

**“For Welfare, Not for Harm”**  
**Vermont Conference Annual Meeting, UCC**  
**J. Bennett Guess**  
**Sunday morning, June 5, 2011**

*“Once you were no people, but now you are God’s people. Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”*

In 1977, Calvin and Nelia Kimbrough – freshly minted graduates of Candler School of Theology in Atlanta – just couldn’t imagine that they would ever feel comfortable settling down in the confines of a neat, tidy suburban mainline church.

They were the nuts-and-granola type, very Vermont-ish, who came of age in the 1960s. They were artsy, musical, liturgical, missionaries who felt called to urban ministry.

Calvin, a guitar-playing, banjo-picking, band leader who had both the beard and the talent to make you feel like you were in the company of Pete Seeger.

And Nelia, an artist who specialized in making elaborate creations out of found objects, a poet and preacher who could keep you spellbound with her outlandish stories of God’s grace.

At the invitation of another couple originally from Bloomington, Indiana, Calvin and Nelia, and yet another couple (all six of them ordained ministers) decided instead of the confines of traditional parish ministry to tackle a more urban adventure. They had heard of a place called Haney’s Corner in downtown Evansville, Ind., one of the city’s rougher neighborhoods where poverty and crime were high and property values and test scores were low, where white flight had left the lone neighborhood elementary school to become the laughing stock of the Vanderburgh County School Corporation.

Drug dealers, or the otherwise underemployed, stood on street corners. And any people driving by in cars nervously fumbled to lock their doors, obviously lost ... or looking for a good place to buy crack cocaine.

The seminary graduates’ plan was to form an intentional community in Haney’s Corner, a ministry to the immediate neighborhood they would soon call “Patchwork Central.”

They started, initially, by purchasing an old three-bedroom house in need of significant repair. The three couples moved into it, each with their own bedroom, with common areas used as Patchwork’s office and worship space.

During the initial years, they held worship services on Sunday evenings, attracting a few stragglers from the street whom they had befriended in the neighborhood. They signed written,

wording-specific covenants as to how they would take responsibility for the organization, program development, and administration of their emerging community, all with one mission in mind: the betterment of Haney's Corner.

By 1981, the covenant community had grown from six to 10. They practiced strict disciplines of prayer, worship, study and the transformation of oppressive institutions and structures.

Each member of the community was expected to live simply and cultivate their unique God-given gifts in order to offer financial income for their shared ministry and to offer a specific leadership to a ministry that would benefit Haney's Corner.

They started families and raised their children, alongside other children in the neighborhood, and encouraged – I quote – “the virtues of justice, love, non-violence, imagination and trust.”

But, in 1982, five of the 10 members withdrew from the covenant, leaving the remaining five distraught.

One of the original couples decided it was time to try their hand at more conventional ministry. The suburbs were starting to sound more appealing now.

The other original couple went a completely different direction, joining the Amway sales movement. (I bet you didn't see *that* coming.)

But, despite moving on, the parting couples remained financially committed to Patchwork, now literally a patchwork of its former self.

But Calvin and Nelia remained and others would join them. At first, covenant members were required to live in the immediate neighborhood but, in time, it was decided that members could be permitted to live elsewhere but only if they maintained a deep commitment to that particular spot where God had called them.

Patchwork eventually moved in and renovated an abandoned synagogue, which the Jewish community donated. They were maturing a bit as an organizational structure, but grassroots still the same.

In time, they organized for improvements to neighborhood infrastructure, streets and sidewalks. They worked hand in hand with parents and educators to push for a better school. They planned community gardens – works of art really – and the people worked in them and ate of them.

I came to know Nelia and Calvin in year 15 of their adventure, when I moved to Henderson, which is adjacent to Evansville. They became the dearest of friends. It didn't take long for me to join the Patchwork Community myself, and a close relationship and worship style emerged between our UCC church in Kentucky and its older more-learned sibling across the Ohio River. Many of our members and musicians worshipped at Zion UCC on Sunday mornings and Patchwork on Sunday nights.

