

VOICES & VISIONS



AUG./SEPT. 08

SECTION B

*Southeast Conference Edition
United Church News*

Stewardship Without Slogans

By Rev. Karen McArthur

I recently saw a red Prius with a license plate "UCC" and a "God is Still Speaking," bumper sticker. That one car says a lot ... environmental efficiency and denominational identity; even the flashy red color, like our UCC banners, is easily noticed. The car carries a message. However, it might be a good idea to stay a safe distance from it when driving.

A recent study in the *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*¹ reported that people who drive cars with bumper stickers or personalized license plates are more likely to exhibit dangerously aggressive driving. It doesn't matter whether the bumper stickers were hopeful and positive or downright rude. In their study, there was no difference between those who displayed slogans like, "My Child is Honor Student of the Month" or "John 3:16", and those whose bumper stickers read, "I Don't Discriminate. I Hate Everybody." The presence of any personalization at all was positively correlated with aggression on the roads.

¹ William J. Szlemko, Jacob A. Benfield, Paul A. Bell, Jerry L. Deffenbacher, Lucy Troup, "Territorial Markings as a Predictor of Driver Aggression and Road Rage," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, Volume 38, Issue 6, June 2008, Pages: 1664-1688

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42nd Annual Meeting in Pleasant Hill, Tennessee

Transforming Churches, Transforming Lives

The highlight of the program year in the Southeast Conference is the gathering for our Annual Meeting, which this year was hosted by Pleasant Hill Community Church, United Church of Christ, in collaboration with Uplands Retirement Village in Pleasant Hill, Tennessee. The meeting explored the theme



“Transforming Churches, Transforming Lives”. The keynoter was the noted Old Testament professor, Walter Brueggemann. Music for the three worship services was provided not only by the choir and musicians of Pleasant Hill but also by the choir of Holy Trinity Community UCC in Nashville. In addition to the usual business of approving a budget and electing a Board, the meeting also received a report on the preliminary phases of a proposed capital campaign. A little over 200 people were present over the course of the meeting and rejoiced in the extravagant hospitality extended by the Pleasant Hill Community.



breakout sessions on interfaith conversations, the role of women, and efforts to address the HIV/AIDS crisis on the part of different faith communities.

The Annual Meeting itself opened with a Friday evening worship service in which the Holy Trinity Choir from Nashville brought people to their feet, and Walter Brueggemann invited us to be a part of a servant community that transforms. The traditional Friday evening ice cream social following worship was entertained by the dulcimer choir of Pleasant Hill. Saturday morning opened with worship led by Patsy Johnson of Victory Church who, among other things, celebrated that the United Church of Christ was a denomination of firsts. She was another first — the first TAP student to preach at an Annual Meeting. Hearings took place later in the morning, gathering people to discuss the capital campaign, the financial health of the Conference, and the resolutions being considered on the floor of the business meeting. Two resolutions brought before the annual meeting included one declaring the Conference a whole earth conference and one on “nuclear weapons danger”.

The business meeting following lunch brought few surprises. In addition to staff reports, a report on the status of the capital campaign, passing the two resolutions, there were elections. Associate Conference Minister, Kathy Clark, spoke about the Global Theological Immersion Trip to Thailand and the growing reach of the TAP program into our congregations. Associate Conference Minister, Cameron Trimble, lifted up the next step in church development — congregational multiplication. Conference Minister, Tim Downs, celebrated the vitality and vision of the Conference while noting that there have been some congregations who have chosen not to continue the journey with the United Church of Christ. Their absence from our fellowship is our loss. He ended by inviting people to “go back and tell what you have seen”. Others need to hear our story and be invited to be a part of it. Our Covenant Keeper congregations were celebrated and the Strive to Tithe Congregations acknowledged. Vanessa Robbs, of Pilgrim Congregational UCC, Chattanooga, was elected Moderator, Ginny Nixon of Pleasant Hill Community Church, Vice-Moderator. Roger Knight, our previous Conference Minister was present to be recognized and greeted by old friends. We left Pleasant Hill delighted by the warmth with which we were received and grateful for the renewal of our fellowship.



We began with the TAP (Theology Among the People) banquet on Thursday the 12th. The banquet was an occasion to recognize those who had graduated from TAP, TAP facilitators, and those approaching graduation. The TAP Commencement was marked by the excellent music of the Pleasant Hill Church choir, a sermon by Walter Brueggemann inviting us to undertake the “Hard Miracle of Transformation”, and the graduation of two TAP classes (total of ten students) from Evergreen Congregational UCC in Beachton, Georgia, and Pleasant Hill, Tennessee. The evening ended with a gathering highlighting the launch of rice paper hot air balloons brought by the Thailand Global Theological Emersion TAP group. As they silently floated into the evening sky, many reminisced of stories and memories of their trip.

