

**“The Plans I Have For You”**  
**Vermont Conference Annual Meeting, UCC**  
**J. Bennett Guess**  
**Saturday evening, June 4, 2011**

*“For surely I know the plans I have for you,” says the Lord. “Plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.”*

About 20 years ago now, at my ecclesiastical council, a man stood up in the back of the church and asked if I knew what was the most-divisive theological argument being debated in the United Church of Christ. I said I could name several, but I wanted to answer, “The color of the new sanctuary carpet?” But before I could do so, he interrupted me, preferring to answer his own question.

“It’s whether or not children should be receiving communion before they are confirmed!” he said.

That may well have been a swirling controversy at the time, even if I missed it, but I can attest that – twenty years later – the tender age of our would-be communicants is rarely if ever mentioned as major cause for alarm. If anything, we worry that we don’t have any kids to commune with at all.

One of the fortunate things about being in exile is that you learn to focus your attention on what really matters. In fact, you have no other choice. When all you carry must fit in a backpack, you can’t insist on bringing the dining room table.

“The wilderness is where we learn again to live in a new way, because old supports are gone, old assumptions no longer hold true, and old practices either fail or are no longer possible.” That’s what Gil Rendle says in his excellent book, “Journey in the Wilderness.”

Using an interesting allegory, he says, the church, right now, is under the illusion that it can build a new prison using the old prison’s bricks without losing any of the prisoners.

Equating the church to a prison is not the best metaphor, but you get the point.

In other words, we want to cross this current wilderness with everything and everyone intact. But such an ideal can’t happen, he says. You can’t go through deep change and remain unchanged at the same time.

And Rendle reminds us that the church is not the only institution that is experiencing a period of wandering in exile. He explains that, following World War II, scientific advances offered the illusion of a secure future. The mainline church, as well as other member organizations (the

VFW, the DAR, the Elks, the Lions and the Rotarians), were at the height of their influence. People wanted to belong, to fit in, to join, and the church was central to fulfilling that mission. Here you could get a membership card.

But as Rendle says, along came Woodstock and Watergate, the fuller atomic age, the communist scare and the hunt for Soviet sympathizers, the civil rights movement, the women's movement, the assassination of national leaders, the emergence of rock and roll, the sexual revolution, and all that was certain (or presumed to be certain) was called into question.

“The hope that science, technology, and the civilized human being could bring order to the world, making life safe, productive and meaningful was deeply dented and called into question,” Rendle says. “When people don't know *what* went wrong, they want to know *who* went wrong.” And fingers are pointed in multiple directions.

As Presbyterian pastor Carol Howard Merritt has pointed out, “When a minister entered a store wearing his clergy collar in the fifties, he got a discount. When the same minister entered the store in his collar in the seventies, he got dirty looks.”

One could argue that right after the UCC was formed in 1957, it really was taking its first baby steps from that Uniting General Synod right into the first edges of wilderness. But we're just now realizing that. But we didn't go there alone, but alongside every other member organization, from the VFW right on down the line). Looking back, it was the beginning of all membership-organization's exiles. The ground was shifting even if we didn't feel it at the time. And the problem is you're often in the wilderness a long time before you realize it.

That man's question to me about the UCC's most-divisive argument, back in 1992, was indicative of his own feelings of dislocation. Life was breaking in on the church's supposed order, and his particular worry (children at communion) was only symptomatic of the broader disorder or dis-ease that has only multiplied for us since then. He didn't like it. And we don't like it.

The reality is that the biggest issue facing the church 20 years ago, or even 30 years ago, really is the same one facing the church today, only we feel it far more acutely now, because our prominence and resources THEN afforded us the temporary luxury of avoiding it for so long.

The first step of adaptive change is coming to realize the urgency for change. Perhaps it's taken us 30 years to reach this important beginning place, but that new-found urgency is something we should count as a blessing, not a curse.

When some people like to blame the UCC's supposed decline, or even our demise, on its more-liberal social policy positions, I always point to the Missouri Synod-Lutheran Church as my response.

No other denomination could possibly be more dissimilar to the UCC in its stances on social issues, but at the same time, no denomination more closely mirrors our demographics (that is, the age and racial/ethnic makeup of the people in our pews and the general membership trends that both denominations have experienced over the past 30 years.) Apart from our distanced positions on every single hot-button issue, the UCC and the Missouri Synod are remarkably similar in size, regional concentrations, and the marked decline we've experienced in the two categories we've used to measure success in the church: overall membership and monies given to the national organization.

Unfortunately for Missouri Synod Lutherans, they don't have the luxury of being able to blame it on the gays.

So how does one explain that similar trajectory? For that matter, how does one explain the spiral of change that is affecting every religious and social service organization, across the board, be they conservative, liberal or somewhere in between?

Rendel explains it this way: "People no longer join congregations because they want relationships or because they want to 'belong.' As far as relationships that serve as social friendships, increasingly people already have as many as their time and lifestyle allow."

But people do want to become active in congregations where they feel that they are having an impact, that they are making a difference.

The theological shift is from "keeping members satisfied" to "giving people meaning."

I find some real hope in that. It's not that people don't or won't take the gospel seriously anymore. It's that they want to explore it and engage it *even more seriously*.

They want a faith-worth living, a faith that keeps them looking upward and outward, even inward, but not in any insular way.

