

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

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"It seems fair to assume that most of the peoples of the world, if they so choose, can respond positively to the challenge of change." Paul Kennedy

**RENEWED IN THE SPIRIT: EMBRACING POSSIBILITIES
(Gen. 1:26-31; John 15:1-9, portions)**

Someone mentioned to me that this sermon series is atypical: that unlike those which are thematically connected, for the center of this series to hold, one must (preferably) hear or read them all. That's true. Each is a discrete entity, but, in order for our congregation to be fully renewed in the spirit, all the pieces are necessary. Also, as we have built toward this day, the series has been operating under a slight misnomer. Stewardship of our financial resources is a critical piece, but only a piece of our reflection. I have been preaching the future – our future with God.

So, here we are on Stewardship Celebration Sunday and so far, we've talked about change... money... and mission with more than a little evangelism. I bet you can't wait to hear what's on tap for today :-). Today we are talking about the people it takes to be the church. Toni gave us a hint of what it takes to educate children in the faith. That focus seemed appropriate for our Minute for Mission on the day when we also recognize Judy Spencer's staff ministry at UCF. We could have as easily made the same point using music ministry, building care, pastoral ministries, financial management, fellowship, mission, communications, – or even folk sitting on committees. What we do on Sundays is both the center of our life together and the tip of the iceberg in revealing the necessary involvement of an entire community to make ministry happen. Our human offerings work just like our financial contribution. We don't have the luxury of merely paying our own way. We are also called to support in various ways all the ministries of the church whether we are here or not, whether they directly impact our household or not. We all must consider the needs of both the church family and the wider community. If you are about to remind me that no one can do everything, I agree wholeheartedly. It is also true that no congregation do everything.

In the same way as with our money, using our human resources requires careful thought about how we do ministry, about how we care, about the reasonable resources we have to give, and matching those to reasonable expectations for ministry. We need to do not necessarily less ministry, but less labor intensive ministry—more ministry of choice and joy, less ministry of guilt and obligation. That's what ministry can become when we're tired. Since I arrived, in nearly every venue, I have been observing near burnout. The truth is, we're tired and we run the risk of being too tired to enjoy what we do.

In response to the need to energize the effective application of our human resources, the most specific work the Board has undertaken is a structural recalculation. Just this week, they approved a recommendation to downsize the Board, from 18 to 9 voting members (much more appropriate to our size) and the elimination of the PCC. That will come for your consideration and approval, after our lawyer has had time to craft it into formal language. The goal is to reduce the amount of time people need to spend in meetings and to reduce the burdens of individual committee workloads.

Probably more importantly, there is continuing evaluation of how we do things; particularly whether or not we can do them more simply. We're taking a look at our activities across the arc of time. Have some things lost their effect except for the clinging perfume of nostalgia? Does everything need to happen every year, or like the toy closets in our homes, would we do better to rotate things in and out? In that way, each would be most appreciated and there would be room for making events truly special, and for adding things as opposed to finding simply one more thing to do. Those evaluations will be ongoing and decisions made through the committees with primary oversight of the various areas of ministry.

Those are two pieces of the human resource picture in a congregation's life. There is another quite different, but also important piece – the roles, relationships and expectations, whether they are vocalized or not, among congregants and between a congregation and its pastor. I've spent a good portion of this series affirming the work of the Board. I imagine that by now, some are asking "What's my role? What is it the pastor does?" Let me step back briefly in time to what happens when a congregation calls a new pastor – an event greatly influenced by how the congregation perceives itself at the particular time.

First, UCF is rightfully proud of its historic building, and its long history of ministry and commitment to social justice. The congregation could have called a museum curator and historian. But you said, "No, we are bigger than that. We are a church." So you called a pastor. UCF has a marvelous music ministry. The congregation could have called a manager for a sacred music society. But you said, "No, we are bigger than that. We are a church." So you called a pastor. UCF does marvelous pastoral ministry and takes excellent care of those who are part of this community. The congregation could have called a keeper of the aquarium, whose responsibility it would be to keep the glass clean and the water purified for the Christian "fish" that have already been disciplined into this church. But you said, "No, we are bigger than that. We are a church." So you called a pastor.

UCF called a pastor, at a time when it was both hopeful about its future and had been anxious for some time about things we've already talked about -- cyclical financial challenges and plateau-ed or declining membership. Like all congregations at such times, people have different images of what it is they're hoping for. It's also likely everyone didn't have the same image. Some congregations import an image from the business world, imagining a white knight. (*Shrug:-*) No armor. Wrong gender. Some congregations think if they call a husband, wife and 1.8 children, preferably not out of elementary school, people will magically come. "Magically" is the operative word in that sentence. There are no statistics to support that idea. In another setting, it's called an urban myth.

Again, whether it's vocalized or not, there is another common image for a pastor at such times, right out of religious language. I stumbled across it soon after my arrival – during the planning of my installation service. The Worship and Spiritual Life Committee said, "We're going to do what we do at Christmas and Easter."

"Which would be?"

"The processional will be led by an acolyte carrying the Christ-candle." I confess. I laughed out loud until I realized they were serious. I shook my head and said "Mmmm, I don't think so."

"Why not?"

"It's a matter of theology. Unlike Christmas and Easter services, my installation is not announcing the arrival of the savior."

“What do you mean?”

“It’s not my job to save you. It’s my job to remind you that you have already been saved.” (*Repeat.*)

...

So, you didn’t call me and I didn’t come here to be a museum curator, historian, director of a sacred music society, keeper of an aquarium, white knight, first family, or even a savior. So why did you call me (or any pastor)? Why did I (or any pastor) come? What are we to one another and what are we doing together?

I came here, for the same reason I have entered into ministry with any congregation in any role – to be a partner in possibility. ... In the not-too-distant past, I mentioned to a member I was sadly disconcerted to find a talented gifted people who were anxious about their ability to be the church. The response from one of the most talented gifted people I know, broke my heart for her and for all of you. “It’s outside our area of expertise.”

So as your partner in possibility, let me ask you to look at yourselves. You are parents who navigate change every day. You are helping raise grandchildren. You teach; you heal; you are masters of technology; you put out fires and provide medical care. You design and repair things, lead scout troops, are artists and writers. You sing. You hug. You prepare healing meals and make 12,000 cookies. You pray. You study. You share your resources and you care. You lead the way, not only in this place, but in the world, and you’ve been doing it here for 150 years. Look at yourselves. See what I see. See what God sees. God created and named you good. Christ abides in you and you in him. How can you possibly doubt your ability to be the church in this place for now and for many years to come? Look at yourselves. The source and promise of all our salvation has already been planted inside each one of us and in our community. You don’t need me or anyone to save you. You have already been saved.

With me and with one another, together, we are partners in the possibilities of the future, and all the wonder, awe and joy of being called to serve and being gifted for that ministry. It is only together that we can embrace the possibilities of a new day, holding each other up, encouraging one another, looking to the near landscape and the far horizon, discerning what it means to be fully human, alive in Christ and trusting in God for every new day. It’s together that we hold off the temptations of despair, the weariness of discouragement and the darkness of doubts about the future. It’s together that we live, not in denial, but in hope, daring to change and to allow God to do God’s work within us. It’s together that we will find the Spirit renewing our spirits, our energies, our passions and our effectiveness for ministry for ages to come.

We’re partners in possibility. It’s not my job to save you. It’s my job to remind you that you have already been saved. You have already been saved. It’s my job to keep reminding you until you believe it and until together we live out fully the possibilities of life in Christ. We have already been saved!