

Merrimack College  
North Andover, Massachusetts  
01845

**What's Happened to My Church, South Church Andover, UCC?**

**Individuals Change Within a Community of Faith,**

**Changing the Church, Evangelical to Progressive**

RTS5700B\_FA2021F3  
Master's Thesis and Seminar  
Master of Arts In Spirituality

Janet Clarke  
North Andover, Massachusetts  
December 2021

Copyright © 2021 by Janet Clarke  
All Rights Reserved

There is yet and still more light and truth to breakforth  
from God's Holy Word.

–Pastor John Robinson, to parishioners boarding the Mayflower



**South Church Andover, United Church of Christ**

## Preface

My Thesis, *What's Happened to My Church, South Church Andover, UCC? Individuals Change Within a Community of Faith, Changing the Church, Evangelical to Progressive*, is the culmination of my graduate studies in Spirituality at Merrimack College in North Andover, Massachusetts.

My college admission letter dated August 25, 2020, the personal statement for my college application, included here, states my heartfelt concern about the declining church, for my family, for all people, and for society in general.

"My faith journey has been so rich and informs who I am, as a child of God, living in God's Grace, and Love, and Forgiveness, and taught me so much of how to live in the wider universe, teaching what was unavailable from my family or schooling. I am so grateful for God's Grace and Peace, and I can not understand how others live without this spiritual grounding. How do the unchurched live and grow? What makes them, and society in general, whole?

I have a special interest in the future of the Church, and declining participation, and specifically, on a personal level, how do my husband, children and grandchildren develop a spiritual, moral anchor, without a church community to grow in and be loved. How do they discern right from wrong, good from bad? What are their formative experiences? How do they deal with grief and emptiness, despair? Where is Hope?" And what is/will be the formation process or institutions to replace formal religious institutions?

Much to my surprise, I have found answers to most of these questions that I thought were unanswerable at the beginning of the program, through reading, studying, and writing. My second Seminar paper for RTS5601G, "What's Happened to My Church?: Emergence Christianity and the Postmodern Culture", was written about the changes at South Church Andover, United Church of Christ with interviews with the many members of the congregation who were involved in the leadership of those changes. I have read books over the past twenty-five or more years by Marcus Borg

and Diana Butler Bass and others about rethinking how we read and study the Bible and understand Jesus. Now I have added books by Phyllis Tickle, John Dorhauer, and Brian McLaren about the emerging church, and read websites to learn about Progressive and Emergence Christianity.

My thesis continues in the same vein of study, this time focusing on individuals changing, within a faith community, with my changing as an example, cognitive dissonance caused by the challenge to long held religious beliefs, changes of culture, and rapid changes within the progressive church, with a still emerging “more Christian, Christianity”.<sup>1</sup> I have continued to read and reread books by Marcus Borg, Phyllis Tickle, and John Dorhauer, and have added books new to me by Brian McLaren. I have come to understand and more fully embrace the profound changes of society and to my spirituality and the emerging Christian church.

My thanks and gratitude go out to Dr. Joseph Kelley, Professor of Religious and Theological Studies, Co-Chair, Religious and Theological Studies, Director of Graduate Programs in Spirituality and Spiritual Direction, (a man with many hats and much compassion) for accepting me into the Masters of Spirituality program and being a most supportive, attentive advisor, nudging me in the right direction to write and study in a way that built a successful program of study and writing for me. And thanks to Father Ray Dlugos, Vice President for Mission and Ministry, my teacher and advisor, for his wisdom and guidance in writing this thesis. Also, thanks and gratitude go to Gary, my husband, for supporting me throughout the program, for endless listening, and proofreading, for cooking, and patience and love.

---

<sup>1</sup> Brian D. McLaren, *The Great Spiritual Migration: How the World's Largest Religion is Seeking a Better Way to be Christian* (New York: Convergent Books, 2016), 19.

# Table of Contents

## Preface

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
List of Changes at South Church Andover:1980-2021	<b>7</b>
<b>Chapter 1: Evangelical South Church of 1980</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>The Clarke family joins South Church</b>	
South Church history and UCC history and polity, 1980's Evangelical South Church Pastor Westy Egmont demise Civic Faith, Civic Church, changing times Cultural Changes, Postmodernity	
<b>Chapter 2: Cognitive Dissonance and Individual Change</b>	<b>22</b>
Dogma: One Cause of Cognitive Dissonance Spiritual Growth with Doubt, Brian McLaren Jesus: an example of Cognitive Dissonance and Change Spiritual Growth with Doubt	
<b>Chapter 3: Changes at South Church Beginning in 1989</b>	<b>34</b>
Rev. Dr. Calvin Mutti begins his ministry, 1989. Change to Reading the Bible in the historical/metaphorical tradition Theological Change to use of Gender Inclusive Language American Flag Removal from the Sanctuary	
<b>Chapter 4: Change to Welcoming Children to the Communion Table</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>Chapter 5: Change to Becoming an Open and     Affirming Congregation(ONA)</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>Chapter 6: Change to Being Progressive</b>	<b>54</b>
Rev. Dana Allen Walsh Now I Ask, What is Progressive Christianity Phyllis Tickle and The every 500 year "Rummage Sale"	

**Chapter 7: Change: Rewriting our Vision and Mission Statements by a Congregational Process Led by “ONCET” (2017-2019). 68**

**Change: Reorganization and Rewriting of Operational and Governance Systems of the Church to Include Rewriting By-laws, with Progressive Goals (2019-2021 and ongoing)**

ONCET: Our Next Chapter Exploration Team (2017-2019)

**Chapter 8: Change in use of Statement of Faith 77**

Living into becoming Progressive

Progressive Christianity, If not creeds, then what is important?

Transformation

Jesus: Change to a new Paradigm

**Conclusion: 85**

**Bibliography: 88**



## Introduction

I have been a member at South Church Andover, United Church of Christ(UCC), (referred to as South Church), for over forty years. South Church has changed dramatically since 1980 from a traditional evangelical protestant church rooted in the congregational tradition, to a progressive church focusing on “Embodying God’s Love, and Compassion”, with a radical welcome for all. Each individual member has had to search for meaning, to grapple with their past beliefs and decide how to respond to new ideas, to discern an authentic way to express their faith and beliefs, to find new meaning to live by.

Has your church changed? Mine has, and I have changed, day by day, year by year, over forty years, working and praying together. I have been faithfully involved at many levels throughout the years, as a seeker, a participant, a teacher, a leader, and a delegate to the association, the conference, and the synod, as I continue to seek to faithfully live and express the Gospel of Jesus Christ in our world today. I have grown spiritually within this vital fellowship of Christians, finding new life and meaning with my participation in this Christian community. The traditional “civic faith”<sup>2</sup> of this evangelical 1980’s congregational church has changed, responding to continued liberal UCC stimulus, individuals and pastors challenging past religious beliefs, and postmodern cultural changes. It is a time of changing culture and challenge to church institutions, with

---

<sup>2</sup>Anthony B. Robinson, *Transforming Congregational Culture* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, Grand Rapids, MI, 2003), 26-30.

declining church membership, countrywide and worldwide.<sup>3</sup> Recently, our new pastor, the Rev. Dana Allen Walsh, claimed that we are a “Progressive Church”!<sup>4</sup>

As I look back, I am in awe over the changes through forty years. I ask, “What’s Happened to My Church?” How did we get from evangelical to progressive? Can we, the individuals worshiping, praying, studying, and working together, change our long held creedal beliefs and practices to change church theology and still be Christian? Who is leading the way? Are we alone? Are we heretical to change our beliefs and practices?

