanted ministries were people committed to furthering the interests of the bodies they oversaw.

Under the proposed UCB, all of the functional ministries will be overseen by the same

directors, a majority of whom would appear to be protecting the interests of the bodies they represent.

How can Local Church, Justice and Witness, and Wider Church ministries’ staffs be empowered to develop and enabled to carry out visionary missions under this convoluted and potentially reactionary arrangement? If this plan is adopted, then Article III of the UCC Constitution, “Covenantal Relations,” can be eliminated as irrelevant.

Theodore H. Erickson
Laughlintown, Pa.

Church and free speech

Many appear to be framing the IRS’ position on non-profit endorsement of candidates as an attack on free speech. I believe this is not only inflammatory, but also incorrect. The non-profit status of churches and other organizations is not a right, it is a privilege granted by the government through the tax code. If churches wish to be able to endorse candidates all they need do is relinquish the privilege of their tax exemption.

Betsy Latham
Groveland, Mass.
via e-mail

[CORRECTION: The image in J. Martin Bailey’s article on Charles McCollough, “Pastor, artist sculpts his retirement with purpose and pleasure,” Oct.-Nov. 2008, received an incorrect caption. The sculpture pictured is titled “Hagar and Ishmael’s Expulsion.” The work will be dedicated Feb. 4, 2009, at Drew University.]

SEND LETTERS of fewer than 150 words to United Church News, 700 Prospect Ave., Cleveland, OH 44115; e-mail <guessb@ucc.org>. Please note that letters may be edited for brevity and clarity.

'ON BEHALF OF OUR CHURCH'

Thomas pens letters to Obama and McCain

COMMENTARY



John Thomas

Dear President-Elect Obama:

As General Minister and President of your United Church of Christ, I write to congratulate you on your election as the next President of the United States. As a church that celebrates the vocation of public service as an honored way to express and embody one's faith, we are grateful for your willingness to take on the demands of this unique office and pledge our prayers as you seek to use that office for the common good. The agenda

before us is daunting. Among them are poverty, the environment, and a just and peaceful global community.

The global economic crisis presents you with an immediate and urgent challenge. While needing to address the problems of financial institutions as well as the deep anxieties on Main Street, members of our church would also urge you to give attention to the needs of poor people who have suffered long before the present crisis and whose circumstances are now even more desperate. Your church is eager to be a strong partner with you in long term strategies to ensure that all Americans have access to adequate housing, nutrition, health care, and education. Poverty is not just an economic or political problem. It is at its core a moral issue demanding our commitment to God's justice and compassion.

Equally urgent is the future of God's fragile creation, long abused by our indifference and greed. Your presidency comes at a critical moment for people around the world facing the devastations of climate change. Today our stewardship of the earth demands sacrifice and political decisions that are difficult. The God who calls the worlds into being and who grants us dominion over the earth bestows on persons and nations an enormous responsibility. May your presidency reflect a relationship to the earth in which dominion is exercised as servanthood for the sake of future generations.

Small gestures of grace, large hearts of concern

COMMENTARY



Steve Rose

As a recent convert to the United Church of Christ, and a rural Midwesterner, I'm often surprised in my travels when I come upon a well-established and aged UCC church.

I was attending a conference in Portland, Maine, recently and encountered a gorgeous stone building with the simple word "Congregational" carved in the stone above the entry, but with a modern sign in front declaring the building to be a United Church of Christ meeting place. It gives me pause to see such a structure, given my short

history with UCC.

You see, the congregation I attend rents the narthex of a campus chapel, not the chapel itself, though the chapel proper goes unused on Sunday mornings. We rearrange the furniture and coffee machines before worship, and then return them to their customary places upon its end.

On a good Sunday we might have 30 adults in attendance. Most are farmers, teachers, and professors, with a few professionals and retirees rounding out the group. We are almost entirely white, but the children with us are less so.

Our minister is part time and holds another position with the Iowa Conference of the UCC. Part of my job, as moderator of the congregation, is to remind her of to take it a little easier and try not to do too much. The Sunday after my return from Portland, she preached about Jacob wrestling with the angel. She has a fascination, perhaps, with those who attempt the impossible.

The tallest member of the congregation is a transgendered person, standing about six foot five and given to heavily patterned synthetics with floral designs. We also have a lesbian couple whose names I reverse if I'm not careful.

The most trustworthy musician among us is a mental health

therapist by profession, and it was she who counseled me when I went through a divorce a decade ago. She leads us in hymns with a guitar, and it's not uncommon that the rhythm we are following is more reminiscent of The Eagles than a church choir.

Thomas' letter to Sen. John McCain is available online:

ucc.org/news/pdf/Thomas-to-McCain-sen.pdf

world. Shortly before his death Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote that we live in a "world house," and warned us that we face the daunting choice between chaos and community. On behalf of our church and its global partners, I urge you to attend quickly to the peace process between Israel and Palestine, to the AIDS pandemic, to the crushing poverty faced by so many in the world, and to the establishment of a respectful and collaborative foreign policy that sees U.S. interests inextricably linked to the interests of the entire global family.

Because of your membership in the United Church of Christ we have watched you with pride and hope, grateful for the role Trinity United Church of Christ has played in your faith journey. We are also aware that this office involves an enormous burden for you, Michelle, and your daughters. Let me reiterate a commitment made to you last spring, offering the hospitality of our congregations in Washington as places of nurture, sanctuary, and encouragement, congregations where in the midst of all you face can remind you that "God is still speaking." Above all, know that my prayers, and the prayers of your fellow members, will surround you.

But we are not happy tableau out of an Anne Tyler novel. The charter members who initiated the church were not UCC but Presbyterian. They left that congregation reluctantly over issues of conscience and worshipped unaffiliated for some time. Even now there are some hard feelings between some members of the two congregations.

We struggle financially. We know that we are only two or three tithing families removed from going under. We lost two of our most solid younger members to car wrecks in a period of less than three months. Our transgendered member who waited until middle age to "come out" was recently diagnosed with, and treated for, a brain tumor.

We try. When those among us grieve or fall ill, we feed and care for them. When one of us is unable to drive, we find rides. We sponsor a Native American family in South Dakota, and a van load of us drives out there every summer, armed with ample person-power and a little money.

I stumbled upon these folk by coincidence, my newly married spouse wanting to give them a try — their meeting place nearby and them not being the church of my past marriage. But I stay for the God I know here, and the God I want to know more.

Only once in the New Testament do we hear that Jesus laughed, but I believe we would make him laugh: this odd assortment of eccentrics, academics and marginalized; this congregation of a score and 10 that meets just outside a huge and empty worship hall; these small gestures of grace and large hearts of concern.

And once the Christ quits laughing, I know he would smile.

Steve Rose is moderator of Crossroads UCC in Indianola, Iowa, and professor of education at Simpson College.

**OVERHEARD**

"The media didn't care about the whole sermon and what it was about. They just used those 10 seconds and used it as a weapon of mass destruction against [Obama's] campaign."

— The Rev. Jeremiah Wright, pastor emeritus of Trinity UCC in Chicago, speaking at a forum on "The Bible, Race and American History" on Nov. 7, 2008, in Milford, Conn. These were Wright's first public comments since his falling-out with Sen. Obama after unflattering video clips from his sermons circulated on the Internet in early 2008.

"As long as she is not fully human, neither am I."

— The Rev. Mary Sue Brookshire of United Church of Christ La Mesa (Calif.) speaking at a "No on Proposition 8" rally in San Diego of a lesbian friend, disheartened by society's treatment of gays.

"Finding your way through disagreement and controversy is never easy, in the church or anywhere else, but still, where public battles rage and the sins of the body politic work against men and women and children who are not strong enough to fight for themselves — that's where the church belongs."

— Charles Guerrero, member of First Congregational UCC of Saginaw (Mich.), in a Saginaw News editorial, "My View: United Church of Christ free and Christian."

