

Rev. Carrie Bail
May 21, 2017
First Congregational Church, UCC
Burlington, VT.

Heavenly God:

As Jesus prayed for those who shared his mission and spiritual journey, so I pray for these friends and members of the First Congregational Church of Burlington this morning as we are gathered to worship you. I ask that you bless us all that we might also recognize our oneness in you as we continue in your word and your mission in this place and time. You have sent your Holy Spirit to be with us, to guide us and comfort us; let us make room for your presence in our life together. Amen.

That's a different prayer than the one I usually start with. I want to draw attention to what's called Jesus' High Priestly prayer, which Jamie just read from John's gospel. Jesus prayed for his disciples many times, but especially at their Last Supper. It was almost the last time he spoke publicly at all, and it was not a story or a teaching or a scripture, but it was a prayer. I want to remind all of us of the power of praying out loud for one another and for the congregation. Don't underestimate it.

John's words are a little too mystical and semantically tangled for us to easily grasp with our intellect. Don't worry about it. Let the words wash over you and catch you up in the assurance of God's loving presence with you. Jesus knew that he and his disciples were about to get embroiled in a terrible time of trial, terrifying and painful. He wanted his friends to have the protective memory of being prayed for out loud, as one in God.

So I begin for you this day with the same kind of prayer. Not that I think this Annual Meeting will be a time of trial, although I suppose that's possible. In fact, I have been praying that it won't be a time of trial: that despite the difficult decisions we may face at the business meeting, we will remember that we gather here as one people of God, united in the name of Jesus Christ, and called to discern and discuss together God's will for this church.

Now you are not accustomed to having the "State of the Church" speech be a sermon rather than a report. I've already written a report that you have hopefully received by email. This moment during Sunday morning worship is an opportunity for us to ask whether the Word of God informs us as we enter into our meeting later today. I think that it does.

I arrived here as your interim senior minister last July: you had a bridge minister for six months following the resignation of your called pastor amidst great division in the church. Certainly there was conflict to be healed, but I also soon realized that some of the current difficulties go even further back beyond the most recent conflict. This morning I will do a very brief SWOT assessment (strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats) which some of you may have done in other institutional contexts.

Contrary to how it's often done, starting with strengths, I'm going to start with some of the liabilities which may also appear as threats. Hold on to your hats while I mention some tough things I've noticed and I PROMISE I will end in a great place.

For example: shrinkage of your membership - and that of almost every other mainline church - has been happening for several decades, and has sped up in this last ten years or so. The church endowment funds have been drawn down over the same period, leaving us only restricted funds and their dividends for our operational use. The

previous huge and sprawling staff had not been thoughtfully trimmed or realigned in size. The increasing need for more lay leadership has not been supported with either intentional recruitment or training. I could go on with these observations, but I think you get my drift.

Church is not what it was in heyday of the 50's and 60's; those days are not coming back, no matter how we long for them, for many reasons. There's no baby boom on the horizon. There are huge differences in the younger generations in terms of employment configurations, ways of learning, patterns of social interaction and especially in communications. Times are a changing, and the form of the church (although not its purpose) must also change. Every single mainline church is facing similar difficulties: you are not alone in these dilemmas. Bemoaning what is in the past makes it all that much harder for Jesus to pilot our boat in the present, referring to the sermon two weeks ago.

You heard me say then that the past year has had elements of the "perfect storm" of three intersecting conditions: crisis in our staffing and vacancies; difficulties in recreating a viable committee structure and recruiting lay leadership; and worries about the cash flow month to month.

Perhaps these three elements do represent a time of trial. If so, the most important thing is to remember that Jesus is with us in the boat, at the helm, praying for us and guiding us, radiating peace and calm in the midst of our anxiety.

You've heard me outline some weaknesses and threats. Hope you are still with me, because now we get to the great news, which are the strengths and the opportunities you have. Please keep listening – and listen carefully and enthusiastically – while I name a few gifts I see in this congregation. Two stand out.

First: location, location, location. That's one.

You are right in the middle of a wonderfully progressive small city that is chock full of young people, mostly on foot, and your doors are open to the public 4 out of 5 weekdays. This is a huge asset, not to be underestimated. The progressive UCC churches out there that are thriving and recreating themselves are mostly located in similar places: in urban locations with lots of young people. These growing churches, however, are not just sitting still and waiting to welcome people who may wander through their doors looking for a 1950's type church. The old adage - if you build it, they will come – is not true anymore, at least for churches. Traditional worship services, by themselves, are not a draw. But open doors, and this huge facility, and people who are willing to talk and be friendly and helpful, as all of you are, are alluring. This place is a gift.

The second huge strength you have is this: you have a demonstrated historical commitment to mission in this city. Bob Lee named his book of history “In the center reaching out” for a reason. You provide space and volunteer energy for a host of human services. At the top of the list are two housed in this building: the Possibility Shop and JUMP; the Ronald MacDonald House, COTS, Dismas House, the Crop Hunger Walk, the GLBTQ Pride Parade, Small Potatoes, and several more. The good news is: most millennials WANT to be involved in meaningful service to others. If you help make service opportunities open to them, especially short term ones, they will come. You don't have to invent or re-create this emphasis, like some smaller churches do: you already have it. Name it and claim it. Celebrate your commitment to mission.

In addition to mission opportunities, one thing that the younger generation seems to want is the opportunity to engage in meaningful deep spiritual dialogue: they want to talk about what faith means, rather than come to a formal worship service and listen to

someone else speak. Maybe you have heard or read about some of the more common efforts in this area. In many cities, there are programs like “Theology on Tap” (gathering for discussion at a bar) or “Office Hours at a Coffee shop with the Pastor.”

For me, the question is: how can you of the First Congregational Church of Burlington, parlay your considerable strengths – and there are many more that I didn’t name - into a renewed and vibrant Christian presence in this city? It will take openness and effort on the part of every lay member of the church; and it will take strong leadership.

Beginning this summer, we will collect names for a search committee for your next minister, someone who will carry on with worship and pastoral care and administration of this church, which by itself is plenty of work.

You will also need someone to be committed to a vital mission in the city and to reach out to young people in new ways. This is why the idea of a new staff person, called the Director of Program Ministries, comes in. None of us love this title – we’ve been calling it the DPM. Maybe we need a contest to come up with a new name.

Whatever we call him or her, we would be moving from a $\frac{3}{4}$ time ordained associate minister to a fulltime church leader who is energetic in working with children and youth and mission ministries, but who is especially excited about the church that is emerging out of our old mainline tradition. It’s hard to see this church. It does not exist everywhere. It doesn’t even have a solid definition or name. But it is happening in some places, some cities, and I believe it could happen here.

I am praying for this church, and for our discussions this afternoon: that we may be of like mind – but not in the sense of rubber-stamping what comes before us. I want you to think about it. Pray about it. If there’s not enough time today, call another meeting for

discussion. As you talk with each other, be kind and courteous and remember that Christ has called upon you to be one body and has given you the mind and the heart to pursue that vocation together.

I looked back at that sermon from two weeks ago, and I'm going to close with exactly the same words I did then: I believe in a God who can make a miracle through helping people assess their own gifts and use their own considerable powers to get their boat to safe waters by working together. I believe God is at the helm. We are the sailors, the fishermen, and with God in the back of the boat with us, we will make it.