Finally, what has been the impact of going through the process of change on my spirituality and other’s spirituality? Did it change from a secondhand believing faith, to a firsthand authentic faith? Did it deepen, mature, transform me, and others, into a more authentic person, finding new meaning and mission for our lives? Does this story of changes at South Church have any wider value for other people, and other churches in this time of challenge to churches, institutions and declining church membership?

The subject of my thesis is change, how I have changed over the past forty years at South Church, along with other members at South Church, and how the church has changed. We have been influenced by UCC slogans and its liberal history, by lay and pastoral leadership, by each individual’s personal honesty questioning past beliefs and practices, by cultural changes, and by God’s spirit among us. It is the story of my journey of faith within a congregation, which is also on this journey. I present myself as an example of church members in the change process. I have wrestled with my traditional creedal, doctrinal beliefs and religious practices and cultural change, along with the

---

<sup>3</sup> Pew Research Center, “America’s Changing Religious Landscape”. 12 May 2015. <https://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious->

<sup>4</sup> Rev. Dana Allen Walsh declared at the worship service July 18, 2015, at South Church.

congregation, trying to find a way to understand and express the Jesus I have come to know in the gospels, with modern Biblical insight and understanding. I have searched, being led by God's Holy Spirit, asking what is Jesus' message? What should I believe? What does that mean for me today? How shall I live?

I present a "timeline of changes" to describe the changes at South Church beginning in 1980 when the Clarke family joined South Church and use the timeline as the framework for this thesis. The changes are shifts in our Christian beliefs, practices, worldview, and culture. I will begin with setting the stage of the 1980's, describing where I was in my faith journey as I joined this vibrant evangelical South Church. My first major change was from my past Episcopal faith of my youth to a rigid evangelical Biblically based faith. To understand the background, I will include South Church history, and United Church of Christ history and polity, and describe "Civic Faith"<sup>5</sup>, and the changing times ahead. I will list my beliefs of the rock solid, unchangeable church and religion which have grounded my soul, and are difficult to let go of, or to incorporate in a new way.

We, the individuals, changed and struggled with our own unrest caused by unbelievable, unscientific, past religious beliefs and traditional practices and many cultural changes. I have written about the changes and the processes with the best of my memory and with the help of other church members and staff.<sup>6</sup> While I am just one member, I realize that other's change processes are uniquely their own, and they may recollect the process differently. My thesis is based on nine of these changes (in bold

---

<sup>5</sup>Robinson, 26-30.

<sup>6</sup> In a previous seminar paper I have described the changes at South Church with help from other church members and staff.

letters and summarized here) which were the major shifts in the church's theology, tradition and practice.

1980-9: **South Church, Evangelical UCC** (Clarke family joins)

1989: **Biblical interpretation** to historical/metaphorical tradition

1994-6: **Use of Gender Inclusive language for God**

1998-99: **Children invited to partake in Communion**

1998-2004: **"Open and Affirming" Congregation**

2015: **"Progressive Church"** declaration

2017-19: **New vision and mission statements**

2020-21: **Rewriting of operational and governance systems** and by-laws,

2015-21: **Statement of Faith** use change, not creeds but faith, how to live.

I will define "cognitive dissonance" and discuss what issues caused dissonance with past and proposed ideas. Within each timeline change I will describe the change, what is being proposed, and my process, the congregation's process of resolving this dissonance, and the outcomes of changing.

I will describe how the congregation worked together in many instances of change to challenge each other to understand, or collaborated to develop new mission and vision statements. Changes were initiated by pastors, seminary students and lay members. Again, I want to emphasize the importance of this story as a journey of faith of a congregation, which is also my faith journey. I present myself as an example of church members in the change process, as I grappled with my faith. What questions, conflicts, and emotions arose, and what processes were necessary to help me understand the changes, and discern my way forward, including how I changed. I have wrestled with my traditional creedal, doctrinal beliefs and religious practices and cultural changes along with the congregation, searching, led by God's Holy Spirit, for how to live authentically as a Christian in today's world.

I will intersperse quotes from several authors who helped me understand the issues being changed including Marcus Borg,<sup>7</sup> John Dorhauer,<sup>8</sup> Phyllis Tickle,<sup>9</sup> Peter Gomes,<sup>10</sup> Brian McLaren,<sup>11</sup> Richard Rohr,<sup>12</sup> and Roger Shinn<sup>13</sup>. I will describe our changing world, with new scientific findings and inventions, secular culture changes, postmodernism, resulting in people leaving organized religion behind, finding it meaningless. I will discuss “cognitive dissonance”,<sup>14</sup> wrestling or grappling with conflicting issues and give examples of Jesus' grappling with his beliefs, resulting in paradigm changing events.

A new religious movement named Progressive or Emergence Christianity has emerged. It was a time of changing culture and challenge to church institutions, with declining church membership, countrywide and worldwide. To help understand the

---

<sup>7</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time: Taking the Bible Seriously But Not Literally* (HarperCollins Publishers, NY, NY, 2001).

<sup>8</sup> John Dorhauer, *Beyond Resistance: The Institutional Church Meets the Postmodern World* (Exploration Press, Chicago, IL, 2015).

<sup>9</sup> Phyllis Tickle, *Emergence Christianity: What it is, Where it is Going, and Why it Matters* (Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, 20012).

<sup>10</sup> Peter Gomes, *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart* (HarperCollins Publishers, Inc, San Francisco, 1996).

<sup>11</sup> Brian D McLaren, *Faith After Doubt: Why Your Beliefs Stopped Working and What to do About It* (New York: St. Martins Essentials, 2021).

<sup>12</sup> Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ: How a Forgotten Reality can Change Everything We See, Hope For, and Believe* (New York, NY, Convergent Books, 2021).

<sup>13</sup> Roger L. Shinn, *Confessing Our Faith: An Interpretation of the Statement of Faith of the United Church of Christ* (Cleveland, Ohio: United Church Press, 1990).

<sup>14</sup> *Random House Webster's College Dictionary*, s.vv. “Cognitive Dissonance” (Toronto: Random House of Canada, 1991).

sweeping changes of the age, I will summarize progressive and emergent changes referring to Phyllis Tickle's 500 years "Rummage Sale"<sup>15</sup> theory, and postmodernity changes, referencing Albert Nolan.<sup>16</sup> Finally, I will retell the Bible story of Jesus overturning the sin offering and money changers tables at the temple, a paradigm changing event, reframing and expanding past beliefs of his Jewish faith, into a wider mission of bringing love and justice into the world. I am transformed again, finding a new way to live. We at South Church are not heretical, we are following Jesus' lead to envision God's kingdom of love and justice and compassion, and make that our mission, too.

In summary, this thesis is about the individual change process as members were faced with the many changes in theology, liturgy, worship and spiritual practices, biblical interpretation, change in vision and governance. This is the story of South Church change, and my story of change and struggle as a representative member of the church, as we worshiped, prayed, and worked together within this church. The church and its members have changed and are changing the church. It is about the changes made in faith re-formation, resulting in changes in how we worship and learn, how we experience and express our faith, and how we live our lives authentically responding to God's call in these "Post-Modern" times. For me, it's about saving Jesus, and the message I think he intended for the world, and trying to discern what that message was, and is for us today.