"It's uncluttered, there's more space for us to think and pray. Many of us have so much on our minds. It's a chance to stop for a while and slow our anxious thoughts down and offer them to God. Prayers come more from the heart than from the mind."

— The Rev. Manda Stack, pastor at both Union Grove (Wis.) UCC and Raymond Community UCC in Franksville, Wis., speaking of her communities' popular Wednesday evening inter-faith Taizé services.

**TABULATIONS**

BY THE NUMBERS

15 million*

*Estimated number of television viewers who saw the UCC's Stillspeaking ad, "All the People," during its Sept. 29-Oct. 12 run on BET, Bravo, CNN and TV One.



PROVIDING COMFORT AND COFFEE TO SOLDIERS

Holy Joe's perks up chaplains' ministry

By Jeff Woodard

Going for coffee these days seems as American as mom, baseball and apple pie. While it might actually involve grabbing a cup of whatever it is that gets us going, its primary purpose may be to strengthen social ties or show support for a friend in need.

Nowhere is this more evident — or more appreciated — than among U.S. military personnel taking part in the initiative known as Holy Joe's Café. Thanks to Thomas Jastermsky and a dedicated core of volunteers, troops don't have to go for coffee; it's coming to them.

"It has really taken off," says Jastermsky, a deacon at **First Congregational UCC in Wallingford, Conn.**, who developed the initiative and set it into motion two years ago. "We're now sending coffee to 95 chaplains in locations in Kuwait, Iraq and Afghanistan."

Serving a variety of settings, the movement has grown dramatically both within the UCC and ecumeni-

no spiritual background," says Gundlach. "You never know what kinds of seeds are going to get planted in a situation like that, when their moral and spiritual underpinnings are being challenged."

While the pipeline of caffeine and conversation is greatly appreciated by service personnel abroad, they are equally as grateful for prayers from back home, says Jastermsky. "It's about helping individuals get through a lot of tough situations."

The internet, for all its modern-day advantages, is not always helpful. It forges an unprecedented link between active-duty troops and loved ones far away. But a click of a mouse is just as apt to bring news of hard-

everything, 30 percent of our cost is shipping. It shows how much a couple of people in the right area can make huge impact on this program."

Jan Resseger, Minister for Public Education and Witness with the UCC's Justice and Witness Ministries in Cleveland, applauds Jastermsky's good work. "When our church members send Equal Exchange coffee to Holy Joe's Café, they are simultaneously supporting fair trade and sup-

porting out troops," she says. The UCC Coffee Project is a way for congregations to support fair prices for coffee farmers in the developing world. We are so glad that Thomas Jastermsky had the imagination to link the UCC Coffee Project to the important work of our military chaplains."

Chaplain Joseph H. Riley echoes Resseger, thanking "the mighty fine saints that are reaching across the water to the desert place. The Lord

sure is teaching us some important truths in our wilderness experience."

For further information or to donate coffee to Holy Joe's Cafe, please call 888/970-7994 or e-mail <holyjoescafe@aol.com>. To donate via Equal Exchange, call 774/776-7366. The UCC Coffee Project website is <ucc.org/justice/coffee-project>.

Jeff Woodard is a regular contributor to United Church News.



Troops in Iraq enjoy fellowship at Holy Joe's Café.

James Suddeth photo

cally, says Jastermsky. "There's a huge need for this. The chaplaincy is a ministry of presence, and coffee is a way for more real interaction."

Holy Joe's provides soldiers a quiet place to talk with friends, converse with chaplains or write a letter home. "Our community coffee bar has become the lifeblood of the camp," writes Chaplain Michael J. Lovett. "Your donations have had a direct impact on our operations. Your act of kindness not only meets a physical need but also strengthens our troops emotionally."

Jastermsky and the Rev. John Gundlach, UCC Minister for Government Chaplaincies, both note that many of the troops have had little church background or spiritual development, so Holy Joe's provides prayer groups and fellowship opportunities.

"These people are receiving care at a time in their life when they have

ships at home — illness, job loss, financial squeeze. "Chaplains are our first line of defense, especially for our younger troops, who are dealing with a lot internally," says Jastermsky. "It's hot, it's rotten, it's war — and then everything back home is going on."

The outreach of Holy Joe's Café extends to combat hospitals in Iraq and on-site "decompression models" where soldiers can speak one-on-one with chaplains. "A third system is to go out to the FOBs (forward operating bases), which are smaller locations of 35 or 40 people," says Jastermsky.

Holy Joe's is funded by checks from churches or by donors participating via UCC-sponsored Equal Exchange, which ships coffee overseas. Among the most giving of the volunteers, says Jastermsky, is Carol Wallace of Middlefield, Conn. "She has made donations to cover the cost of shipping. That's a huge component, because with materials, logistics and



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UNITED CHURCH
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ELEVEN CHURCHES SHARE \$290,000 IN SUPPORT

New and renewing congregations receive seed money, sprout progress

By Gregg Brekke

The UCC draws ever closer towards reaching its goal, set in 2006, of 250 new congregations by 2011. Actions by conferences and the Local Church Ministries (LCM) board, through the New Church Leadership Initiative, bring the total number of new churches in this period to 85.

At its fall meeting, the LCM board voted to allocate \$290,000 in support of 11 new and renewing congregations in nine Conferences.

Six new churches include a Marshallese congregation in Tucson, Ariz.; a Hispanic congregation in Phoenix; a multicultural-multiracial congregation in Baton Rouge, La.; and three Euro-American congregations, one each in Owasso, Okla., Flemington, N.J., and Canton, Ohio.

The five renewing congregations are a Filipino congregation in Honolulu; an African-American congregation in New Orleans; a multiracial-multicultural congregation in Santa Rosa, Calif.; and two Euro-American congregations, one in Somerville, Mass., and the other in Louisville, Ky.

These congregations received

the final allocation of 2008 support which totaled \$661,500. Support was granted to 19 congrega-



tions from 16 conferences, as well as one conference development program. Five of the new and renewing congregations have expressed the intent of being open and affirming.

In total, the Evangelism Ministry received requests of \$1,274,500 for 24 congregations from 17 con-

ferences at their fall meeting. Total funding requests for 2008 equaled \$2,753,965 from 37 new and renewing congregations.

Funds for new and renewing congregation grants come from Our Church's Wider Mission, the New and Renewing Churches Endowment Fund, Strengthen the Church Special Mission Offering and Make a Difference.

"The good news is the increased number of new and renewing congregations in the UCC," said the Rev. David Schoen, minister and team leader for Congregational Vitality and Discipleship. "The difficult news is the lack of funds available to support these congregations."

Schoen invites UCC members to continue their contributions to the New and Renewing Churches Endowment Fund, which enables sustained growth in new churches, and dedication for congregational revitalization.

Information on Congregational Vitality, including new and renewing church activities, can be found at <ucc.org/newchurch>.

WELCOMING THE EXILE



"Mother and Child" (oil on canvas) by Anne Ierardi, was one of several images, poems and short stories submitted around this issue's theme, "Welcoming the Exile."

Links to other submissions can be found at <ucc.org/ucnews/decjan09/art.html>

"A book that calls us to claim our faith and our heritage while still listening to the still speaking God."

—Steve Sterner, Acting Executive Minister, Local Church Ministries

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Sidney D. Fowler



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NO LONGER A STRANGER: **Welcoming the exile**

Where Jesus comes from

By Donna Schaper

We rarely read the genealogy in Matthew's first chapter all the way through. A lay reader quakes at the thought of pronouncing all those names — and there is so much Advent and Christmas competition. The other words are so beautiful, why bore people with lists?

We ignore this text at our peril. It is one of the most radical and telling pieces in all of biblical literature. What it says is that Jesus comes from an immigrant background. He comes from many, not from one. He is of mixed race. He is also understood as a person with a maternal as well as paternal lineage. The writer of Matthew understood what he was saying and doing: Jesus transcends the tribes that often provide us with such false security

The list is not only “contaminated” by mixed races and mixed classes, it includes four women. Genealogies just weren't written that way at the time. The women were omitted, regularly. Even the feeding of the 5,000 counts the men and tells us so. Five thousand were fed, not counting the women and children.