Friday, a day of convocations, opened with an address by Dr. Brueggemann, who noted that only generosity will transform acquisitive people into neighborly people and called on us to recover the “beloved community”. We live in a culture which in its acquisitiveness invites us to hoard and covet, and we are called to organize our lives differently, free of anxiety. Following lunch, the TAP Thailand travelers presented an overview of their trip with

Grace to You and Peace

From the Conference Minister

Dear Friends,

Often when we say the word “stewardship”, it is taken as code in church life for “time to ask for money”. Stewardship at its best is so much more than this; it is an invitation to live in a new way on the face of the earth and in relationship with one another.



To be stewards is to be caretakers of this earth and of the communities into which we gather. At its best for us as a people of faith, it is a call to generosity, laying aside the temptation to be a part of the acquisitive and hoarding impulses of the culture around us. As a local church pastor, I would ask, “Have you ever seen an unhappy tither?” I never did.

In his address to us at our Annual Meeting, Walter Brueggemann spoke about the ways in which our culture presses us to busyness, production and consumption, when God wills us to be a people of praise and neighborliness. As stewards, we are called to care for our community and one another. Our churches are gatherings where we can live into this call. They are places where we praise, care, give, and are equipped to go forth. They are also a part of a network of relationships through which we can reach out together in mission to serve and restore a glimmer perhaps of what God’s reign might look like. Stewards are faithful to covenants, in all the directions in which they stretch.

As we move toward the fall, and churches begin to plan stewardship campaigns, consider looking at this as more than an occasion to raise money to meet the church budget, but instead as a time to invite people to faithful discipleship, faithful giving, and faithful stewardship.

Peace,

Tim Downs

Timothy C. Downs

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Stewardship Without Slogans?..... Cover Story Cont'd.

Why? The authors of the study tested all sorts of theories. Did the price or size of the car make a difference? What about the age or gender of the driver? Or the color of the car? In the end, these factors didn't have as much of a statistical influence as did the presence of bumper stickers, decals, and other means of personalizing a car. The researchers noted that human beings make a distinction between private space and public space. When we think of our cars as private space, then we're more likely to personalize them. If someone threatens our private space, we respond defensively, even aggressively, to the threat.

What we forget is that we are driving on public roads. The very act of driving is a venture into public space, where we have standard rules about how to share the road and interact with each other. We trust that the other drivers will drive accordingly, respecting the rules of the road. Yet we react strongly when someone gets too close or threatens us.

What about our money? Does this private / public distinction shed any light on our stewardship practices? We work hard to earn our wages. We invest our time and resources in training and education, resulting in higher earnings. We inherit from our parents. We use our money to buy food, clothing, a home and a car, with or without bumper stickers. We give to the church and charities. We save our money for the future, for retirement, or for our children. It is our money, to spend or give or save as we choose. It is our money, our accumulated wealth, ours until we die — and beyond if we choose to control it through wills and bequests. Is our money really our own private property?

Jesus asks, "Whose image is on the coin?" Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, Sacagawea — all public leaders who gave their lives, their energy, their wealth, to public service. Our money itself reminds us that it is public currency, not private property. I'm sure you've seen a dollar bill with "Where's George?" stamped on it. You can enter the bill's serial number and find out where it has been, when it was there, and what it has been used for. Each dollar has an interesting life! Sometimes I think of this as I deposit a church's cash offering at the bank: ones and fives and tens and twenties collected by the ushers and blessed by the pastor. The church bank account is credited, but the actual currency goes into the bank teller's drawer for a few minutes before it is counted out for the next

customer who cashes a paycheck, and then uses it to pay for groceries and gasoline, or perhaps to give it to someone in need.

Private or public? This bumper sticker analogy may offer some insight into how we might make individual decisions about the money we give to God's work through our local church. It is also helpful when we consider our congregational conversations about the annual church budget. When we meet as a congregation to talk about our church's finances, how do we think about the church's money? Do we seek to protect it? Keep it safe? If I give \$1000, do I want to be sure it is spent the way I think it should be spent?

Sometimes, a church budget meeting can resemble rush hour traffic. People are not exactly on their best behavior. They cut off others. They speed through the budget. They don't pay attention to the road to look ahead far enough. They label the money with various bumper stickers promoting certain causes. Are we thinking of money as private property? Or is it more like a public resource? Is it the congregation's money that we share? Or is it God's wealth for which we are temporarily responsible?