---

<sup>15</sup> Tickle, *Emergence Christianity*, 17-21.

<sup>16</sup> Albert Nolan, *Jesus Today: A Spirituality of Radical Freedom* (Orbis books, Maryknoll, NY, 2006), 14-16, 101-110.

The story of change at South Church, a large, 500+ member congregation, a thriving and growing church, is one positive example of people, disciples of Jesus, working together, listening for God's leading Spirit, finding Jesus anew in the world today. We have found mission and meaning for our own lives. May it be an encouragement for all who are in this struggle of finding meaning in their church, in God and Jesus and the Spirit in changing times.

### **List of Changes at South Church Andover: 1980-2021**

**The major changes in bold type are the changes I will write about.**

- **1980- Evangelical Church**, (Clarke family joins South Church)  
Change from Episcopal, to United Church of Christ, evangelical church.
- 1984: Rev. Dr. Katherine Kallis, hired for a Pastoral Care and Counseling Ministry, first woman minister at South Church, also leads women's "Journey" groups
- Deacon roles changed from program to pastoral care. 1988, Male and Female Deacons boards merge, with all members to perform all roles equally. (1985)
- 1986: The Rev. Westy Egmont, resigned due to "pastoral abuse of power"
- **Change in Biblical Interpretation**, to reading in the historical/metaphorical tradition, rather than as the inerrant word of God, (1989-90)
- Removal of American Flag from sanctuary , God for all people. (1989)
- **Change to use of Gender Inclusive Language**: buy new pew Bibles, the New Revised Standard Version, (mid 1990's). Change to a New Hymnal (mid 1990's) with gender inclusive language and increased creation/feminine imagery.
- Changes in Christian Education, both for youth and adults, program changes to fit with the increasingly busy, progressive members: language for God, emphasis on faith, not belief or dogma, feminism, sexuality, Sunday School and faith formation with welcoming, gender inclusive curriculum, and experience oriented programs. (1995 and ongoing)

- Becoming a “Come as you are” congregation, now with relaxed clothing attire at worship services. "Sunday Best outfits, tie and jackets are optional. (Blue jeans appear at worship) (early 1990's)
- Formation of a Youth Board made up of half adults and half youth to plan and direct youth activity programs for middle school and high school youth. (early 1990's), programs. Youth programming experiential, interactive, fun educational/ mission trips with youth leadership in planning and organizing emphasized. (1996- ongoing)
- South winds, Alternative Worship Service, Saturday evening worship, lay-led, theme based, creative, special music, guest speakers, visual projection effects (1995-2000)
- **Change to Children invited to partake in Communion**, welcomed at God's Table. (late 1990's) Children serve Communion with Deacons assisting (late 1990's)
- **Change to becoming an Open and Affirming (ONA) Congregation:** Discernment Process to welcome all LGBT members into full membership opportunities. Rewriting of Vision and Welcome statements(1998-1/28/2004).
- First Gay marriage, Further living into the LGBTQ+ covenant. (2005)
- LGBTQ+ groups meet at South Church, (early 2000's). Interfaith LGBTQ+ groups organized.
- Green Team /Environmental issues introduced, Solar Roof, UCC Award for being a Green Congregation(late 1990+), presently with the goal of becoming a carbon-neutral church, members with leadership roles in town planning.
- The “Giving Garden” a church supported community garden begun by a group of volunteers led by Emily Strong and Fran Fink(2010+). Food produced is given to a local food pantry, Neighbors in Need.
- Local support for Habitat for Humanity, ongoing for many years.



- Becoming a community center of Justice ministries and community outreach and the many areas of community volunteerism, Social Justice Coalition formed, an action group, (2018+)
- **Change: Declared to be a “Progressive” church-(2016)**  
Rev. Dana Allen Walsh, first female settled Sr. Pastor.
- “Theology on Tap”-monthly meeting at a bar to discuss a topic of theology (2016).  
Christmas Caroling at local town Brewery.(2019)
- **Change: Rewriting our Vision and Mission Statements by a Congregational Process Led by “ONCET”. (2017-2019)**
- **Change: Rewriting of Operational and Governance Systems of the Church to Include Rewriting By-laws, with Progressive Goals (2019+)**
- Full time Music director hired envisioning an expanded music program for all ages (2018)
- Rev. Alex Shea Will, the first full time openly gay settled pastor hired.(2015)
- **Change use of “Statement of Faith”, no longer “belief” oriented, now changed to mission oriented, “how you live”, “To Embody God’s love, and Compassion”. (2018 and ongoing).**

## Chapter 1

### 1980's Evangelical South Church The Clarke Family Joins South Church

South Church has changed over forty years from Evangelical to Progressive. So much has changed since I have become a member at South Church, it's almost impossible to comprehend the enormity of what we, the members, have envisioned and approved. Individual members have changed through the process, or left the church. This is a separate, individual process, and it is a group process too. Sometimes I think I am "muddling through", but in reality, I feel a strong pulling, pulling me onward to question, to wonder, read, study, and discuss. I will tell my story of change and struggle as one example of what members of this church have struggled through, prayed through together.

To begin, I will set the stage of the 1980's evangelical South Church, UCC, to understand the eventual dramatic changes. It is helpful also to understand my faith and beliefs when I joined, and the changes I made to the evangelical style of reading and studying the Bible as the inerrant word of God. I will also include the history and polity of South Church and the United Church of Christ(UCC), and concept of "civic faith",<sup>17</sup> and cultural changes.

My life has been a journey of faith, an often used symbol, as pilgrims on a journey, or walking on a labyrinth, or a pilgrimage to a sacred destination. I have been on a faith journey trying to understand what it means to be a Christian most of my life.

---

<sup>17</sup> Anthony L. Robinson, *Transforming Congregational Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2003), 26.

My family moved to Andover and we joined South Church in 1980. As I look back over forty years at South Church, I am able to better understand my faith. My faith is multi-layered, as I must also consider the faith of my youth, formed by the traditional Episcopal church where I was Baptized, Confirmed and Married. Many South Church members also have varied church backgrounds and traditions. Mine was a full experience with the choir, robes and caps for the women, liturgy, creedal beliefs, ceremonial processions and reverent communion rituals (only for Baptized and Confirmed members). There was warmth, love, and acceptance, (and cookies after worship). Christmas and Easter traditions were celebrated with town and school, family and friends. Carols and Easter egg hunts were everywhere. This was the era of "Civic Church". Luckily, for me, there was love and belonging in this community of believers. I committed my life to being a disciple of Jesus, and that has not changed.

I thought of the Church as the rock, the holder of unchanging belief, creeds, doctrine, and practice, the Bible, wisdom, the sacred, and the holy, forever. Jesus is love, the way, he said, "Come follow me", I did. The Church was the only way to salvation, to forgiveness for mortal sins. I am sinful, unworthy; Communion will cleanse me of my sins. Believe and you will be saved, forgiven, and God will bless you. This is the "Right Way". Worship is done this way, with songs and hymns, prayers and praise, with ritual bowing to honor the cross. Somewhere there is an all-powerful God who wants me to live by these laws, the Ten Commandments. The creed says it all; believe and you shall live, have eternal life. The Church was the promise of God's goodness, provision, and care, The Church was the home of the good shepherd, and the good samaritan. The Church was a safe place for help in any emergency.