In time, Zion also adopted a similar annual covenant-singing process, meaning that while we had 300 or so “members” on the book, about 60 of them made deeper-level commitments to one another and the community, with specific promises spoken aloud to the congregation and put into writing.

It’s the “membership” format of many intentional communities and emerging churches, and one that I encourage others to look into.

From that experience I began a personal fascination with the formation of intentional communities – churches and congregations, yes, but also authentic expressions of faithful Christian living that don’t necessarily look like the church down the street.

I found it interesting how many people scratched their heads in confusion, even frustration, when I tried to explain Patchwork. To them, it sounded eerily like something akin to Jonestown. They questioned how, if it didn’t have a steeple and pews and hymnals and Sunday morning worship, how could it be authentic Christian community? “Are they a church or not,”

Of course, intentional communities are nothing new. They have been wonderful experiments that have existed throughout all Christian history. Some have lasted many, many years. Others were initiated with courage and commitment, but soon languished in the execution. The Roman Catholics and Anglicans called them abbeys or convents. In more recent decades, Hippies called them communes.

In the 1800s, they were known as Utopian experiments.

Here in Vermont, they have lasted for hundreds of years as Congregationalist (UCC) churches: People bound in sacred covenant “to walk together in all God’s ways.”

In 2002, after 25 years at Patchwork, Nelia and Calvin felt their ministry there was drawing to a close. Haney’s Corner was no longer the scary place, the laughing stock it had once been, thanks to a small Christian community – a church, if you must, that adopted it as its central mission and changed the lives of those in inner city Evansville, Ind., forever. Once they were no people. Now they were God’s people. Once they had been shown no mercy. Now they knew and understood what mercy was all about.

Patchwork’s extensive network of community programs have become indispensable to that part of the city and were now in a place to operate in a more corporate, less organic, fashion - - complete with an “Executive Director” and that’s okay.

The neighborhood food bank, the after-school tutoring program, the bike-repair shop, the citizens’ computer center, the children’s art program, and on and on, were now garnering church support, government funding and business grants.

Unless one looks closely enough now, one might miss the fact that a small band of committed people of faith made it all happen.

Calvin and Nelia moved back to Atlanta, where they now live alongside the city's homeless at the Open Door community there.

Not all Christian communities look alike or worship alike or think alike or act alike, but they have one thing in common: Over a sustained time, if there is sufficient persistence and tenacity, they make change happen.

Here in Vermont and across New England, these small Christian communities started schools when there were none, provided health care when there were no alternatives, and created mission societies to tackle injustice, hunger and poverty.

It might be difficult now to overlook the fingerprint of your church on these ministries – now that they are called colleges and universities, medical centers and hospitals, and community development not-for-profits. But the impact originated with small struggling churches with God's mission on its heart. It's still the way we are, the way we operate.

Not all Christian communities are the same, but we do share a certain DNA:

We take bread, we bless and break it, and remind each other that we are the body of the Christ, which means we have responsibilities to care for and uphold one another.

We take the cup, we bless and share it, and tell one another that it is drink in the wilderness.

We pray and we sing, and we reflect on what we've attempted to do right and where we've come up short.

We look for people and places that are lost and forgotten – and we reclaim them again as God's own.

There's a lot being written about the emerging and emergent church these days, and many of us who hear about it react as if we'd just been told about Patchwork Central, or Sojourners, or the Open Door ... or, for that matter, First Congregational Vermont, or United Church of Anytown, New England.

We have the same puzzled looks on our faces that King James must have had on his, when he first learned of the people called "Pilgrims," whose ways of worship and community seemed strangely dissimilar and disloyal to the Christian traditions that had served us all so well for centuries.

Today, as the religious establishment, we find ourselves asking:

“You mean people will actually gather to talk about the Bible in a coffee shop and think about how to solve the problems in their communities?”

