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“O GOD, TRANSITIONS ARE NO FUN. Change terrifies us. We want to cling to what we know rather than seek what you want. When we do, let the scales fall from our eyes, so we may behold your vision.”



Giving Thanks for the Possible

Annual Meeting 2011

Around four hundred ministers, delegates, and visitors came to the First Congregational Church UCC in Guilford on October 22nd for the Fall Session of the 2011 Connecticut Conference Annual Meeting. Invited to Imagine What's Possible, they shared their wisdom with members of the Conference Minister Search Committee; voted to become a Global Mission Conference of the United Church of Christ; and worshiped with Korean songs and drums, with Holy Communion, and even with dance.

“O God, transitions are no fun. Change terrifies us. We want to cling to what we know rather than seek what you want,” prayed the Rev. Sara Penn-Strah, a member of the worship team, to open the day. “When we do,” responded the assembly, “let the scales fall from our eyes, so we may behold your vision.”

Throughout the day, speakers offered testimony and opportunity to take those scales away. “Only 1% of the world's population possesses 40% of the world's [possessions], but 50% of the world's population has just 1% of [possessions]... What's possible?” asked the Rev. Lee



Photos by Drew Page



Kyungrim, Moderator of the Kyung-Ki Presbytery in South Korea, with which the Conference has a long-standing ecumenical partnership.

“It takes time from just imagining change to having it really come true,” he continued, “but I know that our partnership

will make all things possible if we do not give up. And I believe that we won't give up. Imagine What's Possible.”

A drumming ensemble from the Storrs Korean Church UCC, the Conference's newest congregation, gave a special beat both to open the afternoon's worship

CONTINUED ON PAGE 4

Photo by Eric Anderson



Living Waters Award Presented to Marilyn Graham of H.O.P.E., Inc.

The Living Waters Award was presented to Marilyn Graham, Executive of H.O.P.E., Inc., which provides affordable housing in southeastern Connecticut. “I'm truly, truly honored and humbled to have been selected to receive this award,” she said, “especially when I consider how many people are doing good works throughout our state.” H.O.P.E. has expanded from its first project in 1989, a home rehabilitation in New London,

to expanded ownership opportunities, home repair workshops, and creating a rental program.

The Living Waters Award recognizes a member of the Connecticut Conference “who is a model of laity living out their faith in every place where they work and live,” said Interim Conference Minister the Rev. Charles L. Wildman in presenting the award at the Conference's

Fall Meeting on October 22. “We give thanks for Marilyn Graham this day.”

The agency's inspiration came from a question posed by the Mystic Congregational Church's pastor over twenty years ago, asking about the needs for ministry in the local community. One member, a housing developer, took the initiative to found a non-profit agency, and Graham helped him recruit a talented group of leaders that formed the initial Board of Directors.

On the same New London street where
CONTINUED ON PAGE 4

Giving Thanks



Legally, I am a farmer! I inherited the Wildman farm from my father, who was born in the old farmhouse and worked the land as a young man. His Irish immigrant grandfather established the farm, clearing the land, spending his life paying for it.

My grandfather spent his life farming the land and paying off his siblings. Those generations knew the daily labor required to till and plant, tend and harvest, milk cows, feed chickens, slop hogs and fatten beef, all while praying for good growing conditions and keeping an ever-watchful eye on the Western horizon for crop-damaging wind or hail, drought or flood.

These days, the old homestead is a productive grain farm, managed by a trusted tenant. I cheer him on and tell

him how much I appreciate his careful stewardship. I also enjoy the extra income.

Sometimes, I feel guilty for accepting a check I have done little to earn. Raised in the city, to me the farm has mostly been a romantic place with horses to ride and dogs who liked to play fetch. I have not sweated and struggled over farming. My father's stories of dawn and dusk milking, long days on a tractor before air conditioned cabs, traveling to school with a horse and buggy were just adventure tales to me. Other generations did the work. I receive the benefit. What justice is there in that?

But, justice is not the point. Stewardship is.

My grandfather was a devout man of quiet faith and strong ethics. Known for his honesty, he received farm mortgages on a hand-shake. Everyone knew Lee Wildman was "good for it." To this day, when I walk into the local bank in that community, my last name is better than any credit card.

My father's city business life carried on his family's strong faith and ethics. "You're Claire Wildman's son? Well, let me tell you about your father. One of the finest men I've known!"

I know that many cannot say such

wonderful things about their families. In forty years of parish ministry, I heard many sorrowful stories of tragic legacies. My heart goes out to those who must labor to overcome an inheritance of abuse and pain. I am deeply grateful that the legacy handed down to me was different

But mouthing thanks is not enough. For me, grateful stewardship means tending well that which has been entrusted to me, then passing it down to future generations. Beneficiaries will include immediate family and the wider human family of God — the Church, the schools that nurtured Anne and me, other worthy projects. But my legacy is not just financial. The truly valuable part of the legacy is the good character and strong faith that were central to my family's farming and business achievements.