Brian McLaren states the first levels of belief are about belonging, warmth, and safety; one agrees with doctrine, and teachings. "Before doubt, you simply believed. You were in one innocent and undivided mind, seeing with one vision, feeling comfortable and confident."<sup>18</sup> Richard Rohr states in the first stage of believing "we feel innocent and safe. Everything is basically good...It is our 'first naivete', it explains everything, and thus feels like it is straight from God, solid, and forever."<sup>19</sup>

My early adulthood, during the Vietnam War years, after college, was a busy time with not much thought of going to church except at Christmas. I married Gary, an Air Force pilot, left home, traveled with Gary, had 4 children, moved 10 times in 13 years, I had a nurse's license in five states; I was busy with the nitty-gritty details of life. In 1980 we moved to Andover, Massachusetts, to start a new chapter in our lives. After a thirteen year gap in church attendance, while thinking about joining the Episcopal Church, my husband suggested we try South Church, a change within Protestant denominations. I joined South Church with my family, with a shift of focus to an Evangelical, non-liturgical, and non-creedal church, changes I really didn't understand, but welcomed as freeing from repetitive prayers using "Thee, Thou, and Thine" and kneeling and bowing. The worship service used modern, everyday language that was understandable, with prayer pertaining to life in this present age. I felt wonderfully liberated! But there were challenging times ahead, with Biblical interpretation and church upset. I will return to the South Church story after describing South Church history and UCC history and Polity.

---

<sup>18</sup>Brian D. McLaren, *Faith After Doubt: Why Your Beliefs Stopped Working and What to do About It* (New York: St. Martins Essentials, 2021), 8, 18-20.

<sup>19</sup> Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ: How a Forgotten Reality Can Change Everything We See, Hope for, and Believe*. (New York: Convergent Books, 2021). 248

## **South Church History and UCC History and Polity**

It will be helpful now to include background information to understand South Church history, United Church of Christ history and polity, and the concept of civic church/civic faith. South Church Andover, UCC, is an historic Pilgrim church in the New England congregational tradition. South Church's history dates back to 1711, when it separated from the original parish in North Andover. Samuel Phillips was the first Pastor and served for sixty years, 1711-1771. South Parish was the church and the town meeting house, and taxes were paid to the church, only male members could vote. The church and town affairs were joined until the mid 1850s. South Church Andover joined the United Church of Christ in 1961.<sup>20</sup>

The United Church of Christ(UCC) was founded in 1957, uniting four Protestant traditions, historic streams of Christianity, the Pilgrims and German immigrants, to become a united and uniting church. "There is yet more light and truth to break forth from God's Holy Word", the words of Pastor John Robinson as he sent the Pilgrims off to America is a progressive mantra frequently used by the church and by the Rev. Dr. Calvin Mutti, our new pastor beginning in 1989. The UCC has been changing and leading in society's moral and ethical movements. The UCC is known as a church of firsts: the forefront of the anti-slavery movement and the Civil Rights movements, the resolution of the slave ship, Amistad, the first ordination an African-American by an historically white denomination, the first to ordain a woman, and an openly gay man, the first Christian church to affirm the right of same-gender couples to marry. Our response to the demands of our faith is woven into the history of our country (United Church,

---

<sup>20</sup> Julie Pike, *The History of South Church in Andover Massachusetts*. (Cheshire Press, North Reading, MA, 2011), 1-3, 5, 16, 119.

Firstst).<sup>21</sup>

The UCC has recently used descriptive slogans to express their forward looking polity, “God is Still Speaking”, and “Never put a period where God has put a comma”. In 2004 the UCC ran a series of television commercials with more slogans and created quite a media stir, as they made it clear that the UCC welcomed gays and lesbians: “Whoever you are, or wherever you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here”. “We are a church where Jesus the healer meets Jesus the revolutionary, and where together, we grow a just and peaceful world”. Isaiah 43:19 is often quoted, “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.”<sup>22</sup>

At a very young age, I learned a hand exercise: “Here’s the church, here’s the steeple”, (making a church and a steeple with my fingers inside), “open the doors, (my thumbs), to see all the people” (wiggle fingers). The church is made up of the people.

How is it that members can decide what to believe and how to worship? The polity of South Church is based on congregational polity; the church is the people, in covenant with each other and other UCC churches. There is no pope, or cardinal, no bishop, no hierarchy. The power is in each individual member voting in congregational meetings.

There is an overarching supportive national structure. The national UCC convenes a synod every two years to vote on resolutions, but does not have power to enact changes or dictate polity. It is said that the UCC speaks to the member churches, but not for the churches. Each church is unique, making its own choices. The members

---

<sup>21</sup> “History”, United Church of Christ, accessed May 24, 2021, <https://www.ucc.org/who-we-are/about/history/>.

<sup>22</sup> “History”, United Church of Christ.

vote on their leadership, moderator, and other officers, and committees, including delegates to the wider UCC. The members choose and hire their own pastor, who works with the moderator, the Deacons, the church council, and other boards and committees to decide on how they will worship and what the church by-laws will say and how the church will be managed. Congregationalism is like a democracy.

The UCC is different from many other churches and denominations. There is no central authority that sends ministers to or from churches. There is no central authority that determines a creed that governs the UCC or its churches. No central authority establishes a governing doctrine for the UCC, or makes decisions about questions of faith that are binding within the UCC or upon UCC churches. Instead, each individual church, and each of the supporting bodies of the UCC (state and national) is a free-standing entity formed and self-governed by agreement among its members.<sup>23</sup>

### **1980's Evangelical South Church**

South Church in the 1980's was highly energized by the wave of renewed evangelical fervor in the 1970-80s that was sweeping staid Congregational Churches full of "God's frozen chosen", with a vision that South Church might become the "Crystal Cathedral" of New England. (Cal email) This was a happy time of women's fellowship groups, many young families with young children, faith journey groups, involvement in teaching Sunday School and helping with youth groups, committee meetings, learning and participating in fellowship.

It was also a time of great personal struggle, being overwhelmed with the burdens of family. We had moved to Andover, a change from our military based life, to

---

<sup>23</sup> "Forum on Faith: UCC is based on covenants, not hierarchy", Newstimes, March 4, 2011, accessed 11/26/21, <https://www.newstimes.com/religion/article/Forum-on-Faith-UCC-is-based-on-covenants-not-1042917.php>.

civilian life, and with a new baby on the way, our fourth child. This was the beginning of a new chapter in our lives, settling down at last. I was looking for stability and guidance for a better way to live, seeking to find how God would make a difference.

This traditional Congregational style church was reading the Bible as the inerrant word of God, to be trusted as the truth, the Word of God. I joined my first Bible study and learned to read the Bible, line by line, with memorable verses to be quoted, and a new, deeper, understanding of faith: believe and obey, and all will be well. But there was an uncertain sharp edge to the teaching that I was wary of, the absolute certainty of Biblical inerrancy, and the correct way to read and believe the Bible. A small red flag went up, to be resolved at a later time. There was so much to learn; it was like learning a whole new language, and stories with many levels of symbol and meaning. To my surprise, I found the words of the Episcopal Prayer Book right here in the Bible, the words of the prayers and the Psalms I had sung at each worship service. I was eager to learn. I was immersed in reading and studying the Bible, grappling with the issues of faith, and amazed at the changes it made in my understanding and outlook for my life. I learned to be thankful for all things. I surrendered my life to God, Jesus, and the teaching and leading of the Holy Spirit. Over six years, I was a changed person; I was transformed by being loved in the community of believers, by reading, by learning, by praying about, and experiencing God's unconditional grace and love. Romans 12:2 has become a lifetime verse for me:

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12:2)



I was introduced to understanding life as a journey of faith. This Thomas Merton reading was often read during “Journey” study groups.