Consider his ancestors.

One of the women is Tamar, who disguised herself as a prostitute to trick her father-in-law into keeping his promise to her and producing an heir. The fruit of this tricky union is one of the great-grandfathers of Jesus.

Another is Rehab, a well known harlot who assisted two spies sent to Jericho by Joshua. In doing so, Rehab became an exemplar of faith and works. Rehab is a great-grandmother of Jesus. Ruth is also on the list.

Ruth was a Moabite, a descendent of Lot. Her place in the social registrar of Israel was surely very low. Nevertheless, Ruth became a great-grandmother of David and distant great-grandmother of our Lord.

Matthew is embarrassed to even name the fourth woman directly. He simply calls her the wife of Ukiah. She is of course Bath Sheba, a victim of the most scandalous case of seduction in the First Testament. She too is a great-grandmother of our Lord.

Notably, not a single one of these women is a Jew. Tamara was a Canaanite; Ruth a Moabite, Rehab of Jericho, and Bath Sheba, through her husband, a Hittite.

The final 14 generations are almost totally unknown. They aren't recorded elsewhere in

scripture. By noting them, Matthew reminds us that God, nonetheless, uses those easily forgotten and overlooked for the good of all. Ordinary people — as well as saints and sinners — notes the populist Matthew, get us to Jesus too.

As New Testament scholar Raymond Brown notes, the Story of Jesus isn't told with straight lines. If you have ever thought that your own family was checkered with both nobility and riff-raff, and if you ever considered your own life a combination of good faith and bad judgment, be comforted by the lineage of Jesus.

This text might also suggest that we stop using the terms “foreigner” and “mixed race.” Even “illegal alien” might be shelved.

Queen Elizabeth, apparently, was quoted at some point saying that she wanted her son Charles to marry a woman with a history, not a past. Way too many Christians work way too hard to assure that Jesus is pure and spotless. Matthew differs. He says that all kinds of roads, and tickets, and people, can lead to Christ.

What does this genealogy mean to us today, as our armed forces land in foreign lands, as “our” children and “theirs” cry themselves to sleep because daddy is far away and won't be home for Christmas? It means that the world is one. The sorrow of the sleepless child, whose father is a soldier, is clothed with the sorrow of the people of Afghanistan. Christians have a trans-national, trans-tribal savior.

The current debate over immigration and



Peter Austin | iStockPhoto graphic

“foreigners” misunderstands Matthew. It forgets that God is found in the stranger and not in the self. It forgets what Jesus went on to say about how we find him — in the naked and the lost. When Americans say they want the foreigners “out,” they are really saying they don't want to meet God.

We may and must see the world as one, not

as us and them. We may welcome the so-called “other.” He/she is our savior's grandparent.

The Rev. Donna Schaper is Senior Minister of Judson Memorial UCC in New York City, a New Sanctuary congregation. Her most recent books are “Grassroots Gardening: Rituals to Sustain Activists” from Nation books and “Living Well While Doing Good” from Church Publications.

STRANGER ENCOUNTERS: **The biblical example of welcome**

By Jane Fidler Hoffman

Ida's faith was tested when a stranger came to the door of her home at the end of a country road. She looked out at the white man, quite noticeable in her largely black community, and saw his gray jumpsuit. She was sure he was the convicted murderer the radio said had escaped from the prison several miles away.

Ida had several choices, including the rifle she kept in the corner for shooting squirrels. But instead, she chose to open the door. The whole story merits a longer telling, but here's the crux: At first he was threatening, but Ida fed him and listened to his fears and anger, and spoke to him like the mama he had hardly known.

She insisted on praying with him, and he wept as he remembered a long gone childhood faith. Eventually, the state police surrounded Ida's home. Between the man's renewed fear and

the police's intensity on his capture, the situation came to a dangerous moment. But Ida talked to both parties, and brought them to a point where the man could safely be taken into custody.

As they began to put him in the car, he turned to her and said simply, “Thank you for your hospitality, ma'am.” And the stranger was gone.

It was a stranger encounter. It was a moment of biblical proportions because the Bible is filled with stranger encounters and with the same tension Ida faced: what to do when confronted with a stranger, someone unknown and different from you?

The stranger (aka alien, foreigner) moves through Hebrew tradition from the exodus through the exile. An overview of the texts reminds us that at times the “stranger” is seen by Israel as a threat, and there is tension in the relationship.

The tension was most evident when Israel

felt at its weakest, politically and spiritually, as in the book of Ezra (chapter 10.) The stranger and their strange gods are seen as a danger to the purity of Israel after the exile. At another time, “strangers” are the instruments of God's anger (Ezekiel 11:9).

But those are the minority reports in the stranger encounters of Israel. The overriding affirmation of God is to welcome, protect, share with and, interestingly, *identify* with the stranger because of the shared experience of having been stranger/alien themselves. Over and over, as God guides the people of Israel into a community, as told in the books of the Pentateuch, we hear this theme:

“When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your

God” (Leviticus 19:34; Exodus 10: 17-19).

God's expectations of Israel with the stranger even go beyond non-oppression and charity (e.g. leaving gleanings in Deuteronomy 24:19, 21).

In Numbers 15 and 19, the stranger/alien is seen as being responsible to the same law, with the same privileges and responsibilities, as the people of Israel. The equality of status extends all the way to the throne of God: “You and the alien shall be alike before the Lord” (Numbers 15:15).

In the story of Ruth, God makes a radical move by taking a stranger and making her a mother of the new nation of Israel through her great grandson, David.

Then in Jesus, God makes the strangest move of all: embodying, becoming the stranger in our midst. In the perhaps too familiar text of Matthew 25:35, Jesus identifies | **cont. 9**

Who's in the pew next to you?

By E.S. Gaffney

The pastor of a small UCC church in the northern plains returned from a 10-day vacation to find the church in an uproar. While away, a video had surfaced on YouTube showing one of the newer families in the church making racial and anti-Semitic remarks on a late night TV talk show. To say the least, their remarks were vitriolic and full of hate.

The deacons peppered their pastor with questions. "Did you know about this? How could you let these people into our church? Why didn't you warn us?" They demanded answers.

Three years earlier — shortly after the pastor arrived at her new church — the church secretary answered the office phone. A timid voice said they were looking for a church but weren't sure if they'd be welcome.

"Of course." The secretary echoed the UCC's new slogan. "No matter who you are, no matter where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here."

The next Sunday, a young couple visited the church with two grade school children and a preschooler. The father could easily have passed for one of those burly bouncers in the ad — the ones who decide who can enter the church and who cannot. The pastor and the congregation welcomed them. A few months later, they joined the congregation. Everyone was sure this was the beginning of a new era of church growth.

The pastor had to answer the demanding deacons. Yes, she had known about it, but not when the couple first joined the church. She found out in a counseling session about a year later. She didn't tell anyone because the information was given in confidence. She had been working with both parents to lead them to understand the meaning of Jesus' openness and inclusivity.

The next evening, the church council was unmoved. One member, showing almost as much hatred as the offenders, angrily declared, "We cannot tolerate hatred."

Two Sunday later, the president of the church council told the pastor they wanted to meet with her in the base-

ment after the service. Barely a dozen people attended her sermon based on Luke 7:36-8:3 — the story of the woman who interrupted a posh dinner party to wash Jesus' feet with her tears and with precious ointment, and to dry them with her hair. The woman begged forgiveness for her sins, which was granted. The pastor concluded her sermon. "The church is not in the morality business, the church is in the forgiveness business."

She descended the stairs to the basement where the council was waiting. Most of them had not worshiped upstairs that morning. Seeing the handwriting on the wall, she offered her resignation.