Giving thanks has roots in the 16th chapter of Leviticus, in which God commands the ancient Israelites to observe the Feast of Booths — in Hebrew, *Sukkot*, "to rejoice before Adonai your God" — at the time of the fall harvest (16:11). The Pilgrim settlers likely had this tradition in mind when they held a feast of thanksgiving to celebrate an adequate harvest and assistance from friendly native peoples. But the Pilgrims did not rest full and fat. They continued their strong labors to establish a community so that their children would have a future.

At heart, we all are farmers.

What's Yet to Come



Give thanks, my friends, because you have a treat before you.

I have the advantage of you: I've already read the eloquent and stirring testimonies that are still ahead of you in this issue of *ConnTact*. My cold-hearted

editor's eyes have blurred with tears more than once as I read these stories of thankfulness. You'll find courage in adversity, recognition of blessing, and amazing grace at a Thanksgiving table. Give thanks for what's yet to come.

As I write, the eleven days of Mission:1 still lie ahead. As you read these words, we know if we made our goals of 1 million healthy food items, 11,111 letters to Congress, \$111,111 for Neighbors in Need, and \$111,111 for the East

Africa famine relief fund. I'm remarkably confident. I've talked with pastors and lay leaders in some of our churches, and their long-standing commitment to supporting those who hunger has been truly re-engaged and re-energized by this challenging effort. As I write, I give thanks for what's yet to come.

These are hard times for too many, and my heart has broken again and again as compassion for 25 million Americans who couldn't find full-time employment seemed scarce indeed. In the last *ConnTact*, Nancy Carrington emphasized the importance of efforts like Mission:1 as support for food programs was threatened. But as I write, new voices have emerged that have changed the conversation. I don't know where the discussion or the economy will go, but already I have hope. I give thanks for what's yet to come.

After all, that is the usual role of the Christian, to give thanks for what's yet to come. We live in the Already But Not

Yet, rejoicing in the gift of a Savior but not yet entered fully into Salvation. We proclaim a Christian witness, conscious of how imperfect — how frequently even broken — that witness is. We share a sacred meal, one that is but a small piece of bread and a sip of grape juice, aware that it is a foretaste of a banquet. We give thanks for what's yet to come.

So come to this *ConnTact*, and appreciate the witness. Come to the food pantry, and know the joy of giving. Come to the Table, and embrace its grace.

And before you do, give thanks for what's yet to come.

The Rev. Eric S. Anderson is Minister of Communications and Technology for the Connecticut Conference UCC, giving thanks for the call to prepare the next Fresh Edition.

BECOME A FRIEND

Ministries make a real difference in local congregations, in homes, in workplaces, in human hearts.

When a congregation seeks new pastoral leadership, they call a friend: their Regional Minister from the Connecticut Conference.

When a congregation has a question about a resource or curriculum for their Christian Education program, they call a friend in the Ruth Dudley Resource Center at the Connecticut Conference.

When a congregation's young people seek an experience of Christian community in one of God's most beautiful settings, they call a friend at the Silver Lake Conference Center of the Connecticut Conference.

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And thank you for being a Friend of the Conference!

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Walking Together With the Spirit

BY SARAH ANNIS

Remembering to give thanks is sometimes a difficult task, and at other times gratefulness seems to well up in our hearts and overflow into the world. We all have been brought up to say “thank you” to the person holding the door or when we receive a gift. But remembering to say thanks to the Holy One every day is a practice we sometimes forget and something that we can choose to do regularly. Giving thanks often gets lost as we run to the store for milk, or rush to a meeting, or when we have locked ourselves out of the car. For some of us, giving thanks is not at the top of the list, yet being grateful and expressing our gratitude is an essential spiritual practice.

Thanking the Creator for all that is given to us is an important part of our prayer practice. Taking a quiet moment to look at our lives with grateful eyes helps us to bring perspective to our journey. By checking in with ourselves regularly we will have a clearer sense of where we are, where our gratefulness springs from and will, over time, help us develop a sensitivity to and compassion for those around us who are in need.

Gratefulness practice will help us become better stewards of each other and of our resources. At Thanksgiving, as a nation, a church, and as individuals, we highlight a practice that is an important part of the religious practice of many diverse religious traditions. May our Thanksgiving celebration last more than a day; may it become a daily practice!

PRACTICING THANKS-GIVING

BY REV. ALISON J. BUTTRICK PATTON

There is a small container of homemade applesauce sitting on my desk, tied with a green bow and topped with a thank you note. The first thing I need to do this morning is to send a thank you note to the person who sent me that gift (O.K.: maybe that's the second thing I'll do. First, I want to gobble up the applesauce!). It can become a vicious cycle, can't it? Thanking someone for the thank-you for the thank-you: Help! I'm trapped in a thank-you vortex and I can't get out!