I have no idea where I am going.  
 I do not see the road ahead of me.  
 I cannot know for certain where it will end  
 nor do I know myself,  
 and that fact that I think that I am following your will,  
 does not mean that I am actually doing so.  
 But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you.  
 And I know that if I do this you will lead me to the right road,  
 though I may know nothing about it.  
 Therefore, I will trust you always, though I may seem to be lost  
 and in the shadow of death.  
 I will not fear for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me  
 to face perils alone.<sup>24</sup>

### **Pastor Westy Egmont Demise**

Rev. Westy Egmont was our inspiring and creative evangelical leader, Bible and mission oriented, and a challenging, engaging preacher. These were spirit filled days at South Church. One memorable sermon he preached was titled, “The Truth Shall Set You Free”, in which he challenged us all to ponder the questions, Who is God, who is Jesus, and what difference does that make in your life? These questions have been the basis of my faith journey since then. Unfortunately, in November, 1986, he abused his pastoral power, and resigned, leaving the church in disbelief, disarray, angry, feeling betrayed, hurt, and worse, leaving long term scars. How could a person of such great faith fall into such a trap? The church went through staffing turnovers and a financial downturn followed by a three year interim recovery period with strong lay leadership.

---

<sup>24</sup>Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*, accessed Dec. 9, 2021, <https://reflections.yale.edu/article/seize-day-vocation-calling-work/merton-prayer>

This is a sad tale in South Church history. Change for us, the members in this situation was prayerful, grief and healing oriented.<sup>25</sup> South Church was to enter a new stage in its history as we faced change, both in pastoral leadership, and cultural changing times.

### **Civic Faith, Civic Church, Changing Times**

I have described South Church in the 1980's as a thriving Bible based church and it is informative to understand the culture and the rapidly changing times. There were some lingering remnants of "civic faith" in the eighties at South Church. Anthony B. Robinson describes "Civic Faith", in his book, *Transforming Congregational Culture*. He describes "Civic Faith" as the era of American Christendom (mid 1900's), when Christianity was the unofficial religion of North America, and a half dozen mainline Protestant denominations were the religious establishment of the country." The business of the church might be described by the phrase "civic faith". "The job of the church seemed to provide a kind of religious ethos for American Culture and society", to be the conscience of the community on the issues of the day (25). The church was built in the center of town on the green; church leaders were civic leaders as well. People knew what it meant to be Christian; going to church and being a good Christian was part of being a good community leader. Generally, people knew the stories of faith, even if they were not regular church attenders. Christianity and culture were intertwined. The church was to articulate the moral claims and requirements, to be the voice of conscience on the issues of the day" (26).

---

<sup>25</sup> The South Church, UCC Annual report for 1986, presented at Annual Meeting, January 28, 1987.

This was the era and ethos of my youth. Christianity was taught in public schools; each day began with the pledge of allegiance to the flag and the Lord's Prayer. Christmas Carols and pageants were part of the school programs and celebrations, as well as Easter, Good Friday, and hymn singing in music class. All stores and shops were closed on Sunday. Being a good Christian meant being a good person. Christian holidays, Christmas, Good Friday, and Easter were school and work holidays. Christmas was magical with Christmas lights and Carols in the air. Store windows were filled with elaborate Christmas scenes, toys, and Santas. Good Friday was a solemn holiday, but the next day the town sponsored Easter Egg hunts for all. On Easter Sunday everyone went to church dressed in their Easter bonnets and new outfits.

However, Robinson continues, with civic faith the church became a "moral policeman" for the culture. Civic faith distorted Christianity toward being moralistic, following a certain set of moral behaviors and attitudes, rather than being a religion based on grace, and a fellowship of the forgiven, a transformational faith. "It was saying "be good and then God will love you,... instead of, God loves you, so be who you are, now, a beloved child of God" (26-7). Additionally, Civic faith was focused on charity, giving food baskets, rather than justice and changing systems of oppression. It was the center for community and family life, celebrating national and religious holidays together; "the family that prays together, stays together" (30). Being a good Christian meant being a good parent and a good citizen. Christianity was not distinctive from culture, and people (Boomers) decided they didn't need it, and they left church and religion behind (31). Robinson states the purpose of the church is "transformation, to change human lives,... surrendering ourselves and giving ourselves to God's love and

purpose for our lives”, that change is not a one time event. Change is ongoing throughout one’s life, in the light of God’s grace revealed throughout history (37-8).

My advisor, Fr. Ray Dlugos, compared Civic faith to progressive Christianity. In Civic faith, “the role of religion is to reinforce the values of the culture; it reinforces the way we want life to be, reinforces the status quo, does not challenge the faith or the way we live. It encourages us to “keep the faith”. Civic faith may or may not have anything to do with Christianity.” Progressive Faith, he continued, critiques the status quo, the faith and church practices, the culture and the social structures. “Progressive church challenges society and itself. It invites us to examine everything, to make things as they should be.”<sup>26</sup>

### **Cultural Changes, Postmodernity**

Tony Robinson continues, cultural changes associated with postmodernity legally “disestablished” civic Christianity in the 1960’s and 70’s, by outlawing prayer in public schools, and allowing stores to open on Sundays. People’s lives changed as they had different opportunities on Sundays, children’s sports, or work. Culture officially became secular, and religiously pluralistic, racially and ethnically diverse (16). The modern era was over, and “post-modernity was emerging”. There was a loss of a unifying narrative, what it meant to be American, not only the loss of the Christian story, but also the loss of network TV news stations and family programming. Major channels went from three to fifty or more, with many choices and diverse points of view. There was increased immigration, religious pluralism, and changing economic base, and a breakdown in trust

---

<sup>26</sup> Fr. Ray Dlugos, quoted with permission, zoom conversation, Nov. 10, 2021.

and authority of institutions, politics, and power structures (10-18). In today's pluralistic society, there are many voices (26).

## Chapter 2

### Cognitive Dissonance and Individual Change

Change is a constant in one's life. The individual members of South Church have been a part of many changes reflecting the changing times and culture, changes involving biblical interpretation, dogma, doctrine, creedal beliefs and spiritual practices, challenging the status quo. My changing at South Church has been ongoing, part of my faith journey. When I joined in 1980, I first added fundamental beliefs and Bible study to my Episcopal background faith, then I suffered through the fall of a pastor. Next, with Cal's arrival, and other lay leadership we moved through a series of changes including biblical interpretation, the "Open and Affirming" process, and then to be named "Progressive", and more. Those are just titles, but they include serious religious and cultural issues of changing, asking me to change beliefs and doctrine that I thought was unchangeable, rock solid. I am not alone as each member has had to grapple with their past beliefs, to listen, to hear how God is still speaking, to search their heart for new understanding and meaning. Each member had to discern how to respond to proposed ideas, to change or not to change, to stay at South Church, or to leave. As I make changes to my foundational beliefs, I ask, can I do this, or am I being rebellious, heretical?