Jesus' stories about stewards are about people who are given the responsibility to care for someone else's money or property. Jesus praises those who are trustworthy, those who are generous, and those who take risks for God. If our church's ministry and mission are to deepen and grow, then we are going to need to remove the vestiges of private control by taking off our metaphorical bumper stickers. We are called to let go of our individual ideas and to trust that God and the Holy Spirit will lead us — as a group — to make faithful decisions about how we can best use the money that has been entrusted to us. How are we called to share our resources with others beyond our local church? How can we best spend it on ministry? What needs to be invested for the future?

My guess is that the driver of the red UCC Prius gives faithfully and generously to his church and encourages his church to give faithfully and generously beyond its doors as well. Hopefully, he is also a careful and considerate driver, with or without the bumper sticker!



AROUND THE CONFERENCE:

News from Local Congregations

The UCC churches of Nashville have engaged in *Sacred Conversations* with one another, along with congregations from across the United Church of Christ. At the prompting of **Linda White**, pastor of **Brookmeade Congregational UCC**, **Howard Congregational UCC**, **Holy Trinity Community UCC**, and **First United Church of Christ** have gathered to view a movie together in June, will gather again on Saturday July 19th at 1:00 with **Christophe Ringer**, Pastor of Howard Congregational UCC, at Howard. Following that they are considering reading a book together.

We are pleased to announce that the following congregations of the Southeast Conference have been recognized as **Covenant Keepers**, that is have declared and have contributed 10% of their operating budget to OCWM (Our Church's Wider Mission) Basic Support: **Deer Lodge Congregational UCC, Deer Lodge, TN, Peace Congregational UCC, Clemson, SC, Beloved Community UCC, Birmingham, Holy Trinity Community UCC, Nashville, Kirkwood UCC, Atlanta, Pleasant Hill Community UCC, TN, Unity UCC, in Montgomery** has declared itself a Covenant Keeper. The following congregations have declare themselves **Strive to Tithe** congregations, that is committed to raising their OCWM by at least 1% of their operating budget each year until they become Covenant Keepers: **Central Congregational UCC, First Congregational UCC, Talladega, First Congregational UCC, Birmingham, Bethany Congregational UCC, Thomasville, GA, and Oak Grove Congregational-Christian UCC, Pine Mountain, GA.**

We have word from **Emmanuel Christian Ministries UCC**, of Tucker, GA that they have moved into a new location in Norcross, and their first worship in the new location was July 6th. Called to build a multicultural, multiethnic, "beloved community", they are seeking to reach out to all immigrant communities and all ethnicities.



Circular Congregational UCC, Charleston, SC, hosted a worship service in celebration of the visit of the **Amistad**, on May 17th. **Susan Mitchell**, co-pastor of **Sankofa UCC, Atlanta**, representing the Conference, preach a sermon which was received with a standing ovation. The Charleston Post and Courier printed an article May 25th documenting the incredible work that the United Church of Christ and its predecessor denominations did in the area of race relations in Charleston. The article can be viewed at www.charleston.net/news/2008/may/25/ama42036/.

concerns&celebrations

As noted in our last communication, **Joe Ingle**, a member of Brookmeade Congregational UCC, and a minister who has been a lifelong advocate for the rights of prisoners and those on death row, has re-released his book **Last Rights**. Joe was present at the Annual Meeting for a book signing, and to continue to invite us to awareness of the profound injustices hidden behind our prison walls.

Ted Braun, member of Pleasant Hill Community Church UCC, is the primary author of a book about to be released by Pilgrim Press, *Balaam's Unofficial Handbook of the United Church*

of Christ. It is intended to be a light-hearted look at the UCC's history, beliefs and culture.

Tom Eckert, pastor of the United Church of Cookeville, UCC, announced that a water painting "Grandad's Horseshoes", was accepted into a juried exhibit at the opening of the Tennessee Watercolor Society's Exhibition in June.

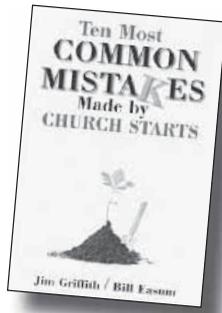
Cindy Benz, Interim Minister of **Fairfield Glade Community Church**, and a Presbyterian minister, announced her admission into a D.Min. program at Louisville Seminary in Kentucky.

If you have news you wish to share with others in this column, please email tdowns@secucc.org.

recommended reading

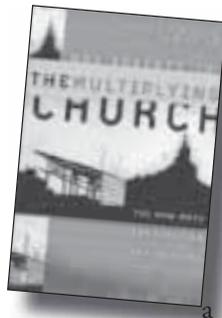
Ten Most Common Mistakes Made by Church Starts by Jim Griffith and Bill Easum

Jim Griffith and Bill Easum draw from decades of personal experience in planting new churches and consulting with supervisors and planters in new church starts. They have condensed their experiences down to ten points that account for the great majority of failures among church planters. For each point, the authors provide examples of the particular mistake and ways to avoid it.