Of course, saying thank-you for applesauce is easy. Even making the applesauce in the first place is great fun (especially if you have one of those hand-crank apple peelers and small children to crank it...). Praising God for apples, cider donuts and glorious fall days – that kind of thank-you just bubbles up, unbidden, doesn't it? Like the psalmists, we burst into song: “Praise the LORD! I will give thanks to God with my whole heart!” (Psalm 111)

Maybe you don't actually burst into song. But you know what I mean, right? You *know* that feeling of gratitude that swells within you when you encounter a beautiful day, have a profound experience or receive an unexpected gift.

But what about saying “thank you” when times or circumstances are tough? The apostle Paul says, “Give thanks, whatever happens.” (1 Thessalonians 5) *Whatever happens? Give thanks when I get a flat tire in the rain?*

The United Church of Christ says, “No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here.” At the Spiritual Life Center in West Hartford, Connecticut, we say that we are a community “Walking together with the Spirit,” and we, too, welcome folks where ever they may be on the journey.

The primary ministry at the Spiritual Life Center is the practice and training for spiritual companionship (also called spiritual guidance, spiritual direction, and holy listening). People at all stages of the spiritual journey and from diverse religious traditions come to the Center for help and companionship on their journey. Persons with interest in trying a spiritual companionship relationship are welcome to call the Center and to come explore the possibility.

The Spiritual Life Center offers two major two-year programs. *Pathways in Spirituality* is a four-semester series that invites participants to look at images of God, sacred texts, beliefs, community and justice across major religious traditions. Pathways is open to all seeking to explore their spirituality and interested in learning about spirituality in traditions other than their own. The Spiritual Direction Internship is a two-year program that trains persons interested in the practice of spiritual direction (spiritual companionship).

In addition, the Center offers a variety of day and evening programs including a monthly book group “Reading in Faith Traditions,” a monthly meditation group “Breath by Breath,” group spiritual direction, a monthly Taize service, as well as special events like “Yoga and Meditation” and “Radical Love, the Spirituality of Dorothy Day.”

Let the Spiritual Life Center help you find Thanksgiving in your spiritual practice: Not just for a day, but as you continue to “walk with the Spirit.”

Sarah Annis is the Event and Programs Cultivation Leader at the Spiritual Life Center in West Hartford, Connecticut, as well as a Co-Operative Master of Divinity student at Hartford Seminary. She is a member of South Congregational Church UCC of Granby. Learn more about the Spiritual Life Center at: www.spiritlifectr.org.

Give thanks when the pain shoots through my abdomen, or when that pink slip shows up on my desk? Really?? Because I gotta say, in moments like those, I'm not feeling the joy. Still, “Give thanks, whatever happens.”

Maybe Paul doesn't necessarily mean that we need to thank God *for* the flat tire. Maybe he's encouraging us to give thanks *while* changing that tire; or navigating that pain in your gut or figuring out how you're going to pay next month's bills. Maybe Paul is talking about giving thanks the way we talk about prayer or worship, as a kind of discipline, or a faith practice. So I say, “God, My tire is flat, I'm cold and wet and crabby, but I'm still thankful that I *have* a car. Thank you for the strength to change a tire – or for people I can call on in times of trouble. Thank you that I have a hot shower waiting for me when I get home.”

Saying ‘thank you’ like *that* shifts our focus and invites us to live out of a place of gratitude. It opens us up, makes us a little more patient and compassionate. Maybe it even leads us to that other kind of prayer, the prayer for *others*, as in, “Dear God, today I got a glimpse of what it means to feel really lousy, kind of vulnerable, even scared. So now I'm thinking about the people who feel like that every day. Please be with folks who can't get to work because they can't afford gas, or because they are sick, or because no one will hire them. Please comfort them today and help me to do what I can to help where I can. Oh! And, thank you. Amen.”

Still practicing!

The Rev. Alison J. Buttrick Patton is Associate Minister for Parish Life and Outreach at the First Church of Christ UCC in Simsbury.

My Least Favorite Holiday

BY REV. JUDITH COOKE

Growing up, my least favorite holiday was Thanksgiving. Other people got to spend “Turkey Day” watching the parade on television, eating too much, and talking about how good the stuffing was. The Monday after Thanksgiving, my friends always talked about their pleasant family gathering for the long weekend. When they would ask how my Thanksgiving was, I would smile and lie, “It was good.”

Every year, Mom would invite over any person she knew needed a place to go for a Thanksgiving meal. We usually had one or two different people each year, but there were some who were regulars. Mom always made sure to include Harry, the church custodian. Harry was a developmentally delayed man who had no family, no friends, no clean clothing, and no teeth. Even though I would try not to stare, I was fascinated by how his chin was immediately under his nose when his mouth was shut.

Another regular was Minah Dillingham. Mrs. Dillingham was older than the hills, and meaner than a hungry hyena. She was able to live independently by eliminating some chores from her life, such as housework, cooking, and bathing. I never understood why she came, since she neither liked the food that was served, nor did she like us. Mrs. Dillingham was known for the conversation she brought to each gathering, which included things like what we could expect when we died and went to hell, and the gruesome details of her bunion surgery. Between watching poor Harry gum his food and trying not to inhale Minah's stench, I could barely eat anything myself.