Wrestling or grappling with conflicting issues is known as "Cognitive dissonance", mental discomfort from holding conflicting beliefs, especially long held religious or political beliefs, or learning new health knowledge leading to a change in thinking or

behavior.<sup>27</sup> The theory of “cognitive dissonance” developed by a psychologist, Leon Festinger, is helpful in understanding the process of change. The theory was developed at the time that smoking was discovered to cause cancer and COPD. People learned that smoking was bad for them and they needed to quit something they really enjoyed.<sup>28</sup>

The theory of cognitive dissonance proposes that people are averse to inconsistencies within their own minds. It offers one explanation for why people sometimes make an effort to adjust their thinking when their own thoughts, words, or behaviors seem to clash with each other. When one learns new information that challenges a deeply held belief, for example, or acts in a way that seems to undercut a favorable self-image, that person may feel motivated to somehow resolve the negative feeling that results—to restore cognitive consonance.<sup>29</sup>

What long held beliefs and inconsistencies have we challenged at South Church? What new ideas were presented to be adopted.? Cognitive dissonance is a working concept to understand when facing any decision. What were the signs of mental discomfort, anxiety, unknowing, that arose from the opposing beliefs? How did we find ways to resolve the discomforting issues, and make a plan, get help along the way, to resolve the dissonance? Cognitive dissonance is a central idea to use as I progress through the changes ahead. What old beliefs, foundational, creedal beliefs, or cultural changes are we at South Church to struggle with as we search to hear how God may be leading us to live anew?

---

<sup>27</sup> *Random House Webster’s College Dictionary*. (Toronto: Random House of Canada, 1991), Cognitive Dissonance, 264.

<sup>28</sup> “Cognitive Dissonance”, Psychology Today  
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/cognitive-dissonance>, accessed 9/29/2021, Theory of Cognitive Dissonance.

<sup>29</sup>“Cognitive Dissonance”, Psychology Today

## Dogma: One Cause of Cognitive Dissonance

Phyllis Tickle highlights the five principles known as “Dogma”, the fundamentals of Christianity, and the origin of the words fundamentalism, and fundamentalist.<sup>30</sup> She states, “Emergence Christianity would wrestle with these five fundamental beliefs, the core ideas, for the next decades ahead, especially within Protestantism and Evangelicalism”.<sup>31</sup> In 1879-95, Americans at the Niagara Bible Conferences, the Committee of Biblical Conservatives, “feeling that biblical inerrancy, which was the heart of Protestantism, was threatened...formulated five principles of faith that they considered were non-negotiable”.<sup>32</sup>

These fundamental principles of Christianity became known as “*dogma*”:

The inspiration of the Bible by the Holy Spirit, absolute Biblical inerrancy as factual reportage;

The historicity of the virgin birth;

The doctrine of the crucifixion and death of Jesus as the atonement of sin;

The physical and attestable reality the bodily resurrection; and the historicity of

The recorded miracles of Jesus.<sup>33</sup>

She states the five principles, dogma, of Protestant-Evangelical conservative beliefs are the pivot point, the challenge points of change today. The dogmatic beliefs defining fundamentalism will be where Emergence Christianity disagrees over the next century and a half.<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> Phyllis Tickle, *Emergence Christianity: What it is, Where it is Going, and Why it Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books,2012), 38-9.

<sup>31</sup> Tickle, *Emergence Christianity*,39.

<sup>32</sup> Tickle, *Emergence Christianity*,39.

<sup>33</sup> Tickle, *Emergence Christianity*,39.

<sup>34</sup> Tickle, *Emergence Christianity*,39.



Brian McLaren in *The Great Spiritual Migration* describes the difficulty with changing long held religious beliefs. The theme of *The Great Spiritual Migration* is a movement from a system of beliefs, by facing one's doubts and questions, to finding a better way of being a Christian, “a Way of Life”, not based on correct beliefs, but on love.<sup>35</sup>

I know a lot of us have a little inner fundamentalist perched on our right shoulder, and he is scolding us right now. “Just a minute...You’re not allowed to do that.” Christian faith was defined once and for all by Jesus and the apostles. It’s encoded in the creeds and preserved by religious leaders and institutions... Christianity must always be what it has always been. Anything else is unorthodox, heretical, apostate, and wrong. For years I grappled with believing the dogmatic tenets of faith.<sup>36</sup>

I certainly have an inner fundamentalist that seems to keep me from believing that I can really make changes to my rock solid beliefs. I have a hard time claiming that Christianity can and will change and it's okay; I must be wrong. I have never thought of reading the Bible as the absolute truth, written by God; that doesn't make sense to me. And the virgin birth, and the dead rising, are not scientific, not provable. It's "a leap of faith" to believe... for me, and all believers. I want to believe, as I was taught to believe, but it is difficult. Actually, I just tried to understand as best I could, to believe what I was taught, and make the “leap of faith”, to say, yes, I believe, if that's what I'm supposed to do to be a Christian. That's what everyone else has done. Perhaps it will make sense to me at a later time. I don't believe in the doctrine of substitutionary atonement; God has always forgiven those who ask and truly seek to live a better way. The more I learn

---

<sup>35</sup> Brian D. McLaren, *Great Spiritual Migration, How the World's Largest Religion is Seeking a Better Way to be Christian*. (New York: Convergent Books, 2016), 66.

<sup>36</sup> McLaren, *The Great Spiritual Migration*, 11.

about how the creeds were written, the less I like the creeds, or think that Jesus would like the creeds. Did Jesus think of himself as God or want to be worshiped? Did he ask us to believe certain things? I don't think so. Jesus taught us to have faith in God, to love one another, and demonstrated servanthood, being humble. I want to believe in miracles, but how does one explain feeding five thousand people from five loaves and two fishes, and turning water into wine? I have come to believe these amazing stories of faith in a mythical way.

Now, at South Church, I am being asked to think for myself, to be honest, to use my intellect, along with my imagination. I seek to learn about my faith, my world, wisdom, the history of God and Jesus in sacred texts, and practice, and to consider my experiences of God, to find God in my world today.

I have so many questions. I ask who is God, who is Jesus, and what difference does that make for how I live? How do God and Jesus want me to live? Would Jesus like His church today? Did Jesus want to be worshiped as God? What would Jesus think of these dogmatic beliefs? What was Jesus' message to the disciples? What were Jesus' actual words? Those are more questions than I can answer in this thesis, but they are real to me as I grapple with my faith.

## Spiritual Growth with Doubt, Brian McLaren

Brian McLaren, in his newest book, *Faith After Doubt*, describes doubting as similar to cognitive dissonance.

The word 'doubt' derives, from duo, or double, being of two minds, one believes, one doesn't. Two minds wrestle and writhe in tension, pulling in two directions, leaving you in distress. You can see with the eyes of faith or with the eyes of skepticism, leaving you with double vision or with internal di-vision. Before doubt, you simply believed. You were in one innocent and undivided mind, seeing with one vision, feeling a comfortable confidence rather than distress, but that innocence, that simplicity, that peaceful unity of mind and clarity of vision now slips away, the first casualties of doubt.<sup>37</sup>

*Faith After Doubt* is about individuals struggling with their faith and beliefs. McLaren shares his and others personal stories to vividly illustrate the pain of being forced to make a decision between one's Evangelical traditional and fundamental beliefs, descending into doubt and despair. McLaren lists many kinds of beliefs that may be challenged; personal, historical, aesthetic, scientific, moral, and dispositional beliefs that can be challenged, and adds that religious beliefs contain all of these types. Adding to the distress of one's changing belief system is the question of the cost to change or not to change, which must be considered.<sup>38</sup> Costs may be financial or social, membership in a community with friends and family, moral integrity issues, to be honest, authentic, genuine, to be good, or reputational issues, approval, what others think about you. All are issues to be considered, as well as positive benefits, the freedom to be authentic, curious, to discover and learn, and to grow.<sup>39</sup> He did not list death as a cost

---

<sup>37</sup> Brian D. McLaren, *Faith After Doubt: Why Your Beliefs Stopped Working and What to do About It* (New York: St. Martins Essentials, 2021), 8.