Welcoming is not as easy as a slogan, but we are called to do it. Jesus told us directly to do it. "I was a stranger and you welcomed me" (Matthew 25:36). And he taught us by example when he talked with the outcasts of his day — Samaritans, lepers, tax collectors. He even chose a tax collector to be one of his disciples.

But there are fears and even dangers (real or imagined) that accompany welcoming. We see church as a safe place, a place where we can relax from the constant worry of modern society.

Most churches would be reluctant to accept sex offenders. The dangers are obvious. State laws increasingly force convicted sex offenders out of homes, often into rural areas where schools and parks are widely separated. But not all offenders are known as such. Sometimes their offenses become known only after, sometimes

long after, they are in a congregation.

It has been reported that the pastor of Wichita's BTK killer, who was the president of his church council, found himself drawn to Mark 28:20 — "I am with you always, to the end of the age" — as he prepared his sermon for the Sunday following Dennis Rader's capture. "If Dennis has done what they've alleged he did, then he must pay the price," the Rev. Michael Clark said. "It still does not have any effect on how I minister to him. I still will love him."

If we are not willing to engage the outcasts or renegades from society, how can we expect that their beliefs or behaviors will ever change? Distasteful or dangerous as it may be, we are directed to go and tell the gospel to all. If we do not, who will?

The northern plains pastor had followed the admonitions of Mark 16:15, "Go into the world. Go everywhere and announce the Message of God's good news to one and all." And she obeyed Christ's commission in Matthew 28:20 to "instruct them in the practice of all I have commanded you."

She had been working almost two years to bring the father of this family to see the inclusive and forgiving message of the Christ. By the time the video appeared on YouTube, he had abandoned all connections with the Christian Church Aryan. Sadly, having been rejected by his UCC church, he returned to the Aryan church. "Because they accept me," he said.

How can we open the eyes of those blinded by racial hatred, how can we help heal those whose souls are sick with unrestrained sexual desires or murderous fantasies, if we do not deal with them? How, if we do not ask them to confront Jesus, to bring their actions to him, to lay down those acts, and to beg forgiveness?

E.S. Gaffney is a retired geophysical researcher living in Honolulu, Hawaii. He and his wife are 33-year members of the UCC. Currently, they are members of St. John's UCC in Council Bluffs, Iowa.

STRANGER | cont. himself as the stranger to be welcomed.

Familiarity risks robbing this statement of its amazing power, but the urgency of life in a world of strangers requires us to receive its impact. In this story from Matthew, Jesus first acknowledges his identity as "the Son of Man [who] comes in his glory, and all the angels with him." There Christ is, reigning sovereign and savior of the world.

It is astounding, then, that in his very moment of glory Jesus identifies himself with the risky stranger — for strangers were seen as threats to a religion of purity and a nation oppressed by empire. The sovereign Jesus says starkly, "I was a stranger and you welcomed me..."

The savior is stranger, the stranger is savior. To welcome one is to welcome the other. It is an astounding

statement.

Clearly the dominant urging from our long faith tradition is hospitality, equality, care for and identification with the stranger. Those are the constant commands of our God, the one who came as a stranger in our midst and with whom we are "strangers and foreigners on the earth" (Hebrews 11:13b).

This is the God who, in Jesus Christ, welcomes and transforms us all so we are "no longer strangers and aliens" but "citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God."

As our nation struggles with immigration issues and the enduring sins of racism, sexism, homophobia and the chasm between rich and poor; and as the nations of the world engage one another across hostile lines, we who follow Jesus, the stranger-savior, have an

urgent mission to live this stranger life with him.

The opportunities set themselves before us in diverse ways, great and small — from learning to greet our neighbors in a second language to giving sanctuary to the refugee, as several UCC congregations from New York to California are doing.

One of the last references to strangers in the biblical canon (Hebrews 13:1-2) gives a final encouragement for our stranger encounters: "Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it."

Or all the more, we may encounter Jesus himself, our stranger-savior.

The Rev. Jane Fidler Hoffman is interim Conference Minister of the Southern California / Nevada Conference.

feature presentation

centerstage

COMMENTARY

From exile to embrace

By Mahan Siler

Reflecting on the theme, "Welcoming the Exile," prompted a review of my history with Pullen Memorial Baptist Church in Raleigh, N.C. Between 1986 and 1992, we made the journey toward full inclusion of LGBT persons, including the ritual of blessing for same-sex commitments. I was in search of an insight that might illuminate a larger theology of inclusion.

From my balcony position of retirement, what I saw surprised me. Embedded in a pastoral journal entry from June 28, 1987, is an insight virtually lost during subsequent years. The journal entry took note of my "coming out" sermon about homosexuality. This is a portion of that entry:

"In the sermon today I worked with the familiar parable of the Good Samaritan... I presented the ways in which we victimize the homosexual person in our culture. No surprise in that. The congregation expects me to make the 'justice' point.

Then, I attempt an unanticipated twist, the very kind of surprise experienced in the original parable. I remind the congregation that Samaritans were 'the most hated, most discredited persons in Jesus' world. Yet, Jesus presents the despised Samaritan as the hero, the source of grace.'

Similarly, I reason, homosexual persons, among the 'most hated, most discredited persons' in our society, just might be the instrument of God's grace. Perhaps they are the bearers of the healing we need. Only they can help us tend to the wound of homophobia, that fearful prejudice that inflicts blindness and fosters prejudice. The congregation anticipated 'homosexuals need our care and advocacy.' They likely did not expect the reverse: 'We need what only our homosexual friends can bring to us.'"

Remaining on the surface as the focus of our discernment was the query: How will we be in relationship with LGBT persons in our midst and beyond our congregation? Can we embrace, not exile, by welcoming them into full membership? With considerable cost, Pullen said and embodied "yes, we will."

Now, some 15 years later, I see this action as only one face of our transformation. At that time, we defined LGBT persons as the exiles that needed our full welcome and embrace.

But in truth, all along a deeper, not so obvious, converting action was occurring. LGBT friends were offering relationships in which our inner exiled homophobia could be named, released

and replaced with trust. In 1987, it was named in the Samaritan's witness: We heterosexuals are the exiles, and our gay friends hold the keys to our deliverance.

I grew up in a homophobic climate, a condition I internalized — or exiled — deep within myself. I lived and breathed the pejorative stereotypes of my Southern culture. Jokes about "fags" were unchallenged, along with taunts against Roman Catholics, Jews, blacks and "uppity" women.

Only now do I see clearly what I discerned in the Samaritan's witness from that 1987 sermon. I marvel at LGBT persons who, in the face of consistent condemnation from the larger church, still choose to love the church.

