

The Leading of the Spirit
Psalm 9:1, Philippians 4: 4-7
October 21, 2018
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We are in the midst of our Annual Stewardship Campaign, and over the last few weeks, we have been telling some of the stories of First UCC's ministries. Psalm 9 would call these stories of good God's deeds, God's actions. I'll choose different language since I want to talk about God's activity in a careful, more nuanced way, but I do still want to point to the movement of the Spirit in our midst.

When I was serving in Wisconsin, I was talking with a colleague I trusted about this mysterious movement of the Spirit, and she said to me, "when we are in line with the Spirit, what should be difficult somehow becomes easy. When we aren't in line, what should be difficult is just difficult."

I think there's something true in this statement.

I've been thinking about this church's past and present, the times when I think it has aligned with the call of the Spirit and found difficult things becoming, if not easy, possible.

When this church was founded the church received two offerings. The main offering collected on Sunday, went outside the walls of the church to missions, to serving the world. Later, the Trustees would go from house to house to collect enough to pay the bills. The church trusted the leading of the Spirit that there would be enough, and there was. I believe this beginning is why this congregation is still so generous towards Our Church's Wider Mission, the most generous in the Conference, and generous in so many other ways too.

Shortly after this congregation was founded, members felt this leading to start a Congregationalist college; to do something great. It couldn't have been easy, but they followed the leading of Spirit and look at all the lives that have been changed by our neighbor next door.

There was a time when members of our church identified a need for more social services in Northfield. The Spirit led them into creating these services. What has now become the Community Action Center was born.

In response to the AIDS crisis of the 80s and personal grief experienced by members of First UCC, the Spirit led this church into an Open and Affirming process, a deep conversation about human sexuality and sexual orientation. That led to a vote to become Open and Affirming and members of this church brought this conversation to wider Northfield.

All of these things sound extremely difficult to do, and this church listened to the leading of the Spirit and thanks to the good work of amazing people and alignment with the Spirit, what was difficult somehow became possible.

I wonder where the Spirit may be leading some current ministries of First UCC.

Two weeks ago, our youth told the story of our trip to Guatemala and our growing partnership with the Los Hogares orphanage in Santa Apolonia. This planning for these has been complicated, but we've leaned in to the leading of the Spirit and these experiences have been grace filled. Who knows where this relationship might go?

Last week Pastor Abby spoke about First UCC's ministry with Our Whole Lives, a comprehensive sexuality curriculum, and CYAN, a ministry with LGBTQ+ youth. We will hear a little more about this ministry later in the service. Everyday we are reminded that there is great need for healthier

understandings of relationship and sexuality in our culture. And we are offering these difference making ministries for youth that will benefit our youth and our shared future. This ministry is a natural outgrowth of the Spirit leading this congregation into that initial Open and Affirming conversation. Conversation about sexuality is difficult anywhere, in a church it is even more so, and yet, thanks to very talented people in the church's past and now partnering with the Spirit, what is difficult has been possible, vital and life changing.

Similarly, over the last five years, First UCC has been very involved with ISAI AH MN. We have been organizing with religious people across the state, Christians of all stripes and Muslims too. We have been advocating for racial and economic equity, for climate justice, and for a healthier politics. Every day we are reminded that the need is great, and we know that engagement in politics as a church is difficult and delicate. No one would say this work is easy, but there is energy here too.

This spring many members of our congregation joined together with ISAI AH leaders across the state in an intentional effort to become delegates to the conventions of the two major political parties to advocate for the values we share as religious communities. At one of the state conventions a member of the ISAI AH delegation was told by one of the other delegates, "You know, when you all come onto the floor together as people of faith, the tone of the whole room changes. Everyone becomes a little more thoughtful, careful, respectful, because people of faith are here. It's better." I trust that the Spirit is somehow all mixed up in that.

I think this work is consistent with the Spirit leading us in the past. It is in line with a generous congregation that gave to the world first. It is in line

with a congregation that wanted to give to the world in a big way by starting a college. It's in line with a congregation that wanted to respond to the need for social services in Northfield by starting a social service agency. Now the Spirit is leading us into this deep need, with other faith communities to create a healthier state.

The impact of our ISAIAH work with other faith communities has been growing and I wonder where the Spirit will take this work in the future.

As we move into 2019, I think the Spirit will continue inviting us as a congregation into these places of deep need: working towards healthier relationships, and healthier understandings of self and sexuality; and working for a just world for all by engaging the powerful places where decisions are made about how we live together.

Obviously, election day on November 6th is a day that I'm thinking about quite a bit. November 6th will determine what our staffing configuration looks like at First UCC, but I don't think it is a day that will change where the Spirit is leading us in our ministry together. The Spirit has been leading us in consistent ways for a long time.

Regardless of what happens November 6th, I believe the Spirit in our midst will keep leading us into this place of great need, this intersection between faith and how we live our lives together in the world. It's who we are. We have a reputation not only within the Minnesota Conference of the UCC, but within the entire United Church of Christ, as a church committed to social action and justice.

Regardless of what happens with the election, we will be fulfilling one of the goals of the last three years: adding staff capacity for ministry with youth.

We want to do more of the ministry we have been doing well with youth as a congregation, building on the Open and Affirming legacy.

On Sunday November 11th, we will have a congregational meeting to approve the staffing plan that will fit First UCC's post election day reality. Either way, we will be looking to add a staff person and we are in position to do this because of your sustained generosity.

Among the best practices for stewardship in congregations is for pastors to share their own giving practices with the congregation. I did this last year, and have again, cleared with Sara sharing this part of our faith.

Our giving in our household has changed as our family needs have changed. There were a few years where health concerns were a major expense for us and it affected what we could give. Over the last few years, though, we have grown our giving to be giving at the level of the Modern Tithe. The tithe is the Biblical guide of giving 10% of one's income to God. The Modern Tithe affirms that there are other organizations beyond the church through which God's work is being done, or that are contributing to the common good. The Modern Tithe invites us to work toward the goal of one's total giving to the church and other organizations adding up to 10% of one's income.

This year, again, our household will be giving 10% of my income to First UCC. Our goal is also to give 10% of our other household income to organizations we care about. We, of course, have other financial goals, and we are working on those too.

We give because we are grateful for all God has given us. We also give because we believe in this church and the work of the United Church of Christ as it works for a Just World for All.

We all have different financial circumstances and one size does not fit all. I invite each of us to prayerfully consider our support for First UCC in 2019.

I give thanks for the movement of the Spirit here. For all the Spirit has empowered us to do over generations. What an amazing community this is. And I ask the Spirit to guide us as a congregation in the years ahead. Amen.