

**United Church of Fayetteville  
310 E. Genesee Street  
Fayetteville, NY 13066**

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***For Reflection:*** “One of the most important junctions one comes to in the journey through life is that place where one must decide whether one is going to take the road of defending old positions or the road of making new discoveries.” Leonard Sweet.

**RENEWED IN THE SPIRIT: CLEANING CLOSETS  
Isa. 43:18-21, Eph 4:22-24 (portions)**

As most of you know, I swim nearly daily at the Y. A few weeks ago, I was about halfway through my laps when three inches of my suit disappeared. It didn't tear or split. The material just went away. Because it was comfortable, and because it's a bear to shop for a suit you can actually swim in, I had worn this one beyond its intended design life.

It was just two years ago that my brother persuaded my sister-in-law to dispose of her high school work out clothes -- not because after 25 years of marriage and giving birth to a baby, they didn't fit -- (talk about a woman you could love to hate:-) -- but because they were worn, saggy and hid her attractiveness.

While my bathing suit forced the issue, it's easy for us to keep things after they are worn out, to tuck them in the back of the closet, because they evoke fond memories or have sentimental value, or because we'd like it if they still fit. We save pieces of broken toys, bald dolls, and jewelry that needs to be restrung, but never will be. There are all kinds of reasons to keep things that we don't need or that don't work anymore.

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with holding on to old things. They're often valuable, as antique-ers will tell you. But when we can't even tell what we've got anymore, or lay our hands on it when we need it, when the closet gets so crowded that we need strength training to be able to wedge in anything new, and everything, new or old, comes out looking crushed and wrinkled, unrevealed in its beauty and possibility -- well then it's time to clean the closets. It's an activity most of us engage in each fall, as we make the switch to fall/winter wardrobes, get ready to go back to school, see whose legs are longer than their slacks this year, get rid of favorite shoes whose soles cannot be restored one more time...

There is something that renews our spirits in cleaning closets. It's easier to take care of what we do have. We find ourselves freer and lighter without clutter, have the space for something new and spend far less time looking for something we know we have, if only we could find it.

Organizations, including congregations, like our own households, also have metaphorical closets, that can be useful, can become cluttered and can in every way serve (or not) like the ones in our homes. It can also be the case, that when any family, including a congregation, gets anxious, they can be afraid to look in the closets for fear there is something there they don't want to see; or because they suspect the childhood monsters we used to fear really are there. We can conclude it's better to leave the closets closed, than attempt to clean them out.

While like my bathing suit, changes in the economy may have forced the issue, UCF has, in fact, been experiencing anxiety about what is in its closets (or not) for at least a decade. Any organization's fortunes are, in part, determined by who its leaders are at any given point in time, but especially in times of challenge. In the last two years, we've had the opportunity to see a lot of elected leaders at work. In California, they're announcing "Bank account's empty.

Debt ahead. Lights' out. Party's over." A little closer to home, there's Albany. I moved to New York three weeks before Elliot Spitzer resigned and it's entirely possible that I have missed the glory days of NYS government. I can riff on Albany with the best of any of the late night talk show hosts and for sheer entertainment value, they can't be beat. And when it comes to the inability to see to the end of the street, let alone the next horizon, the inability to get anything done, and the sheer audacity of the pettiness and parochialism, they can't be beat either.

Closer yet to home, we have those folk UCF has elected to be her leaders in this time. On top of maintaining the ongoing ministry of the church, they have sacrificially spent untold hours in prayer, in conversation, in thought and no doubt, in sleepless nights. In so doing, they have attended not only to their personal passions in ministry, but with genuine regard, learned and come to appreciate more the passions of others. They are a Spirit-led people who understand that being part of the solution is not found in the certainty that one is the solution or that one alone has the solution; rather it's in the willingness to remain in community, to ask questions, and to credit one another with the best of intentions. In such ways, the whole body is tended to, and each of its part strengthened and nourished.

I have been proud to serve this congregation with UCF's Board this year, because, with courage, grace and careful listening, it set aside anxiety and decided to look in all UCF's closets: the closets where we keep our money; our ministry practices and values; our mission work; our human resources and even our fears – in other words they've looked in the closets where we steward all of God's gifts in this house of faith.

What they discovered was that they were opening only closets, not Pandora's box; that anxieties were far larger than anything our congregation actually has to fear; and that with some judicious closet cleaning, there is far more capacity for joyous energetic service to the world, and the building of deeper relationships here and with our community than we have been imagining for some time.

The Board's prayerful reflection on what they have seen has guided their leadership with regard to strategic planning, restructuring, mission emphases and proposed closet cleaning. This imposes no judgment on the past, but acknowledges some things are worn out, some things no longer fit our lifestyle, some things no longer work in the world the way it is today (How is your analog TV working?); some things inhibit the community around us from seeing all the wonders of the life we have here and so from becoming a part of it.

Board members took a collaborative long view and they are excited about the possibilities they see for generations of ministry yet to come. Is there work to do on the way? Certainly. Did they always agree with each other about how to get there? No. Will all of us agree with all of the proposals? No. (That doesn't happen anyway once the number in a community exceeds 1.) For the work they have done and do, for their courage and willingness to take risks, seeking not personal glory, but the glory of God, for their work for the sake of Christ and for everyone in this room, for their selflessness and commitment to the life of the whole church, it is my belief that the UCF ought thank God for their being in leadership roles in this time and place. I do.

As you suspect and have already heard, this closet cleaning is going to involve, and please forgive me for swearing in the pulpit, "C-H-A-N-G-E." Theologian and pastoral care expert, Herbert Anderson wrote: "The ability to change is an essential characteristic of the capacity to move toward a future in which God is always making something new." The Board believes, and I agree, that the possibilities for the renewal of our spirits, the revitalization of our life together and in the community, and the breaking of the cycle of paralyzing anxieties far outweigh the bittersweet cost of change.

The result is that the Board is issuing an invitation, not making a threat, or announcing doom. The Board's invitation is to look in the closets with them, see what they have seen – in order to empower UCF's extraordinary vision by giving it focus and priority (much as a laser focuses the power of light). In such ways, we as a congregation might care differently, not stop

caring; spend differently, not necessarily more; work smarter and play much more. It is an invitation to leave behind anxiety about money and anxiety about membership. It's an invitation to celebrate who we are and what we are and all that we have to offer the world in Christ's name.

It's an invitation that will be expanded through this month's stewardship series, *Renewed in the Spirit*. Together, we will take a tour of the closets of our life together, that we might see afresh what we have to offer, and to make room for the new. As importantly, I suspect, we'll discover something that often happens when we say the name of the thing we fear aloud. It eventually shrinks and melts away. I encourage you to be part of this worship series. When you cannot, to read the sermons (they will be on the website) – but being here is far better. If you have questions ask them – of someone on the Board or me. Let us journey together, fed at this Table, a meal shared with all the world, reassured that we strive not alone, serve not alone, dream not alone, minister not alone, and we never do any of it by our power alone. Together, let us be moved by worship and liturgy, prayer and praise, song and story to embody in our congregational life that which we preach and believe – that God is always doing a new thing and that by the power of the Spirit, through Christ, we are indeed being made new, day by day.