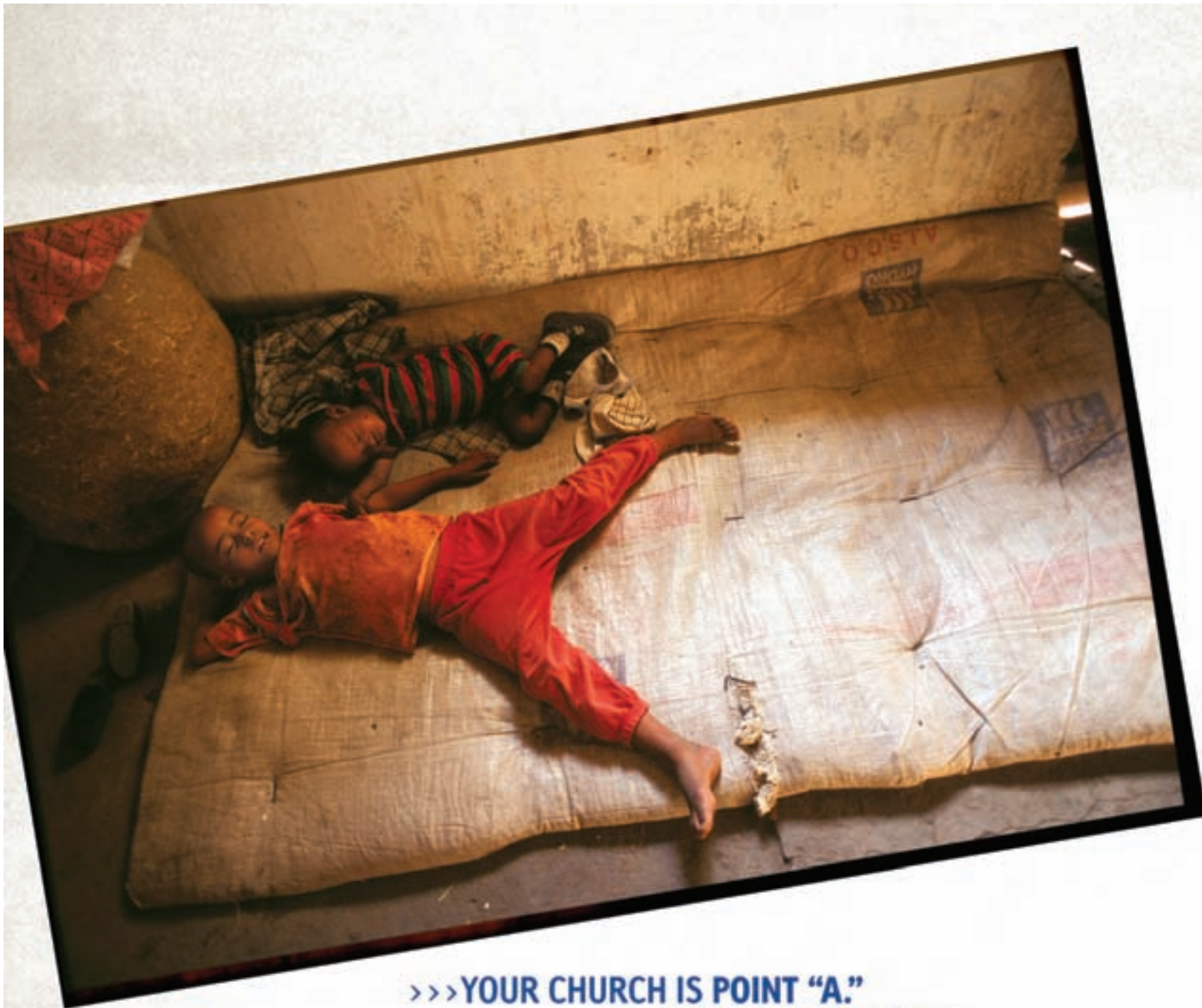
In church, that is, within our mutual participation in God's call to justice and the gift of mercy, they offered me, and other heterosexual members, the gift of a relationship. They provided a safe place within friendships that allowed our feelings, and their feelings, to be named and voiced.

In time, the polarizing categories of straight, gay, lesbian, bi-sexual and transgender melted into virtual insignificance. "I-You" became "We" who joined together in worshipping the God at work in the "welcoming of exiles" within us.

The exiled, fearful parts within us that create enemies to dominate bear many names: sexism, racism, classism, nationalism, as well as, heterosexism. But this is the good news: paradoxically, the excluded, the "exiled," the Samaritans among us, through their offer of relationships, become instruments of freedom from the force of our internalized, "exiled" fears.

Strangely, "by their stripes we are healed." Only by the power of God in these relationships of welcome can we — all of us — welcome home our inner exiles.

Mahan Siler is a member of Circle of Mercy Church (UCC/American Baptist) in Asheville, N.C. His book, "Exile or Embrace? Congregations Discerning their Response to Gay and Lesbian Christians," is available from Pilgrim Press.



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CYCLING BACK FROM NEAR-TRAGEDY

people | places | things in the news

Going the distance, Conference minister embraces competition

By Gregg Brekke

The marathon, that 26.2 mile test of endurance and will, continues to inspire athletes of all levels. From its historic roots in ancient Greece, to individuals meeting life-long fitness goals, the marathon stands as an icon of sporting achievement.

A distinct addition to modern marathons has been the inclusion of wheelchair and hand cycling racers. Those who have participated or attended marathons will surely have seen these athletes — normally far ahead of their two-legged race companions.

Ohio Conference Minister, the Rev. Bob Molsberry, is one such athlete. He competed in 2008 as a hand cyclist at both the Wright-Patterson Air Force Base and Columbus marathons in Ohio. His times of 1:42:03, for third place at Wright-Patterson, and 1:47:04, for second place in Columbus, place him among the top hand cyclists in the region.

Molsberry's return to competition has evolved over the last 11 years. In 1997, a hit-and-run bicy-

cling accident left him paralyzed from the waist down. The accident occurred as he was returning home from a Memorial Day weekend training ride when what witnesses say was a drunk driver slammed into Molsberry on his bike.

Molsberry has no recollection of the accident, the trip to the hospital or the MedEvac helicopter flight to Des Moines. The initial days and weeks after the crash were tenuous. Given the severity of his blood loss and internal injuries, doctors initially gave him a one percent chance of survival. He spent the next six weeks in a coma.

"It was touch and go," says Molsberry of this time. "My family didn't know if I would survive, or if I did, what would be left of me. There were

head injuries, along with the internal injuries, and no one was certain of what life would be like for me if I came out of the coma."

Molsberry did revive, and it was only then that doctors diagnosed his spinal injuries and paralysis. He admits that there was a moment of doubt and depression upon learning that his formerly active lifestyle would be forever altered. But Molsberry, ever the competitor, didn't linger on his misfortune for long.

"One of the turning points of my physical therapy was when they brought me down to the recreation room — there was an old hand cycle. They figured out how to put me on it and I started cranking down the hallway of the hospital," Molsberry recalled. "I felt the wind on my face and I decided right there and then that life was going to happen again."

Spending the last two months of his nearly four-month hospital stay in rehabilitation, Molsberry learned how to accommodate his injuries and establish new expectations for mobility.

"It was a really long struggle," says Molsberry of his year-long transition out of the hospital and back into full-time ministry at UCC-Congregational in Grinnell, Iowa. "I didn't feel like the same person, and I didn't know how folks regarded me."

Returning to being an athlete has really saved my life.

He found commonality among other athletes with disabilities. Another injured cyclist, who Molsberry knew from the hospital, had purchased a high-end hand cycle. He invited Molsberry to try it and he was hooked. "I loved it and immediately ordered one for myself," says Molsberry.

That same year, 1998, he returned to ride a summertime traditional group ride called RAGBRAI (Register's Annual Great Bicycle Ride Across Iowa). On this first outing as a hand cyclist he rode half the daily 50-70 miles with his children and spent each evening at the day's host community. Molsberry has completed this eight-day ride 10 times since, each time cycling the entire distance, which averages 470 miles.

Training for, and competing in, eight marathons and numerous triathlons since his accident, Molsberry believes he is in the best shape of his life.

"Returning to being an athlete has really saved my life," says Mols-



Ohio Conference Minister the Rev. Bob Molsberry competes in the 2008 Wright-Patterson Air Force Base marathon.

photo furnished

berry. "When I came to Ohio [as Conference Minister], I thought I'd be too busy to continue in competition. But exactly the opposite has happened. The busier I get the more I need it to have a sense of normalcy."

For others facing the challenges of a disability he says, "You can't take the dead-end [of a disability] as a final answer. Don't give up, because there are other ways to still be yourself. In order for me to be alive spiritually, as well as physically, I need to be active."

Molsberry's memoir about his return to ministry and athletics after the accident, "Blindsided by Grace," is available from Augsburg Fortress Press.

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'LIFELINE TO MANY' BURDENED BY INADEQUATE FUNDING

With costs skyrocketing, United Church News to explore funding, savings

From staff reports

The future of United Church News' print edition will be the subject of broad discussions in coming months in hopes of discovering how the newspaper's rapidly rising costs can be curtailed, shared or more adequately funded.

In the past five years, the cost of printing and mailing United Church News has risen more than 100 percent. In 2003, it cost \$60,000 per issue. This year, due to dramatic increases in newspaper postal rates and newsprint, it costs \$125,000 to print and mail a single issue — or \$750,000 annually for the newspaper's six editions.