Year after year on Thanksgiving, I was usually only grateful to see our guests go home, and I wondered why we had to share the day with these unpleasant characters. “Please, Mom, let's not have anyone over this year. Everyone else just has their grandparents and cousins come over. Why can't it just be us?”

But alas, my mother would simply respond with “All God's children deserve Thanksgiving.”

I used to think that she invited these people out of charity or out of a sense of obligation, but later I came to realize that pity and guilt had nothing to do with it. She was simply grateful for her life, and she wanted to share that gratitude with others. I look back on those Thanksgiving feasts, and I am thankful for sharing table fellowship with Harry and Mrs. Dillingham.

When I have trouble being grateful now, I focus on my favorite Native American saying — “Give thanks for unknown blessings already on the way” — because, as Mom taught us, gratitude is not just a spiritual practice, it is a spiritual discipline to be practiced every day.

The Rev. Judith M. Cooke is pastor of the Higganum Congregational Church UCC.



top left: Interim Conference Minister Chuck Wildman; top center: Conference Preacher Ed Rawls; top right: Search Committee Chair Gordon Rankin; below: Rev. Gwak Seonkeun presides at Holy Communion with Rev. Wildman

Giving Thanks

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1
and accompanied a profoundly moving prayer of confession sung in Korean by their pastor, the Rev. Chang Ho Jun, with the assembly responding with a Korean melody. The Rev. Gwak Seonkeun, who hosted Rev. Wildman on his spring visit to Korea, joined him at the communion table to celebrate the eucharist with him.

“Great leaders...” said Conference Preacher the Rev. Edward Rawls, “listen for the voice of the Spirit and the cries of the people. Then they’re able to articulate that vision to others in such a way that we end up doing what we never thought we would and trying what we never thought we could. You see, that’s my hope for this Conference. God has yet more light to shine from God’s Holy Word, and God has yet more great things in store for us to do.”

Interim Conference Minister the Rev. Charles Wildman ruefully noted the 30,000 miles he’s driven in the fourteen months of his ministry, but emphasized the Conference’s primary reason for being. “The Conference exists to serve the 244 congregations comprising the Conference. Our mission is to empower the church, from the smallest to the largest, to fulfill its Christian mission.” It’s not necessary or healthy to act as discon-

nected churches or clergy, he said. “We are not alone. We are the servants of the Church, and we have a covenant ministry together.”

“Challenging times are ahead,” he observed. “Some say the old mainline church is dying. I do not agree. We are changing, that’s for sure, but not dying. In fact, our United Church of Christ, as I’ve said before, is needed more than ever.” The UCC’s theology, justice commitments, and spirituality are highly relevant for the twenty-first century. Adaptation to the new requires risk. “New ways require risking time, talent, and material resources. It’s time to retire the phrase ‘We’ve never done it that way.’”

At the center of the day, attendees met with members of the Search Committee for listening sessions, telling of their hopes for the next Connecticut Conference Minister. Reporting in the afternoon, Search Committee Chair the Rev. Gordon Rankin offered some of the characteristics that had been shared. Many things are often said, but one comes up in every setting: “We’re looking for somebody who is visionary, someone who can listen to others but also do the process of discernment.” Other attributes desired include a strong theologian, someone willing to take risks, someone accessible, and someone with a pastoral heart.

Hundreds of volunteers from First Congregational Church helped delegates find meeting rooms, parking, and refreshments. Bright smiles accompanied each of the great big bright red badges they wore in the church, on the Green, and beneath the luncheon tent.

The assembly did not sit statically; during the offertory, Guilford’s Director of Music Ministries Bill Speed infectiously encouraged the worshipers to jump, clap, and sing. “We r inviting to dance at the #ctucc2011,” tweeted Associate Conference Minister the Rev. Da Vita McCallister from the congregation. “And they r doing it! Seriously DANCING at the #ctucc2011!”

And as the day closed, the Rev. Elizabeth Miller and Kelly Forbush blessed the assembly again with song and movement. “The Spirit says, ‘Come!’” said Miller, quoting from chapter 22 of the Revelation to John. “And let everyone who hears say, ‘Come.’ Let everyone who is thirsty come, and let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.” “We will walk with God together,” sang the gathered Church, clapping each others’ hands and lifting their arms in the air. “We will go rejoicing ‘till the work is done!”



Living Waters Award

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1
H.O.P.E. refurbished its first home, nine others have received the same loving renovation, and two more are in process. The organization currently works on two or three rehabilitation projects at a time, provides a rent-to-own program, and supports those renters whose income is so low that they may never become homeowners.

“Each step of the way, God has been speaking, showing us the needs in the community that we should respond to,” she testified. “But I wanted you to know that the seed for all this work was planted back at our local United Church of Christ church in Mystic.”

