

PARKERS IN MINISTRY
NOVEMBER 5, 2017

Celebrate Our Past Ministry Successes:

You have in your bulletin some (probably not all) of the successes we have enjoyed as a church family over the past 4 ½ years

Angie: All are important, but I am especially proud of:

1. The reunification of the split church, especially given the time that had passed since the split;
2. That the Children's Program, including Youth Ministry, has taken off and that we now have in place a Children's School Voluntary Coordinator and a diverse and qualified new group of teachers;
3. Reestablishing our identity as a UCC church and connecting in the authentic ways that we have.

In all three ways, we are showing what it is to be Christian, not just talking about it. We have shown other churches how to reinvigorate their ministries using our collaborative, positive, and progressive model. We have demonstrated that our children are important to us, not for their numbers, but for their contributions to the overall health and vitality of our church family. And we have modeled Christian reconciliation and forgiveness in our unique history of reunification after a church split.

Tracey: I agree and support all that Angie has said here today. From my perspective, the reunification was uncharted territory. As the Transitional Pastor charged with trying to lead the two churches back together, I could find no models for doing so, no history of other churches that had been able to do so following a split and time apart, and no denominational support for the process, though I tell you the eyes of the UCC were upon us to see if we could actually pull it off.

I knew that this church would be a special testament to the resiliency of the Word, that we would be Christ's disciples in the world in many meaningful ways. And we were and we are. We worked a process and had some hard discussions, but then you voted to become officially Open & Affirming, and the doors were flung wide open to persons who had been ushered out of their growing-up churches, their parents' churches, and other church families.

Two years later, you worked hard and committed resources to making the physical, cultural, and emotional adjustments necessary here to become an Accessible to All church. Most churches bemoan that they have so many senior persons in the church, that their church vitality is waning with the aging of their most stalwart supporters. We here at UCC Parker Hilltop chose to value our seniors and make this place and this ministry fully accessible to all persons, including those who don't get around as easily as they once did, those who need aids to hear or see or fully participate in programs serving every age from youth to seniority, including our smallest child and our most senior member living in another city in a retirement village.

We became the 4th UCC church in the nation to be recognized as Accessible to All, and now 11 churches in our Conference are what we call A2A, many of them using our model to remake their ministries in an accessible format.

I am proud of these achievements, while at the same time we are experiencing sustained growth in all age and social demographics here. When I first came to Hilltop UCC, I left in the car with Chris expressing doubts as to whether this church would survive. Attendance was way down, kids were non-existent, and many, many hurt feelings over the split had depressed the social heart of the church—actually of both churches. I had served both of them as their Transitional pastor.

Once again, you did the hard work of reconciliation within the divided church family. New people came and that helped; some did not stay, that is true. One of the growing pains of UCCPH that we have had to endure is the reality that while this church is open to everyone, it is not a good fit FOR everyone. We have said goodbye to some close friends, this is true. But we have also said goodbye to some of the toxic feelings and behaviors that threatened to bring us down.

When Karen and I added up our true participation numbers Friday, I was not surprised to see that we now know 180 active participants in this church. That is both a blessing and a challenge. There are more people for me to meet and know as pastor, more kids to be served and engaged in faith formation, and more stressors on our building and meeting spaces. We will put in a new well shortly. That is awesome. That brings us to our second discussion today:

Opportunities for Ministry Growth Ahead:

Angie: In the IGNITE program you sent Pastor Tracey and me too, we learned the skill of reframing challenges facing churches from an either/or proposition to an AND statement.

As an example: A church might say, “We need to add more families to our church, or we will die out.” The reframing says, “Adding more families to our church will enhance our ministry, enliven our spiritual lives, and create a more sustainable church.”

Some of our opportunities lie in these areas:

1. Giving our former Sunday School teachers a much-needed retirement gave our church a new awareness of the changing nature and needs of our children and youth AND gave opportunities for more adult members of our church family to

become involved in the faith formation of our kids. We are now actively seeking someone to head up our Youth Ministry program so as to coordinate collaboratively the educational, social, and formative aspects of the program. Maybe this is you!

2. Having longstanding relationships with outside mission partners helps us take the Word and the Message of our church outside our doors, AND now we need a Missions chairperson to help us use our resources and contributions from members wisely. Maybe *this* is you!

Tracey: Yes, it's all about resources. We have experienced growth such that the church is alive and rocking and taking off in so many different areas AND now we need a visioning team to form to discuss how we use our resources to meet the growing needs for space, sanctuary improvements, staffing, and for improvements to our building. Maybe this is your call to join this important conversation.

Another opportunity we have before us is to be even more of a leader in our denomination AND to help other churches find their life's blood again using our models of collaborative ministry and progressive church relationship. The Church doesn't have to die out; we are proof of that. We would like to see more congregants, including youth, serve the wider church in leadership positions. Maybe this interests you.

Angie: Ghandi said, "You must be the change you want to see in the world."

Tracey: Jesus said, "Don't stand on the sidelines professing to be a holy person. Live into your faith."

Angie: Strong leadership builds strong churches AND strong leadership starts with you.

Tracey: Widespread participation will grow the spiritual life of the church AND encourages other people to join this living, vital ministry of ours.

Angie: We pray that God continues to bless our mission and message here at UCC Parker Hilltop.

Tracey: There is no telling what we might be in our not-too-distant future, with God's grace, with Jesus' call, and with the Holy Spirit's prompting.

May It Be So.