The board of the Office of General Ministries voted Nov. 1 to ask General Minister and President John H. Thomas, Associate General Minister Edith Guffey and Communications Director J. Bennett Guess to

convene a consultation that will include members of the OGM board, Executive Council, Conference representatives, Collegium of Officers, Editor Gregg Brekke, and others, "to examine the model and costs of United Church News."

As part of its action, the board asked that "any recommendations should include how United Church News or some other resource is coordinated with an overall communication strategy," according to its voted action.

"People should not assume that this conversation will automatically lead to the elimination of United Church News," Guess cautioned. "We know it's a lifeline to many and it's a living, constant reminder of our

The problem is that we're now competing with postal rates and newsprint costs that make large-scale print publishing a very costly enterprise."

— The Rev. J. Bennett Guess

shared ministries. But, at the same time, we need to explore ways to save money, increase revenue and explore the funding structure that now exists to pay for the National and Conference editions."

Partnership arrangement

In 1999, before United Church News implemented a first-of-its-kind National-Conference partnership, the UCC's national newspaper went to fewer than 55,000 addresses, which included 12,000 copies to active and retired clergy and another 12,000 to local churches (two per congregation).

"The number of actual paying subscribers, at the time, was less than 30,000," Guess said. "Something had to be done to reach a larger segment of the UCC's membership."

At the same time, Guess said, each of the UCC's Conferences was producing and mailing their own newspapers, at a significant cost to them, without any coordination with

How can I help?

In June, United Church News launched "Operation Clean Database" to ensure that its subscriber list was accurate and that duplicate copies were not being mailed to the same address. With help from Conference offices, about 8,500 unnecessary subscriptions have been eliminated.

But there's more to do. Here's how you can help.

— GO GREEN.

» With the help of a reply postcard tucked inside this issue, United Church News is now offering an easy way for members to opt out of print subscriptions if they would prefer to read it online instead.

» Each issue of United Church News appears online at <ucc.org/ucnews>. Persons who return the postcard and provide an e-mail address will begin receiving the UCC's new weekly e-zine, "Keeping You ePosted," which will also alert readers when a new issue of the print edition is available to read online.

» "If readers genuinely prefer to receive the newspaper in print, then we hope they will continue to do so," said the Rev. J. Bennett Guess, the UCC's Communications Director. "But if they would just as well prefer to read it online and save some money for the church, that too would be good for us to know."

— GIVE GREEN.

» While United Church News is provided at no charge, that doesn't mean it's free. Readers can help by periodically returning the enclosed giving envelope, which is inserted in most issues. Give as individuals and as congregations.

» "If each reader would voluntarily contribute \$10, \$25 or more, the cumulative effect would help preserve the printed publication for those who really want it," Guess said.

» Readers can give online at <ucc.org/news>.

United Church News.

In an effort to boost overall readership and create a seamless vehicle for the delivery of UCC news, the National setting agreed to gradually take over costs for printing and mailing the Conference editions as companion sections to the National section — in exchange for mailing addresses.

In 2008, of the \$750,000 spent on United Church News, the National setting will spend more than \$280,000 to print and mail the Conference sections.

Thirty-two Conferences now participate in the cooperative program, Guess said, and it's become the Conferences' primary vehicle for communications.

"The partnership has resulted in great savings for Conferences, a better product for our readers and a substantial subscriber base of more than 200,000 households," Guess said. "We're now the largest denominational newspaper in the country."

Donations and advertising

Even though there is no set fee for a subscription, Guess said that free-will donations do significantly outpace the income once received from paid subscriptions, as was anticipated when the National-Conference partnership was devised. Reader contributions are projected to be \$122,000 in 2008, up from \$25,000 in 2004.

Ad revenue increases have been even more pronounced. In 2008, ad sales are expected to surpass \$265,000, up from \$27,000 in 2004.

"Advertisers are now paying attention to United Church News because our subscriber and reader base is so large," Guess said.

"Our income, both from advertisers and donors, has increased exponentially as was projected," he said. "The problem is that we're now competing with postal rates and newsprint costs that make large-scale print publishing a very costly enterprise."

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'Holy Adventure' explores new spiritual ground

By Jeff Woodard

Like many progressive pastors, the Rev. Bruce Epperly can't help but think outside the box. Or, in his case, "color outside the lines." "It's OK if we color outside the lines a bit, to be creative, imaginative," says Epperly, whose new book, "Holy Adventure: 41 Days of Audacious Living," is intended as an alternative to Rick Warren's best-selling "The Purpose Driven Life." Warren's work — a guide to living 21st-century life based on eternal purposes, not cultural values — uses Biblical stories and a set of devotionals titled "40 Days of Purpose" to explain God's plan.

"In 'The Purpose Driven Life,' you find out what your job is, and if you stay inside the lines, you're OK," says Epperly, Director of Continuing Education and Professor of Practical Theology at Lancaster (Pa.) Theological Seminary. "If not, you're in trouble."

Epperly says he has had many conversations with pastors, including several from the UCC, whose congregations have studied "The Purpose Driven Life." "It brought people to adult studies, but many pastors weren't comfortable with the theology of it. They struggled with the notion that God, despite everything that is important in our lives, acts without our input. It challenged our human freedom and seemed to imply that God was responsible for heinous events, from genocide to

traumatic events."

Undermining Warren's message is not Epperly's intent. "It's the difference between purpose and adventure, and being driven and having a degree of creativity in the course of your life," says Epperly, who, along with his wife, the Rev. Katherine Gould Epperly, is co-pastor of the Disciples United Community Church in Lancaster. "The Purpose Driven Life" implies that the script has been written, that goals have been planted, and all we have to do is discover them."

Defining "adventure" as "the interplay of call and response," Epperly says God continually calls us to take our role as God's companions in creatively healing our lives, relationships and the earth. "Freedom is real, but it is always shaped by our previ-

ous choices and our environment. Like a good parent, God wants us to use our freedom responsibly as God calls us to be more creative and free in shaping our lives and the world."

The "extra" day in Epperly's book is designed to symbolize that the future is open. "It's very much a practical theology. Each of the 41 days focuses on a theological theme and then provides exercises to live it out with their heart, head and hand."

Local churches can use "Holy Adventure" for both group and individual study, says Epperly. "My goal would be for congregations to study this book and help them frame their own lives, shape where God is calling them on the adventure. If there's one challenge of our church, we've forgotten contemplation in the midst of all our action. We need both. When we live out our faith, our actions are inspired."

In many ways, Epperly thinks "Holy Adventure" is the embodiment of the UCC's "God is still speaking" ministry. "Our church quite possibly has the most dynamic model of any denomination in the world. 'God is still speaking' is saying that your life is an adventure, and that God is not finished. He is still in the process of doing a new thing . . . and he wants us to be part of it."

Epperly praises the Stillspeaking

ministry for going beyond reinterpretation of Bible passages and considering new perspectives on topics such as homosexuality — and sex in general. "God is saying, 'Well, this is how it's been understood in the past, but behold, here is a new thing,'" he says.

Eagerly anticipating those "new things" yet to come, Epperly hopes "Holy Adventure" helps to provide the spiritual foundation on which people can build and live out their faith.

"We live in a world where the final word hasn't been written, so we're helping to write it."

Jeff Woodard is a member of *Pilgrim Congregational UCC in Cleveland, Ohio*, and a regular contributor to *United Church News*.

HOLY ADVENTURE:
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By Dr. Bruce Epperly
Upper Room, 2008.
Paperback, \$15.00
ISBN 978-0-8358-9970-3,
<upperroom.org/bookstore>.

COMMENTARY: How to live faithfully in an economic downturn

By Anthony B. Robinson

"More of Everything" is the slogan for one of the big box retailers in our area. Its trucks roll by with those words emblazoned on the side: "More of Everything."