This is why organizations like Habitat for Humanity or Heifer International have thrived in the past 30 years, while membership organizations, like the PTA, or the UCC, have had a hard go of it. To our surprise, people don't want to read our resolutions, or review our minutes, they want a hammer and some nails. They want to engage something at a deeper level. They want some indication that their "faith has muscle," as Geoffrey Black says.

The function of the congregation has shifted from being social to being purposeful, from relational to missional.

Young people today aren't "just NOT interested" in church any more, as some claim, but a new generation is not willing to support the big, cumbersome institutions that our grandparents so lovingly built for us.

They aren't willing to play that "offering charade" where we bless our monetary gifts under allusions that they're being shared "at home and around the world to further the work of God's mission" *because they don't see that happening.*

"For surely I know the plans I have for you," says the Lord. "Plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope."

Outside of Owensboro, Ky., there is a magical place called Mt. Saint Joseph. It is the Roman Catholic Mother House of a once-thriving order of Ursuline Nuns and it serves as the infirmary where the oldest sisters come from around the world to spend their final days. It's a throw-back to another time. Huge, impressive buildings that rise out of soybean fields. It's the last thing you'd expect to find along that narrow county road that eventually dead-ends at a river's edge. It's so out of the way that most people would never see it, unless they had set out looking for it.

For several years in high school, I attended a two-week music camp at Maple Mount, as it's called, and I befriended one of the younger nuns, Sister Margaret, who lived there. Younger, meaning she was probably in her 50s. Years later, when I came back to Henderson, as a pastor, I often took spiritual retreats at Maple Mount.

One evening I was out walking, and Sister Margaret was out walking, so we met up and started walking and talking together. (I am just Protestant enough to still get a kick out of seeing a nun in shorts and tennis shoes.)

By this time, Margaret was easily in her mid-60s, but still vividly the youngest and spryest of any of the sisters there. Surely the average age was 85 at best.

We walked around the sprawling campus and she pointed out the buildings and the purposes they once served. There sat the two empty dormitories and a stately classroom that once housed students of Maple Mount Academy, the all-girls boarding school, now closed. We walked past the indoor pool and gymnasium, facilities I had used when I had been a summer camper there. Now boarded up. The only place I spotted any new activity was in the graveyard where it seemed like the number of newer, cleaner headstones was catching up with the number of moss-covered ones.

I don't know if my next comment was rude. I hope not, but I asked Sr. Margaret, "What's going to happen here?" "This place is so magnificent, but unless something drastic changes, it doesn't appear to be sustainable."

And her response to me has become one of those 5 or 10 comments in life that you hear, you know, and it just refuses to let you go.

She said, "When and if there are only a few of us left, we'll sell all this and move to an apartment. Even though we love it so, we don't need it in order to fulfill our mission."

“An apartment?” I thought to myself. “An apartment?” ... gazing over hundreds and hundreds of acres of church-owned farmland, with a 150-year-old monastery sitting atop this beautiful hilltop.

I heard some sadness and frustration in Margaret’s response, some resignation to the inevitable perhaps, but more so, I heard profound liberation in what she said. Far more liberation than frustration, to be sure.

“For surely I know the plans I have for you,” says the Lord. “Plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.”

But what we hope God will do for us is not always the same as God giving us a “future with hope.” It’s so easy to confuse the two.

While no one can tell the future, especially when you’re wandering in a wilderness. The one thing that’s for sure is that we’re not going back to the place where we came from.

The reality is that the UCC is likely to continue to get smaller, in terms of membership, denominational agency budgets, and in the number of congregations that are part of our fellowship. That’s not an indictment on our purpose or our effectiveness; it’s an honest accounting of the locations of our outlets and the population shifts in our nation. It also doesn’t mean that we won’t have tens of thousands of new members in the coming years and many new vital congregations joining our denomination. Because we will.

All I’m saying is that you don’t need a monastery when all you really need is an apartment. Please hear that as liberation, not as more frustration.

But, here’s the excitement: I also predict that more people will be touched, impacted and changed by the United Church of Christ than in years past. Because the church, she is changing. Our UCC values of extravagant welcome, continuing testament and changed lives – they resonate profoundly with the trajectory of our nation, perhaps more than ever before. And they don’t depend on people signing up, but in our going out.

That’s why we must discover new metrics to measure our success.

About four years ago, the United Methodist Church started tracking its churches’ “constituents” – those who looked primarily to a church for nurture and pastoral support – whether or not they were members or not.

Not surprisingly, even though membership is in decline, the number of constituents is rising. I suspect the same would be true in the UCC.

As long as we continue to ask only about membership and donation to the national church, we are setting ourselves up to interpreting our overall impact in negative terms, using shrinking numbers that really don’t tell the whole story.

When your mission is relational, you count the number of people on your dance card. But when your mission is purposeful, you look at the number of people dancing. The first keeps track of all that's been received; the second celebrates all that's been given. Not how many came in, but how many went out to serve, to make a difference.

McDonald's doesn't tell you how many restaurants they have; or how many employees they hire. They tell you what matters in a service business: billions and billions served.

The church is learning the importance of doing the same.

As a church professional, someone who's on the payroll and is depending on the pension, I hear that as unsettling news. I prefer the monastery. I'd prefer you give me a Lilly Endowment grant or a couple million-dollar donors to ensure the future that *I would envision*. But, when I think like a Christian, I'm sort of hopeful about this emerging shift.

"For surely *I know* the plans I have for you," says the Lord.

God knows. We do not.

But this we do know... this future has been crafted with our welfare in mind. It's meant for good and not for harm. AMEN.