<sup>38</sup> McLaren, *Faith*, 20-21.

<sup>39</sup> McLaren, *Faith*, 29.

of change or leading a change movement, but we Christians all are too aware of this reality.

I have chosen a few stories and quotes that illustrate the struggle and pain in realizing that one's beliefs no longer fit the person they have become. They need a new world-view to help them navigate the complexities of life. The book is an all encompassing description of doubt and change, grieving change, navigating through change, and growing with or without doubt. While much seems extreme, as the examples are often of ministers, who lose vocation, income and friends and status, to find a new way to live. The examples describe the personal distress and anguish of all people, whether clergy, lay or unaffiliated, when leaving behind a belief system that no longer fits their wider world-view.

McLaren describes his personal experience of doubt and uncertainty within his ministry, as he questioned his evangelical roots, and dogmatic beliefs. There was no room for compromise; whether he believed the total inerrancy of the Bible or he didn't. He couldn't pick and choose. Finally, he had a "come to Jesus moment", a faith crisis; he was not able to teach and preach what he did not believe. He vividly describes his passages and the cost of his resignation, loss of vocation, income, status, and the effect it had on his family, marriage, group membership, and financial security. His gain was his honesty, morality, and integrity.<sup>40</sup> In the process, he states, one realizes one's own "hypocrisy and self-deception"<sup>41</sup> and hears the internal debate. There is "dishonesty and pretense" to maintain one's belonging to a group. He generalizes that all people who do

---

<sup>40</sup> McLaren, *Faith*, 24-30.

<sup>41</sup> McLaren, *Faith*, 28.

“come out”, are being honest about their beliefs and identity; it is about moral and theological honesty, to self and to community. It is freeing to be honest and authentic.<sup>42</sup>

McLaren gives examples of problematic areas arising in life, finding that his daughter and son are gay. Does one choose their family or their religion?<sup>43</sup> When voting, do you vote for someone because they are anti-abortion, even if the person is of poor moral character? Does one keep preaching when one no longer believes the main line Evangelical fundamental world-view.<sup>44</sup>

And I ask, does one continue to go to church when you no longer can say the creed without crossing your fingers?

The strict rules of Evangelical conservative belief circumscribe one's world view. “God demands absolute perfection, and submission, firm unwavering faith (and correct beliefs)... by a tough demanding father and exacting judge...who is also loving, gracious and forgiving.”<sup>45</sup> There is the fear that God turns against us, rejects us, if belief is not good enough, if we doubt, sends us to final damnation, hell. There is no room for doubt; all choices in one's life are made to support your religious world-view. “What could be more terrifying than losing God's love and protection?”<sup>46</sup> Belief in a set doctrine is like a road map, but with doubt, one goes off the edges, our world view is lost. The loss of certainty, unknowing, and not feeling safe can be traumatizing.<sup>47</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup> McLaren, *Faith*, 28-30.

<sup>43</sup> McLaren, *Great Spiritual Migration*, 41.

<sup>44</sup> McLaren, *Great Spiritual Migration*, 23.

<sup>45</sup> McLaren, *Faith*, 10.

<sup>46</sup> McLaren, *Faith*, 9-10.

<sup>47</sup> McLaren, *Faith*, 9-10.

## **Jesus, an Example of Cognitive Dissonance and Change.**

Brian McLaren, *In Faith After Doubt*, tells a story about Jesus' Sermon on the Mount as an example of Jesus wrestling with his faith, resulting in challenging ancient and accepted beliefs. "Each belief needed to be challenged, subverted, expanded, reinterpreted...and further developed."<sup>48</sup> In Matthew 5:21, five times Jesus says, "You have heard it said,... `But I say to you'..." In saying "you have heard it said", Jesus is stating the present teachings of the Temple, and when he says, 'but I say to you', he is stating a new way, challenging the old belief and tradition (Matthew 5:43-44).

*"You have heard that it was said, You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy." "But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you".*<sup>49</sup>

Jesus has set the way for us to go forward, challenging both religion and culture when reason, truth and justice no longer prevail. By going back to the heart of Jewish tradition to find his connection to God and wisdom, he proclaimed his vision of the Kingdom of God prominently in the Sermon on the Mount. What is Jesus challenging us to do, to be, now in this year 2021? We too can go back to the heart of Jewish tradition to find meaning.

Some changes in culture directly challenge long held faith beliefs, especially, in our age, abortion issues, social justice, global warming, human diversity, and sexuality issues including marriage, families and children. Phyllis Tickle expounds throughout her

---

<sup>48</sup> McLaren, *Faith*, 39.

<sup>49</sup> Matthew 5:43-44.

writing that culture and religion are intertwined, that changes in culture effect changes in religious practice and belief.<sup>50</sup>

Religion is a social construct as well as an individual or private way of being and understanding.” “In its public or corporate role, any established religion is the soul of the culture or society that in turn is the body in which and through religion acts.<sup>51</sup>

She imaginatively describes “religion as a cable... of meaning that keeps the human social unit connected to some (stabilizing) purpose and/or power greater than itself.” She describes religion as a many layered grounding cable with a 3 strand braided cord at the center, an inner mesh layer and then an outer waterproof protective layer connecting life to meaningfulness. The outer layer is the community and the story. The three central strands of the core are spirituality, morality, and corporality. If one layer is damaged, or changed, it affects the other layers causing instability and change.<sup>52</sup>

### **Spiritual Growth with Doubt**

McLaren states doubt is the passageway to “a growth process, an opportunity to mature intellectually, spiritually, morally, and relationally.”<sup>53</sup> Loss of belief is like being off the edges of one’s road map. The map is our worldview that is changing; loss of knowing and not feeling safe can be traumatizing.<sup>54</sup> Spiritual growth involves putting

---

<sup>50</sup> Tickle, Phyllis. *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012), 33-39.

<sup>51</sup> Tickle, *Great Emergence*, 33.

<sup>52</sup> Tickle, *Great Emergence*, 34-5.

<sup>53</sup> McLaren, *Faith*, xvii.

<sup>54</sup> McLaren, *Faith*, 9.

one's faith together in a new way, a new paradigm. A person needs a safe place to talk about their doubts, and possible decisions, and options for growth and life and faith beyond "belief". McLaren compares growth in faith to growth of a tree, the rings symbolizes growth in seasons and in four stages, all interacting, with doubt as the passageway between the stages.<sup>55</sup>

McLaren describes the growth process in depth.

He names four stages of growth:

1. Simplicity: dualistic thinking, finding authority figures, built on trust and unquestioning loyalty, obedience. They find joy in being right.<sup>56</sup>
2. Complexity: pragmatism, effectiveness, and results, independent thinking and learning in multiple situations, school, with peers, with sexuality and changing body, and spiritually, making own moral and intellectual choices, making right choices. They find joy in being effective.<sup>57</sup>

Fundamental Christians are found in stages 1 and 2.