Love and Unity Manifest

BY REV. DR. MARY LOU HOWSON

If we stop to think about most of the times we give thanks to God for our blessings, we are likely to realize how often we understand those blessings in terms of our own ego needs. Consider some examples: the house we've always wanted, the job with a good salary that we enjoy, being respected and valued at work and in the community, our favorite team winning, or our children's success. Simply put, we are thankful when our egos get what they want and think they deserve. In other words, we are human. Meeting our ego needs controls our anxiety by making us think that we will be safe.

Please do not think that I am denying the importance of any of these things. But Jesus reminds us that they are not the essence of who we are, of our purpose for being, or the meaning of our lives. He says in Matthew 6, "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?... But strive first for the kingdom of God... and all these things will be given to you as well."

Three years ago I had a bad fall, fractured my skull, and suffered traumatic brain injury. When I first regained consciousness in the hospital, I was weak, disoriented, and in pain. For a long time, I couldn't follow a recipe or play the piano with two hands. I could read but I didn't remember much. When I was well enough to drive I would have flashes of not knowing where I was. I could add two deposits in my checkbook but not three. I still forget an embarrassing percentage of people's names. I was needy, vulnerable, and dependent. It was humbling and disorienting.

Despite my frustration, I was never afraid, because deep within was a presence that welled up in me, saying, "Remember the birds of the air and the lilies of the field. Could I love you less than these?" Here I was, broken and shattered, yet whole and beloved. It's an amazingly different reality than what our ego would have us believe. Paul is right: "Nothing can separate us from the love of God." That love is who we are. There is a unity at the heart of creation.

At some point over these last 3 years, I have come to understand that giving thanks is incarnational: making love and unity manifest. There is not a particular moment or incident in which that awareness came. Rather, it is my experience of many people responding to my situation. Some took time to be present and to care. Others did not. Often their care was expressed in small ways or remembrances. But whether the expression is small or large makes no difference. Presence, care, and remembering lift us up and open us to the ever-flowing love of God. They help to heal us because they share with us the love that holds all things together.

Because love is incarnational, we truly give thanks by actively living from the love in which we are immersed. Every time we do seek to make love manifest, the kingdom of God comes into being once again. And all creation gives thanks.

The Rev. Dr. Mary Louise Howson lives in Southbury; she offers a ministry of spiritual nurture and support through www.fourwaters.org.



Photo by Fred M. Dole

COMPASSION AND SERVICE IN MARLBOROUGH

BY DREW PAGE

The sign in front of the Congregational Church of Marlborough UCC reads, "Come as a stranger... leave as a friend." When Cassie Hamilton of Marlborough called the church, she was looking for a friend, and some urgent help.

During Hurricane Irene, the Rev. Bob Faulhaber arranged for any calls to the church to go directly to his cell phone. As he was driving around after the storm, a call came in from a woman he did not know, and she needed some help.

Cassie Hamilton has two special Newfoundlands, a 5-year-old named Rosie and a 17-month-old pup named Joy. Rosie is a trained rescue and service dog, while Joy is being trained by Cassie. She not only trains them, but works with them to help her in her daily life. Cassie has multiple sclerosis, an autoimmune

disease that affects the central nervous system.

Joy, the younger dog, had torn a ligament in her leg. The injury required an expensive surgery. Cassie had a plan to pay for the procedure. She would hold a tag sale, but she could not organize and run one on her own.

"I knew I needed help," said Cassie. "I was not able to do this alone. I started to reach out to the community."

Cassie had been to the church for some holiday services. She was not a regular, but she knew a little about the church.

"I thought if anyone would do something, the Congregationalists would. They are community minded. They want to be active in the world."

Cassie was right. The Marlborough congregation responded immediately. Pastor Bob made an appeal to the church the next Sunday. As he told her story, he wasn't even aware that Cassie had slipped in and was sitting in the pews. The response to her story was "overwhelming," according to Cassie. Members signed up to help set up for the sale. The senior high fellowship volunteered as well. One member donated a large tent. Another canvassed the town with signs, twice, replacing a first batch because the print was too small. More members came to Cassie's home on Sunday to help clean up after the sale. In all, approximately 20 members of the church stepped up to help her.

Cassie raised almost \$900 from the sale, and even more from donations that came in response to her story appearing on WVIT-TV and in the local newspapers. She was able to pay for Joy's surgery and even put some money aside for taking care of Joy during recovery.

"This experience has changed me," says Cassie when expressing her gratitude to the church. "The overwhelming generosity has come at a time when I really needed it. When you see the true spirit of people, it gives a renewed faith in the goodness of life and people."

Cassie is planning to join the Marlborough congregation. Having a background in publishing, she has offered to help the church with its publications and media. The church welcomes its newest friend, according to Pastor Bob. They have even set aside a special place in the sanctuary for her two dogs.

Drew Page is Media Assistant for the Connecticut Conference, UCC.