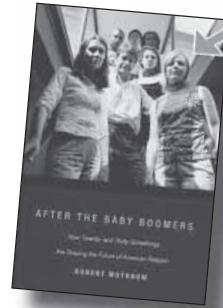
The Multiplying Church: The New Math for Starting New Churches by Bob Roberts

If you are interested in learning more about church multiplication, this book is a quick and easy read. Roberts comes from the evangelical church multiplication network and offers his insights into the challenges of birthing new churches from our existing congregations. With the wisdom of an experienced church planter, Roberts casts bold vision for growing the Church. We encourage all of our SEC churches to learn more about birthing new churches from their congregations.



After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion by Robert Wuthnow

Princeton sociologist Wuthnow assembles and analyzes a vast amount of data about the religious lives of Americans aged 21 to 45. His interests include the extent to which younger adults participate in organized worship, as well as how they think about spirituality, the relationship between religion and politics, and theology. Wuthnow insists that in some ways, today's younger adults are similar to their boomer parents—the vitality of small groups, for example, is nothing new. But there are key differences, chief among them the tendency of today's younger adults to remain single longer than ever before. Married people are significantly more likely to participate in religious communities; at the same time, participation in at least some religious groups may make marriage more likely. Wuthnow argues that our society provides lots of structural support for children and teens, but leaves younger adults to fend for themselves during the decades when they're making crucial decisions about family and work.



sharingTHEWord

Peace.

It falls off the tongue so glibly, God.
It's so easy to say, but not so easy to find.
We say it so often, we find it rarely.
Wherever I look, God, there is conflict.
Suffering. People wounded and dying.
Injured by violence of inequality and neglect
of hunger and poverty, and the greed that causes them.
Some dying from bullets of war,
but more from the conflict in their hearts.
It isn't only the victim who dies,
but also the killer, little by little.
God, I know what you are saying.
Peace begins with me.
No, even that's wrong.
Peace begins with you, God. With you.
It's in you that I can find acceptance as I am,
that I can know that I am loved and safe.
And that brings peace such as the world cannot give.
And in that peace I can move out,
taking the risks of love.
Building right relationships.
Sharing in the creation of the community which is
your church.
Working with others to find understanding.
Breaking down the walls that separate us.
Offering, not glib words, but myself.

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.

Eddie Askew from A Silence and a Shouting (adapted)

For additional information on any articles, activities or resources, contact Tim Downs at tdowns@secucc.org or call the conference office at (404) 607-1993, or outside the Atlanta area at (800) 807-1993.

Conference News and Announcements

Updates and Upcoming Events

2008 Annual Meeting

We wish to recognize all of the volunteers and leaders of **Pleasant Hill Community Church UCC, TN**, who extended themselves to make our Annual Meeting a success. **Jack Seville**, Interim Pastor, **Lyle Weible**, Moderator, **Barbara Everett**, Local Arrangements Committee Chair, **Don and Jean Clark**, who coordinated the display area, **Bill Bateman**, who coordinated all the meals, **Ted McKnight**, who did much of the set up, the musicians of the Pleasant Hill congregation, and so many others. Thank you for all of your gifts and graces!



SEC Youth Ministries

The **National Youth Event**, to be held at University of Tennessee, Knoxville, is still looking for volunteers, July 24-27. You can **contact Ann Harvey** at Harvey54@earthlink.net, if you would like to support this effort. **Bob Watson**, member of **Central Congregational UCC, Atlanta**, will be representing the Conference as the Chair of the SEC Youth Task Force.

The Conference is seeking ways to extend the ministries we offer to serve our youth, and we are pleased to announce that we have begun a conversation with the Alabama Region of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) to open their camping programs to the children and youth of our Conference in 2009. This ecumenical endeavor may become a model for other initiatives.

SEC Capital Campaign

We have this update on the capital campaign. The first phase of the needs assessment process has been completed. A Statement of Needs was developed in over fifteen meetings with committees and leaders of the Southeast Conference and its associations. Subsequent to the Board's approval of the Statement in June, a series of meetings were held to make final revisions. At this time, Steve Havey, who



was retained to conduct the Campaign, is interviewing fifty-five of the leaders of the Conference to test the Statement of Needs and solicit feedback. The Statement at this time lifts up three areas of great need of funding:

1. Enhancing our ability to communicate by increasing our IT capacity, including web based conferencing technologies, on line courses, training, and securing the necessary hardware and software to equip this initiative.

2. Strengthening our leadership development and training through the TAP program, programming for youth and young adults, and strengthening the "ministries of the baptized".

3. Equipping our church development, both new churches and the renewal of existing churches.

These priorities will be tested in interviews throughout the summer, and a final report and recommendation will be given to the Board of Directors at its meeting in September.