

*“Creators of Justice & Joy”—a report on the 2015 Annual Meeting of the Vermont Conference
United Church of Christ (UCC)*

Creators of Justice and Joy. That was the phrase that came to us this year when planning the Annual Meeting and when thinking about some of the big questions and challenges that face us today—that face our world, and that face our churches. Before “Creators of Justice and Joy” though, we asked ourselves the question, “Why Church?”

Why not, for example, just stay home, read the news and donate online to your favorite charity? Why instead, why gather to worship, to pray, to sing, to serve—why gather to risk hearing some words we might not exactly agree with...why gather to pray prayers we might not have otherwise prayed on our own...why gather to sing hymns we certainly wouldn't have chosen if we were in charge of things...why gather to serve those different than us—to serve those far away who we might never even meet—to serve even those close by to us who are different and who we might never meet...why gather to risk a life-changing encounter with a God who is most often otherwise than expected?

Well, maybe you can tell with how I've phrased those questions that I believe that within them lies part of the answer as to the question *Why Church?*, as I think we all really know deep down that it's good for us to encounter new and challenging ideas; that trying to expand our horizons is what we should always be doing; and that enlarging our circle of moral concern is in some exactly what our human hearts are made for.

These are just some of the thoughts I've been sitting with since the 2015 Vermont Annual Meeting of the church conference ended yesterday afternoon...and since I feel that the three days I spent at the conference were worth my time, I thought I might just take a few minutes today to report on some of the meeting, in the hopes that it might also be worth a few minutes of your time today...

So in general I'd say the meeting was a mixture of worship, learning, and business, but I think for my report today I'll focus on the worship and learning aspects, as the business portion actually went pretty smoothly and without much controversy or debate...

So just brief fragments in this report, little sketches or little impressions of our time at the conference...First, in our opening worship our keynote preacher was Matt Laney, Pastor of the Asylum Hill Congregational Church in Hartford CT...Matt I think was the only person wearing a suit and a tie in the room of a few hundred people, and he noted early on that he must have missed the memo about the Vermont dress code. Matt also was the tallest person in the room—he seemed to me to be close to 7 feet tall—and during his talk about “Justice” he joked that discrimination against tall people like on airplanes, for example, just had to be one of the greatest travesties of our time.

But more seriously, Matt reminded us of a couple important, key concepts in our faith. He reminded us that in our faith tradition the notion of **justice** is always connected to the notion of **justification**. So, that's a big theological word, but justification—it means that before we ever do or say or accomplish anything on our own, God has already accepted us for who we are, and has already equipped us for what we are called to do. So Matt reminded us, the way life with God

works is not that we do good deeds and then God rewards us, what he called the Santa Claus mentality, but instead that first we receive the grace of God, and then only after that are we able to try to live the best lives that we are able in grateful and loving response to the God who first loved us. Se're ultimately justified, Matt reminded us, not because we're perfectly good, but because God is perfectly good.

Later that day on Friday we had our next gathering of worship and learning, and this time we turned our attention to reflecting on the issue of heroin and opiate addiction in Vermont...partly this was in response to how Governor Shumlin used just about his entire 2014 State of the State address to highlight the opiate addiction epidemic here in Vermont. So for the worship portion of this session, we used the image of the backpack, how we all throughout our lives have a certain backpack filled with a certain weight to carry, but particularly how the disease of addiction just adds and adds and adds to that weight over time...and so here I was actually called to be one of the volunteers to play the role of Cory...

"Cory is 16. He's always gotten good grades, has a good group of friends and hasn't ever been in any serious trouble. From the first time he helped to make dinner Cory has wanted to work in a restaurant...A couple of months ago he got his first job working in the dish pit of an upscale restaurant, where he met his hero mentor, the chef. The whole kitchen crew took him under their wing and showed him the ropes—including how to snort heroin..."

Jack was another character invoked...*Jack was an athlete all through school....Senior year he hurt his knee, but played out the season, because that's what you're expected to do...the doctor prescribed oxycodine for the pain....*

Our presenters for this panel were Dana Poverman from the Howard Center in Burlington, and the Rev. Joe Amico from New Hampshire. Both reminded us of the important work the church has to do in terms of de-stigmatizing opiate addiction...reminding us really that it could happen to any of us...that the human brain is in some primordial way hardwired to prefer pleasure to pain. Dana put it this way, she said that addiction is a *"biopsychosocial and spiritual/existential condition that is both a disease and a syndrome."*

That addiction is a disease is something we tend to forget. The presenters asked us, would we ever blame someone or think lesser of them for having a relapse of cancer? And yet, when a recovering addict relapses, why do we so often think of this as an individual failing rather than acknowledging the full power of the disease as a disease?