THREE NEW STAFF JOIN THE CONNECTICUT CONFERENCE

On October 31, the Rev. Dr. Thomas Clough took up his duties as Interim Eastern Regional Minister, to assist the congregations in the Hartford East, Tolland, and Windham Associations with their search and call, resource, and pastoral needs. Dr. Clough comes to Connecticut from the Edgcomb Congregational Church UCC in Edgcomb, Maine, and had previously served as Associate Conference Minister in the Massachusetts Conference, where he aided the congregations and leaders in the Metropolitan Boston Association. A search for the installed Regional Minister awaits the arrival of a new Conference Minister.

At Silver Lake Conference Center, long-time "Laker" Jennifer Kronholm Clark joined the staff as Registrar and Office Administrator on October 12. A resident of nearby Lakeville, she has experience in journalism and development, as well as some years on summer staff and volunteer leadership positions at the Conference's outdoor ministry site in Sharon.

On October 1, the Rev. Mia Douglas began her work as Sacred Conversation on Race Coordinator, a part-time position intended to deepen the important discussion around race and religious community within the Conference. Rev. Douglas also serves as associate pastor at Faith Congregational Church UCC in Hartford.



Rev. Dr. Thomas Clough



Jennifer Kronholm Clark



Rev. Mia Douglas

Search Committee Seeks Input through Online Survey

Help us understand who to seek in our next Conference Minister!

VISIT CTUCC.ORG/SURVEY and spend 15 minutes completing our online questionnaire. Thanks for all your help!

For current information on the Conference Minister search process, visit ctucc.org/cmsearch.



INTERVIEW

Olivia Arsenault, 15, East Woodstock Congregational and Gloria Knust, 15, First Congregational Church Woodstock

What is your earliest memory of church?

Gloria: Probably one of my Easter Sundays where we would go to my grandfather's church. It's bigger than mine and they have a bigger choir. I remember the choir always singing that Alleluia song. It was big and grand, with trumpets and horns. It was a nice experience.

Olivia: I was probably four or five years old, and I went to a Methodist church. I remember that a few times my mother would let me stay with all the adults instead of going to Sunday school, and at the end we would all hold hands and sing a song. I thought it was really cool that I could be part of all the other worship services.

How about now? Still think it's fun?

Olivia: Yeah, it's pretty cool.

So you've both attended Compassion Camp 2011 this summer? Tell me about that.

Olivia: I thought it was very eye-opening. I really enjoyed seeing everyone work together to accomplish a common goal to help the community that we live in and to make it a better place.

What exactly was this camp? What did you do there?

Olivia: Each day we went to a different site to help people in our community. We went to an animal shelter. We went to Brimfield, MA, to help with the tornado relief. We went to Center of Hope.

Gloria: A community garden [where] the food supplies people who don't have enough money for food, or good fresh food.

What did you take home from the camp?

Olivia: I really wanted to get out in the community more and help more. We do that through Giv² and the youth group. We went to Boston. We did mission trips when we went to Synod. It was all connected through compassion camp. It's just going out to the community and making it a better place.

[Giv², or 'Give Squared', is a youth service program sponsored by the Connecticut Conference. The program brings together youth from neighboring churches in service and fellowship.]

Gloria: Before Compassion Camp, I did two other community things with General Synod [in Miami] and an offsite conference through Silver Lake helping a community in Maine. It just feels so good to help someone that I wanted to do it

again. It's rewarding.

I saw that you both attended a workshop on Thinking About Working For God [at the Fall Session of the 2011 Annual Meeting]. So I have to ask: Have you ever thought about working for God for a living?

Gloria: Yeah, I guess since I've gone to Silver Lake so many times that has given me the idea that working for God isn't boring. I used to think it was, but seeing the people at Silver Lake so happy that they're working at a Christian camp all summer, and my sister also thinks about it, I don't... it's kind of a cool thing to think about.

Olivia: I have... vaguely... kind of... thought about it. I think all the stuff that I do, like with volunteering and things, has kind of opened my eyes to what kinds of things you could do when working for God. I think it's pretty inspiring.

[Gloria was a Counselor in Training for Compassion Camp 2011. Olivia was a first-year participant in the program. See inset for more details on Compassion Camp 2011.]

Interviewer Drew Page is Media Assistant for the Connecticut Conference, UCC.

Compassion Camp

Compassion Camp is a week-long summer service camp for children interested in giving back to their communities, sponsored by the First Congregational Church UCC of Woodstock and the East Woodstock Congregational Church UCC. This summer marked the sixth year of the program.

Thirty-five youth from northeastern Connecticut participated in Compassion Camp 2011, which ran July 25-29. The group served a different mission each day for 2 or more hours, in addition to engaging in reflection times and fun social activities. Participants volunteered at the Northeast Regional Animal Shelter; assisted folks with mental disabilities at Center of Hope in Southbridge; provided tornado relief at First Congregational Church of Brimfield, MA; harvested vegetables at People's Harvest Garden, a community garden in Pomfret; served meals at the Covenant Soup Kitchen and worked at WAIM in Willimantic. The participants in Compassion Camp 2011 gave back over 480 total hours in service to their communities.