Suddenly that slogan seems less like glad tidings than it does a haunting, sad chiding. For some time now, we Americans seem to have worshipped a god named "More." More growth, more money, more experiences, more houses, more cars, more speed, more stuff. Always and everywhere more; always and everywhere pushing the limits. Now that seems to have backfired.

Perhaps we should not be surprised. Perhaps we aren't surprised.

There is a reason for limits. As any four-year-old who gets a hold of the cookie jar or a container of Cool Whip learns, there is such a thing as "too much of a good thing." There is a reason for limits. "More" is not always a good idea.

In classical Christian thought, human beings are of a dual nature. We are finite, made of earth, mortal and limited. And we are also free, and if not exactly infinite, then capable of going beyond the given circumstances. Finite and free, we have one foot on earth and one in heaven.

"What a piece of work is man," exclaimed Shakespeare's Hamlet as he contemplated the human being who is both "infinite in faculties" and a "quintessence of dust."

Life's great challenge is to give both parts their due. There is a time to push limits, cross boundaries, and

go beyond what has previously been thought possible. And there is a time for acknowledging limits, for mind-ing our boundaries, and respecting the rules.

Arguably, our strong suit as Americans has been the first: pushing the limits, crossing boundaries, and achieving what others haven't even tried. Is there a shadow side to this virtue? Our relentless pushing of the limits, our drive for "more of everything," has been one-sided and excessive. We have failed to take account of our finitude, to honor limits, to live with boundaries.

Are the present economic woes a judgment on our transgression and the failure to acknowledge and value limits and boundaries in the push for "More of Everything?"

The Very Rev. Samuel T. Lloyd, Dean of the National Cathedral (Episcopal) in Washington D.C., writes that Americans worship not simply the

god of wealth, but the god of "More." "This is the god who declares that we can live without limits, that more wealth, more growth, more spending must always be the way of the future. We have come to worship the golden calf of unlimited growth."

Lloyd quotes the Kentucky farmer and writer Wendell Berry: "The commonly accepted basis of our economy is the supposed possibility of limitless growth, limitless wants, limitless wealth, limitless natural resources, limitless energy and limitless debt. The idea of a limitless economy implies and requires a doctrine of general human limitlessness; all are entitled to pursue without limit whatever they conceive as desirable."

In the present challenges might we discern a divine chastening of excess and the doctrine of "general human limitlessness?"

Limitless growth may violate God's plan and ordering of life. Now may be a time to remember what we have too long seemed happier to forget: The wisdom of limits and the blessing of boundaries.

The Rev. Anthony B. Robinson, a UCC ordained speaker and author, teaches leadership at Emmanuel College at the University of Toronto. This article is one in a collection of Writers Group produced reflections titled "Faith and Tough Economic Times: Pastoral Perspectives." Additional resources are available at <cc.org/stewardship/faith-and-tough-economic.html>.

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UCC YOUTH STIR IT UP FOR 'SOUPER BOWL OF CARING'

America's youth are working to make 2009 a record year for the Souper Bowl of Caring, with a national goal of raising \$11 million in cash and cans for hunger and poverty-related charities across the country.

Youth will collect one-dollar donations in large soup pots on or near Feb. 1, 2009. Each group gives their donation directly to the charity of their choice — no money is sent to Souper Bowl of Caring headquarters. Organizers simply ask that groups report their collection amount so a national total can be determined.

"The Souper Bowl of Caring empowers us to take the simple step towards ending hunger and changing the lives of our neighbors in need," said Kara Fleharty, national youth advisor to the Souper Bowl of Caring and member of **Pilgrim Faith UCC in Oak Lawn, Ill.**

To learn more about the event, interested groups can visit <superbowl.org>.



Youth from **Christ (Myers) UCC in Massillon, Ohio** display their Souper Bowl of Caring collection.

photo furnished

GEORGE OTTO DEAD AT 76

The Rev. George W. Otto, executive director of the UCC's Stewardship Council from 1979 to 1992, died Sept. 24. He had led the movement toward a more holistic view of stewardship where he proclaimed that stewardship "is the care of the Gospel, of creation, of history and the church." Otto was a member of **Cleveland's Archwood UCC**. He died after returning from a trip to Colorado, where altitude had caused physical complications.

PASTORAL CHANGES

- Adams, Katherine M.** to First UCC, Billerica, MA
- Arens, M. John** to Cong. UCC, New Preston, CT
- Baldwin, Winston** to First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME
- Bartlett, Grace M.** to First Cong. UCC, Brewer, ME
- Baskette, Sue M.** to St. Paul's UCC, Herndon, PA
- Biggar, Cynthia B.** to Cong. UCC, Standish, ME
- Bing, Eric A.** to First Cong. UCC, Newton Falls, OH
- Bove, Virginia B.** to Pelham UCC, Belchertown, MA
- Brink, John C.** to Union UCC, Dennis, MA
- Dipina, Toni** to Hadwen Park UCC, Worcester, MA
- Dodge, Christopher L.** to First Parish UCC, Westwood, MA
- Faber, Kathy A.** to Cong. UCC, Enfield, CT
- Fiocco, Judy** to Evangelical UCC, Boonville, MO
- Fung, James A.** to Christian UCC, Lihue, HI
- Fung, Karl** to Chinese Community UCC, Berkeley, CA
- Gackenheimer, Ryan** to First Cong. UCC, Essex Junction, VT
- Gagnon, Alfred J.** to First Cong. UCC, Scarborough, ME
- Hambrick-Stowe, Charles** to First Cong. UCC, Ridgefield, CT
- Kuhns, Nancy E.** to Nittany Valley Charge, PA
- Lepak, Cheryl** to Salem Plankroad UCC, Plymouth, WI
- Marean, Eric** to East UCC, Milton, MA
- Marean, Sara** to East UCC, Milton, MA
- Marlin-Warfield, Mariah** to UCC Cong. UCC, Medina, OH
- McSherley, Lonny J.** to Trinity Reformed UCC, Conover, NC
- Noble, Robert** to Federated UCC, Castleton, VT
- Norris, Sally E.** to Federated UCC, East Orleans, MA
- Olson, James J.** to Center Cong. UCC, Meriden, CT
- Schmidt, Valerie** to McConnellsburg/Fort Loudon Charge, PA
- Steinhard, John B.** to St. John's UCC, Bluffton, OH
- Strout, Winfield** to interim, St. John's UCC, Genoa, OH
- Thomas, Candace D.** to interim, Point Place UCC, Toledo, OH
- Towner-Larsen, Susan** to Church House, Cleveland, OH
- Underhill, Mike** to Nexus UCC, Hamilton, OH
- Van Houten, Gloria** to First Cong. UCC, Sarasota, FL
- Voelker, Steven E.** to St. John's UCC, Bucyrus, OH
- Wagner, Gretchen** to interim, St. John's UCC, Mansfield, OH
- Ward, Fredd** to Cong. UCC, Naugatuck, CT
- Wendorf, Diane E.** to North Parish Cong. UCC, Sanford, ME
- Whiting, Pat C.** to Union Cong. UCC, Nucla, CO
- Whitten, Lora A.** to Cong. UCC, Edgerton, WI
- Wild, David A.** to All Faiths UCC, Ridge Manor, FL
- Yetter, Daniel** to Trinity UCC, Canton, OH

Pastoral changes are provided by the UCC's Parish Life and Leadership Ministry.