Later that night we turned our attention to another issue as we focused on the idea of economic justice, as Debbie Ingram from Vermont Interfaith Action gave a presentation on the idea of a Moral Economy. A Moral Economy...it's interesting just to hold those two words together, isn't it? Well, I could give you all the numbers and statistics, but you probably know already that in the last 30 years the gap between the very rich and the very poor has increased exponentially, both in this country, and in this state. Today, for example, over 25% of annual income goes to only 1% of the population, which is a higher proportion even than right before the Great Depression. A new "Gilded Age" is what Debbie called our time, and she reminded us that the economy is not in the end like the weather or like other natural phenomena that are beyond our control, but instead is the direct result of policy choices that we make, and so if we'd like to see an economy with less of an extreme disparity of wealth, well, we should think about that, and we should commit ourselves to seeing that reality become possible. A movement for a moral economy.

The next morning, yesterday morning, was one of the sessions that I was most excited about as I asked the Chaplains at Middlebury College to come talk to us about some of the more pressing and promising edges of interfaith relations today in our increasingly diverse, multi-cultural, multi-racial, multi-religious world.

So we were blessed to have with us Laurie Jordan, Ira Schiffer, Beau Schurich, and Naila Baloch from the Scott Center for Spiritual and Religious Life. When introducing them I invoked a couple of quotes...one was actually from the night before when the state conference minister Lynn Bujnac gave her "State of the Conference" address, and Lynn ended her presentation with an image taken by the Hubble Telescope, one of those beautiful and strange images of deep space that can only invoke pure wonder and awe....She added to this image a couple of quotes from the quantum physicist David Bohm...the first, "*The apparent separateness of all things is an illusion, at a deeper level all things are infinitely connected.*"...and so she began on this note of unity, and then she ended also celebrating diversity...she quoted Bohm again, saying, "*Because of our interconnectedness, no one part can have the entire picture of the whole.*"

Because we're all so interconnected, no one part, no one person or tradition or even I think no one religion can have the entire picture of the whole...isn't that beautiful?...it just reminds me that we each have our own little glimpses, our own little slivers and fragments of the Divine light that we can reflect back to magnify or to reveal the whole...

Well, that's just to say that it was beautiful to hear perspectives from the Jewish tradition, from the Muslim tradition, and from Laurie's Methodist tradition...no one part can have the entire picture, but each part contributes to the beauty of the whole...

Well, finally, we ended with a worship and learning session on the topics of immigrants, refugees, and migrant workers.

Lucy Samara, Director of Outreach Ministries at the First Congregational Church of Burlington reminded us all that in a very powerful way, the Bible in fact is the ultimate immigration handbook. She pointed us to all the scriptures about welcoming the stranger and the foreigner, as God reminds us to welcome the immigrant because in fact once we were all immigrants...

Finally the Rev. Kim Erno, a Lutheran pastor from Mexico who now serves here in Vermont as the director of FARM (Franklin Alliance for Rural Ministries)...he began with a provocative question...*What does the price of tortillas have to do with Mexicans milking cows in VT?*....well, through teasing out that question he opened our eyes to all the ways in the relationship between the US and Mexico is complex and fraught with difficulties...and he reminded us that about 60% of the workers in the VT dairy industry are from Mexico, and that of that 60% interestingly about 90% are from small villages in Northern Mexico and who still speak indigenous languages...he reminded us then that when we're enjoying our next pint of Ben and Jerry's, that we should also think about and thank not just Ben and Jerry but also Benjamin and Javier in Franklin County...and so from Mexico to Vermont, he reminded us of all the ways in which our world is more interconnected, more interdependent than we even realize.

Well, needless to say I think, by the end all of our heads were spinning, all of our hearts were enlivened, and we ended again by reflecting on that phrase, "Creators of Justice and Joy"...

Even in the midst of all these big issues, these big challenges of our time...maybe especially in the midst of these big issues...we're called to be creators of Justice and joy...and that, I think, is a pretty important, and a pretty exciting thing to be a part of. Amen?