JEWEL FOR THE SPIRIT

BY JENNIFER KRONHOLM CLARK

As the newest member of the year-round Silver Lake staff, my new commute takes me by the Twin Oaks viewshed, as we locals refer to it. If you've ever come to Silver Lake from the northeast, you'll remember the view: Two oak trees stand in a hillside clearing, overlooking Mudge Pond (which we call Silver Lake). Route 41 climbs to the top of that hill through farmland, then dips into the valley. Turn off the main road for a twisty, hilly ride through the woods, a stream following on the right, before turning onto Low Road and wending your way to Silver Lake Conference Center.

Driving into work, the first thing I see is the familiar "Welcome to Silver Lake" sign. I can almost hear echoes of the summer: conferees singing, laughing, praying, playing. Young people had profound, life-changing experiences here, and lots of faith journeys began or continued as the 1,025 participants learned to "Love

God, love your neighbor, and love yourself."

In this time of Thanksgiving, this view is a daily reminder of how lucky we as a conference are to have a jewel like Silver Lake. So much more than a summer camp, Silver Lake offers the members of UCC churches the opportunity to escape the pressures of modern living — smart phones, email, Facebook — and reconnect with God in nature. Your conference center hosts retreats throughout the fall, winter, and spring for groups ranging from confirmation classes to senior women's fellowship. Ministering to youth is a big part of what we do here, but we recognize that adults need a spiritual experience in the outdoors just as much, if not more.

As a state and as a nation, we are experiencing one of the most difficult financial times in recent memory. Camps across the country are shutting down or over-

specializing to try to survive. With the continued support of the Connecticut Conference of the United Church of Christ, our local UCC churches, and the donations of alumni and friends, Silver Lake will be here for the next generation, and even the one following that.

Thanks to generous donations to our scholarship fund, we also are able to offer scholarships to dozens of conferees each summer to ensure that the Silver Lake experience is available to everyone, even in these difficult financial times.

If you have benefitted from the tranquility of the Lake, or even from the controlled chaos of the summer program, please remember us as you give thanks this month. We are collecting donations for our annual fund through the end of the year. Mail a contribution to Silver Lake Conference Center, 223 Low Road, Sharon, CT 06069 or go online to www.silverlakeect.org and click the "Donate Now" button. We are grateful for you and your support.

Jennifer Kronholm Clark is Registrar of Silver Lake Conference Center.

Christmas Mystery III

by Rev. Stoddard Williams

"Things" fixed within Creations' time and space,
however cleverly they integrate
the firm realities that they embrace,
must fail when they confront a different place.
God's mysteries, though very real,
exist beyond the scope of sensate mind.
Their hidden character they won't reveal
except to "knowing" of a different kind.
Those men and women who called the baby Lord
saw nothing worldly that would mark him so.
Their homage, offered him with one accord,
was drawn from wells that have a deeper flow.
The Holy Spirit gave them the grace to see
eternal truths drawn forth from mystery.

The Rev. Stoddard Williams worships at the First Church of Christ UCC in Simsbury.

A SIMPLE ACT OF GRATITUDE: COUNTING YOUR BLESSINGS CAN CHANGE YOUR LIFE

BY ELIZABETH HEALY

I consider myself a relatively grateful person. I try to give thanks for the blessings in my life and not to spend too much time obsessing about the things I want that have eluded me. So when Pastor Cindy Maddox asked members of King Street United Church of Christ to keep a daily Gratitude Journal during Lent to remember where our blessings

came from, I figured, "Eh, I really don't need to do that."

Then I thought it over. After all, Pastor Cindy usually has a good reason for asking us to do things. If she wanted us to make a commitment to gratitude, why not? Plus, she said we could do our daily journal entries on Facebook if we wanted. Piece of cake, I thought.

And so it began: 40-plus days of entries about the things that make me grateful. The only instruction was to be specific and not just say something like, "I'm grateful for air."

At first, the entries were easy. I truly am grateful for my partner Joe, who knows me but loves me anyway; the people in my church; my brave sister, who was battling cancer; my brother's unswerving love and trust; my best friend. When it got more difficult, I usually found *something* to write about:

- "Grateful for singing: In the choir, in the shower, to the dog... (poor dog)."
- "I'm grateful for conversations shouted over the back fence with my wacky neighbor, Fred."

- "I'm grateful for my furry friends, who are sometimes easier to relate to than humans."

- "In the words of that wise philosopher Glynda the Good Witch, there's no place like home" (after a long road trip).

Then the weight of the task set in. Around the first day of spring, I realized that every single day until Easter I was going to have to come up with yet another thing to be grateful for. The first day of spring is usually quite difficult for me, because it was the day my marriage ended. What was I going to be grateful for on this lousy anniversary?

It turned out to be one of those days. People cut me off on the highway; a salesperson was rude; work was stressful. When I got home, I realized I was still going to have to write in that darned journal. So I sat down, prayed, thought about my life then, about my life now. Turns out, the thing I was grateful for was obvious:

- "Gratitude Journal day #12: On the first day of spring, I know exactly what I am grateful for. Because on this day 13 years ago, I realized my marriage was over, and I thought my life was over, too. It turns out my life was just beginning. And every first day of spring since, I have said

a special prayer of thanks for my beautiful, drama-free, happy, happy life."