“You mean, they meet up on Facebook to pray with one another? How strange is that?”

“They meet when – Monday nights? What, are they too good for Sundays now?”

“They plan on giving 50 percent of every offering to support justice work in their community?” (“Let’s see how long that lasts. They’ll never own a nice big sanctuary with that kind of game plan.”)

To be sure: One group’s idea of how to remain faithful is another group’s definition of institutional heresy.

With all this change, it’s easy to wonder if there’s any room left for the small church. What in the world is to become of us?

Well, we use the word “emerging” for good reason, because it fits ... we don’t yet know for sure. But we can glimpse some general shape of what’s to come.

Some things will remain the same: We will still rely on the capacity and leadership of larger churches to support much of our denominational work, along with the intentional giving of smaller congregations, communities and individuals. There’s still room in the church for some Cathedrals, those that can use their most vast resources to teach and build up the whole.

And, as a denomination, we will find newer ways of relating to one another, with much more focused attention on sharing our expertise from all across the church.

Denominations are going to be values-driven, with local mission lifted up and celebrated, but in ways that we can measure collectively the impact we are having across the landscape as a united church on some similar path.

But those who predict the demise of the small church are wrong. Small churches will evolve, to be sure, and not all of them will look alike. Groups, like individuals, have always found a way to distinguish themselves based on what drives their mission and sustains their faith. But the “small Christian community” will remain the bedrock of our Christian experience.

Will we build the buildings we once did? Maybe not. Will we create the infrastructures we once did? We are likely to rethink them.

Yet, the small, intentional group of people committed to being faithful together – that will never go out of style.

If we’re lucky, the local church will become even more “local” – finding ways to immerse themselves more deeply in the struggles of the places where they find themselves.

Sometimes, today, it feels like the seeds we plant are very, very small. But I find it helps us when we remind ourselves, seeds – by nature – have always been small.

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A couple of weeks ago, I was in a meeting with Bill McKinney, the former president of the UCC's Pacific School of Religion.

A few days earlier Bill had been on a shuttle bus in Chicago, where just before the doors closed, a young mother and her three-year old daughter came on board, carrying a lot of luggage and all the trappings that come with transporting a young child.

The driver, before departing for the journey, came through the center aisle to collect the \$16 fares from each of the passengers. When he reached the young mother and asked for her cash, she replied that her boyfriend had told her that the shuttle was complimentary. She did not have any cash. She didn't have the \$32 required for both her and her daughter.

"Well, you can pay by credit card," the driver said. She didn't have a credit card.

She did say she could write a check, except the driver said he couldn't accept personal checks.

So with seemingly no other option, the bus driver said, "You're going to have to get off the bus."

So, with shame and frustration, this woman started to gather her belongings. Everyone around her had heard the conversation.

But one guy, in the front of the bus, stood up and said to the other passengers, "You know, this doesn't have to end this way. Why don't we take up a collection? I've got \$10. Who else will chip in?"

Bill said he also contributed \$10 ... and within about 30 more seconds, the required \$32 was in the bus driver's hand.

"Why don't we take up a collection?" What a grace-filled moment of possibility that must have been.

What amazes me about Bill's story is that I had expected that the man who stood up was going to valiantly cough up the whole \$32. But it was his trust in others' inherent goodness that I didn't expect. He displayed such courage, such a trust in the potential goodness of others, that it transformed that bus ride into one worth remembering.

That's what Christian communities do. We remind one another that both life's struggles and joys, our problems and their solutions, are riding together on the same bus, and they are always indistinguishable when Christ is invited into the midst of us.

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John Wesley had three rules.

Do no harm.

Do as much good as you can possibly do.

And stay in love with God.

The first and the second are hard enough. But the third – staying in love with God – is what always proves the most difficult.

And that's why ... we have each other. We need each other. And we, too, have God to thank for that.

AMEN.