CLERGY DEATHS

- Anderman, William H.**, 86, 10/20/2008
- Bird, Ray N.**, 71, 8/28/2008
- Beckwith, Hubert S.**, 86, 10/12/2008
- Benedict, Donald L.**, 91, 9/4/2008
- Burditt, Paul H.**, 84, 10/18/2008
- Diaz, Andres R.**, 75, 9/18/2008
- Engel, Austin G.**, 80, 10/3/2008
- Foster, John J.**, 92, 8/11/2008
- Gaskill, R. David**, 60, 10/15/2008
- Howard, Neil R.**, 85, 9/16/2008
- Knudson, Kalmer N.**, 79, 8/31/2008
- Menchhofer, J. David**, 86, 10/29/2008
- Morris, Ronald E.**, 76, 9/21/2008
- Nace, Robert K.**, 85, 8/31/2008
- Nuyujukian, Soghomon D.**, 85, 9/14/2008
- Otto, George W.**, 76, 9/24/2008
- Snyder, Roy C.**, 92, 9/3/2008
- Sinclair, Donald K.**, 92, 10/10/2008
- Szigethy, Bela**, 97, 8/26/2008
- Walker, J. C.**, 92, 9/21/2008
- Wheelock, Robert B.**, 87, 10/26/2008
- White, Arthur F.**, 91, 9/21/2008

Clergy death information is provided by The Pension Boards.

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local church mission and ministry

Written by Carol L. Pavlik

TANK CHECK



Volunteers check the water level in one of Humane Borders' fresh water emergency stations in the Sonoran desert south of Tucson, Ariz.

Gregg Brekke photo

Ministry offers hope to migrant workers' children

Maggard Migrant Ministry has its roots in Plymouth Congregational UCC of Coconut Grove, Fla. In 1967, Alvin Maggard and members of the Triune club hosted their first Christmas dinner for a busload of migrant workers' children from South Dade County.

Forty-one years later, the ministry has grown into a full-blown 501(c)(3) organization that has branched out to educational endeavors as well. Even today, Alvin Maggard and his wife, Helen, remain active in the ministry. And the Christmas dinner is still held each year for a busload of children brought to the church for dinner, singing and gifts.

The Rev. Thomas Niblock, pastor at Plymouth, describes the Christmas party: "We bring 70 or 80 kids up from one of the migrant worker camps. They get a good meal and their teachers come with them," he says, adding that the teachers often remember coming to the party when they were children.

"The kids always get one toy to keep, then they get two to take back to the camps and give away. It was a good concept all those years ago," says Niblock. "It allows the kids the joy of giving." Niblock says the children received clothing, book bags and school supplies in addition to the toys.

Reaching beyond Christmas, the Maggard Migrant Ministry has been providing scholarships for migrant children attending college, another result of Alvin Maggard's passion and vision for the plight of the migrant family.

"Alvin Maggard is an unbelievably vigorous guy who still sits on the Mexican American Council, the only Anglo to do so," Niblock says. "He's helped the church be a financial presence, a mission presence, but also a political presence."

Each year, Niblock attends the local high school graduation and witnesses the proud look of the migrant workers and their children as they receive their diplomas. "In almost every case, the parents are a good foot or two shorter than the kids, because this is the first generation of kids who have grown

up with decent nutrition," says Niblock.

"These parents have the weathered look of centuries of laborers," says Niblock. "You see the field workers of a century ago in their faces. Yet in their kids, you're seeing a hopeful, young American!"

This year, Maggard Migrant Ministries is sponsoring 16 students by paying all or part of their college tuition. "We work very cooperatively with the colleges in the area," says Niblock. "They stretch the money that we use for scholarships a long way."

Niblock has seen families ripped apart when the parents are forced to return to Mexico, but their children, who were born in the U.S., are allowed to stay. "Immigration law issues are so complicated and so threatening, and some of these people [at the migrant worker camps] are undocumented and some aren't. It is a real sword that hangs over the lives of families, ever-present and dangerous."

As long as there is a need, Niblock is confident his congregation has the desire and resources to continue their ministry to migrant families. "The only wonderful, blessed thing that might happen is if the need goes away," says Niblock. "I don't see that happening day after tomorrow, but I think there's a possibility we may get to a point where we don't do this to people any more."

"I know the law is clear," emphasizes Niblock, "but life isn't."

Arizona church humanizes border, aids migrants

The backdrop of this story begins in January of 1994, when President Clinton and the leaders of Mexico and Canada signed the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), creating a trilateral trade bloc between the three countries.

A side-effect of this treaty resulted in the rise in immigrants crossing the borders between these countries, a situation in which Good Shepherd UCC in Sahuarita, Ariz., finds itself inextricably involved.

Situated just 45 miles north of the Mexican border, the Rev. Randy Mayer came to Good Shepherd in 1998, joining other churches in the area that were already in the midst of conversations about the border.

"In free trade economics, if you're going to let products and money cross without tariffs, then you have to let people cross, as well, to follow the work. That's just part of the fundamental rules of free trade economics," says Mayer.

But the United States has kept vigilant watch over the border with heightened Border Patrol security, trying to deter the number of undocumented migrants passing over the border. Those efforts were stepped up in a post-9/11 world, where suspicions ran high of undocumented persons entering the country.

The hot, barren desert at the border was seen as being a natural deterrent, but Mayer and his wife, Norma, were immediately concerned by the reports of people getting stranded in the desert, or even dying because of dehydration.

By 2000, Mayer was part of an ecumenical group of community members who gathered to discuss the problem. There was a resounding agreement at the end of that meeting, held on Pentecost Sunday: There needed to be a humanitarian response, and that response, they decided, would be water. "We wanted to take death out of the immigration equation," says Mayer.

Before long, the idea of Humane Borders was developed. Mayer remains active in the humanitarian group and was part of the group that put the very first water station in the desert at Rio Rico, Ariz.

Today, Humane Borders maintains over 90 water stations along the border. Some of these water barrels, says Mayer, distribute 250 gallons of water a week during the peak migration season.

Getting permits for these 90 stations happened gradually, as the U.S. Border Patrol initially discouraged the idea, calling the availability of water aiding and abetting. "There were lots of conversations with Border Patrol that more people would cross knowing there was water. But we've worked through all that," says Mayer in his calm voice. "It is not illegal to put water in the desert."

Still, the mission of providing water at the border remains controversial. The community of Sahuarita can often be divided on the issue of immigration, and Mayer admits that he's lost church members over the years because of this ministry.

"It's pretty intense," concedes Mayer. "There is a push-pull factor. People are forced out of one economy, pulled into another, and nobody addresses the root causes. Migrants

are caught in the middle."

Mayer says that all Americans benefit from the work of migrants, "but we have no idea because the costs and benefits are hidden." He continues, "We have blinders on, thinking we deserve all this; we want our food and vegetables cheap and our houses cleaned. Every single American lives a better life because of the migrant."

In that context, says Mayer, offering a drink of lifesaving water is the least he can do.

Mayer and his army of volunteers who work for Humane Borders or for the Green Valley Samaritans — a spin-off group that attends to food, supplies and medical needs of those stranded in the desert — have to strike a delicate balance between doing what is right, and doing what is legal.

Four years ago, two Samaritan volunteers

PHOTO ESSAY: BORDER LIVES — U.S./MEXICO

View images by United Church News editor Gregg Brekke, collected during a 2006 educational trip of the US/Mexico border with Border-Links, a non-profit organization that conducts travel and education seminars on U.S./Mexico border issues.

sixview.com/essays/bl2006/

were picked up and detained by authorities for transporting three migrants who were in need of hospitalization.

Transporting undocumented migrants in the United States is against the law. Their vehicle was confiscated, and the volunteers faced receiving the maximum penalty allowed by law. Just before the federal trial was about to get under way, the judge dismissed the case on the grounds that the volunteers had notified authorities of their intent to transport the injured migrants for emergency medical aid only.

Mayer describes that experience as receiving a "get out of jail free card." Since then, the groups have been careful not to test the limits of the law.

In the Christmastime tradition of *Las Posadas* (Spanish for "the inns"), there is a re-enactment of the classic story of Mary and Joseph knocking on door after door and receiving the same answer: No room at the inn.

Each Christmas time, Mayer is reminded by *Las Posadas* that our faith sometimes has to lead our decisions. "In our system of law and order, we don't always know what the right thing to do is," he says. "But from a faith perspective, we know about hospitality, we know about the innkeeper who finally opened the door and said, 'You have a place here.'"

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