I knew now why Cindy wanted us to write that journal. We are meant to look within the tragedies of our life and find the blessings. They are always there, but we don't see them. Later, I started to hear from people who were finding their own inspiration from my daily journal entries.

I got a long letter from a woman I had once worked with. She was going through a rough patch: feeling worthless, feeling hopeless. She had just lost her mother to cancer. Her marriage wasn't doing so well. She said *my* gratitude journal had picked her up and made her start thinking about her blessings. She started one of her own. I heard from others, too, who, thanks to our little project, had started to count the blessings in their own lives.

I had been wrong about one thing. Writing a daily gratitude journal is not a piece of cake. It is hard, frustrating, inspiring, and life-changing. I stopped the daily entries on Facebook on Easter, but I have kept making them in my heart. I hope that some of the other folks who found meaning in the project have done the same.

Elizabeth Healy is a member of King Street United Church of Christ in Danbury.



CAMERON TRIMBLE: GO EXPERIMENT WITH THE CHURCH



Photo by Eric Anderson

This year's General Association brought the Rev. Cameron Trimble back to Connecticut in October, where she brought the learnings, energy, and wisdom of the Center for Progressive Renewal to her two days of presentations. Her message: the world has changed around us, and it is past time to reform and renew the Church.

Just in the last ten years, the United States has witnessed profound failures in significant institutions, shaking the confidence of citizens here and around the world. Among these has been the decline of the institutional church, and the increasing alienation of those around it.

Fifty years ago, the mainline and evangelical churches divided in America in a profound yet informal way. The evangelical congregations began to emphasize the emotional power of the faith, particularly but not only in worship. In contrast, the mainline denominations focused on intellectual rigor. "They took the heart," said Trimble, "we took the head."

"Our task as leaders in this age of the church is to rejoin head and heart," she urged the pastors and educators. "When they come to our church, people do not want to know more about God. They want to know God. They want to feel the presence of the living Christ in their lives."

Church growth, she told the assembly, is simple but not easy. It consists of three steps:

- "First you get them to come.
- "Then you get them to come back.
- "Then you get them to stay."

Worship, said Trimble, is the church's entry portal to the Christian community. She compared it to the layout of a home, where guests who aren't well known are admitted to the cleanest, most care-

fully prepared room in the house. Good friends come further, into the family or playroom, and close friends and family make it all the way to the kitchen.

In addition to Trimble's presentations, the participants at General Association heard from Moderator the Rev. Laura Westby, pastor of the First Congregational Church UCC in Danbury. Diana Butler-Bass, Westby recounted, has identified the one quadrant of the American faith community that is growing, and it is the "unaffiliated" — they now number at least 20% of the population. "That means that those who call themselves 'spiritual but not religious' are a larger percentage of the population than mainline Protestants," said Westby.

"This is the time to suck up our guts and listen to the folks who have left or the folks who won't come through the door," she continued, "because they can teach us what we need to know about being a new kind of Church, a different kind of spiritual community, one that will re-imagine and renew and re-create the world in the image of God and according to God's eternal plan."

With a beautiful two days, the ministers and educators greatly enjoyed the beauties of Silver Lake Conference Center, and the extravagant hospitality extended by the staff. The keynote addresses to the 2012 General Association will be delivered by Bishop Yvette Flunder, pastor of City of Refuge United Church of Christ in San Francisco, California.

FROM THE SPIRIT CALENDAR



BY REV. SARAH J. VERASCO

Matthew 20:8-15

Having a last name that begins with a "V" I have often found myself in the back of a classroom or near the end of a list. Over time, I learned that I really didn't have to begin paying attention until I started hearing names that begin with an "S" or "T." I knew my place and I was good with that.

In the early 90's there seemed to be a lot of attention given to "social location." I remember participating in an exercise that invited the construction of a social hierarchy. The significant elements were obvious: race, gender, age, class, physical ability, sexual orientation... You know the list. There were some pretty tense moments in the room when different perspectives were offered. And even though there was not total agreement, in the end we each basically knew "our place" in the world, but only a few of us were good with that.

It was also in the early 90's that I began to recognize and name God's presence in my life. Sitting in classrooms with Catholic priests and nuns I saw and heard the depth of their commitment to living the Gospel. I was truly amazed at the decisions they had made, at such an early age, to live a vowed religious life.

At the age of 28 I remember sharing that, in their presence, I felt like the workers who were brought to the vineyard later in the day. I felt like I had come late but was given a full day's wage.

Unlike Jesus' story in Matthew 20, my friends and classmates were not enraged or envious, they rejoiced and were glad. We each knew our place in God's world and we were all good with that.

The Rev. Sarah J. Verasco is Fairfield County Regional Minister for the Connecticut Conference, UCC.