3. Perplexity: a quest for honesty, mysterious and complex, faith feels perplexing; you have more questions than answers; you feel skeptical of beliefs and systems, and distrust institutional injustice, oppression and hypocrisy, structure, authority. They are off the edges of their roadmap now. "They have the gift of humility".<sup>58</sup>

4. Harmony: Stage 4 expresses itself in Love.(114) nothing else matters except faith expressing itself in love. This stage integrates the previous stages: a "second simplicity" built on all the previous stages; Simplicity loved correctness, Complexity loved effectiveness, Perplexity loved honesty and justice. God had been there in all doubts

---

<sup>55</sup> McLaren, *Faith*, 44.

<sup>56</sup> McLaren, *Faith*, 45-47.

<sup>57</sup> McLaren, *Faith*, 47-55.

<sup>58</sup> McLaren, *Faith*, 72-76.



and struggles. Faith is about love, non-discriminatory love, love infuses all. We are all part of a Beloved universe.<sup>59</sup>

McLaren states Progressive or liberal Christians, are in stage 3 and 4. They tend to talk more, discuss issues, “specialize in critique and deconstruction and analysis” as they seek truth and justice. As they study and learn more, they have more questions, which lead to more uncertainty, “down a dark tunnel of unknowing”, mysticism, the cloud of unknowing.<sup>60</sup>

McLaren concludes with these statements about faith:

“Faith before doubt: it’s about correct beliefs

Faith after doubt: it’s about revolutionary love.

By revolutionary, I mean love beyond: beyond myself, my neighbor, the outsider, critic, antagonist, opponent and enemy,... to non-human fellow creatures.”<sup>61</sup>

In summary, I have described change and “cognitive dissonance”, grappling with foundational religious beliefs, with the possibility of change with doubt, finding a new spirituality. The next chapters describe the changes we experienced at South Church, what issues we grappled with, and the outcome of the changes, and what has been the impact of going through the process of change on my/our spirituality? My experience is just one example of a person changing, one change at a time; all of the members in their own way changed, (or left), as we worked together as a community of faith. Did change deepen, mature, transform each of us into a more authentic spiritual person or

---

<sup>59</sup> McLaren, *Faith*, 99.

<sup>60</sup> McLaren, *Faith*, 72.

<sup>61</sup> McLaren, *Faith*, 116-7.

the opposite? Have we found a better authentic faith, a new purpose for our lives, and a new way to live?

## **Chapter 3**

### **Changes at South Church Andover Beginning in 1989**

#### **Rev. Dr. Calvin Mutti Begins His Ministry.**

I have set the stage of Evangelical South Church from 1980-89. The focus was on Evangelical doctrine, creedal beliefs, Bible study, and reading scripture as the infallible, inerrant word of God. As I continue the story of my “faith journey”, I enter into years of continued changing after 1989. In January of 1989 we welcomed The Rev. Dr. Calvin Mutti(1989-2007), fondly referred to as “Cal” by all, after a three year interim period of healing following the painful resignation of Pastor Westy Egmont. Cal came and stayed for almost twenty years!

There were changes through the years with Cal’s creative, pastoral, kind leadership at South Church. According to a member of Cal’s search committee, the committee was not looking for changes at South Church; they chose Cal to be the next sr. pastor because they fell in love with him. Cal took great pride in learning and knowing everyone’s name, and all extended family members, too. He was most loved for his farm stories and tales of growing up on a farm, and also for his tireless energy, and presence everywhere. Cal had several favorite sayings always looking to the future:

“There is yet more light and truth to break forth from God’s holy word”<sup>62</sup>, “The future is as bright as the promises of God”, “The best is yet to be!” He adopted the UCC “Comma campaign, Don’t put a period where God has put a comma, God is still speaking”.

### **Reading the Bible in the Historical/Metaphorical Tradition**

A major theological change made by Rev. Dr. Calvin Mutti soon after he arrived at South Church was to change from reading and understanding of the Bible as the inerrant word of God, now to read and interpret the Bible in the historical/metaphorical tradition. Cal didn’t make any grand announcement of change; I think that was his normal previous practice and he continued as he had done in his previous ministry. I was still fairly new (nine years) to the church and to Bible study, and was naive to this controversy. However, there was a group of Evangelical church members who had grand ideas and wanted to become the “Crystal Cathedral” of the east. Bible reading and study was done in a conservative manner. I became aware because some of my Bible study group leaders were no longer present in church or at Fellowship Hour. A substantial number of church members left the church.

I did wonder if I should be leaving too. As I grappled with this issue, I learned there were some very conservative issues within the wider church. I was curious in becoming aware that my conservative friends were leaving. Did they really believe literally, as I don’t think I have ever met anyone who believes in seven day Biblical creation? Originally, I had raised an eyebrow and wondered, when taught in Bible study class that the Bible was the inerrant word of God, that everything is true. I honored the

---

<sup>62</sup> Pilgrim Pastor, John Robinson’s words upon sending the Pilgrims off to the new world.

teachings and the certainty of belief I had experienced, and the transformation of my life; this would not change. But I knew in my heart that I didn't believe the Bible as absolute literal truth. There were too many discrepancies and passages which were obviously outdated, and belonged to another time in history; there are two different stories of Jesus' birth, and two creation stories, Paul's advice to slave owners is obviously outdated, "Slaves be obedient to your human masters with fear and trembling..."<sup>63</sup> The Bible to me still held the stories and meaning of our faith tradition without having to prove that it was all true without error. This change was fairly easy for me, a relief, actually. I already was reading the Bible in this manner, but it clarified issues of fundamentalism and I became more aware that I didn't want any part of it.

I have since come to appreciate that this change in Biblical interpretation and gender wording was a watershed moment in time. Phyllis Tickle, in *Emergence Christianity*, identifies reading the Bible as the inerrant word of God is one of the five unchangeable, non-negotiable tenets of faith, dogma, set up by American fundamentalists at the Niagara Bible Conferences, in 1879-95. She states the five dogmatic beliefs, defining fundamentalism, will be the challenge points where Emergence Christianity will disagree over the next century and a half (Tickle 39). I have described this well in the previous section on cognitive dissonance.

Biblical inerrancy is the major issue defining conservative Christianity. Brian McLaren states, the Evangelical, Biblical "worldview" is defined by believing the Bible as

---

<sup>63</sup> Ephesians 6:5-8.

truth, creation in seven days, any everything else is set literally by what is written. Any doubt is not allowed or the belief system will crumble if one thing is questioned.<sup>64</sup>

Marcus Borg, in *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*, states the Bible is sacred scripture; it has shaped us, is our primary identity and vision. It is a mediator of the sacred; God becomes present to us, we experience God's spirit. The Bible is "the 'Word' of God' in a metaphorical, nonliteral sense" (28-35). Borg goes on to describe the "historical-metaphorical approach" of reading the Bible. "What did the text mean in the ancient historical setting in which it was written? A metaphorical reading does not confine itself to the literal, factual and historical meaning, but moves beyond to ask what the story means, independent of its factual factuality"(38). He uses the story of the exodus as an example, "as a divine narrative of the divine-human relationship, depicting both the human predicament and the means of deliverance"(41). "Metaphor is linguistic or verbal art", and allows understanding the Bible and God's activity as "profoundly true, even though not literally true"(41).

### **Theological Change to Use of Gender Inclusive Language, 1994-6**

Change to new pew Bibles, the New Revised Standard Version, 1994-6..

Change to a New Hymnal, *Hymns, Psalms, & Spiritual Songs*, (mid 1990's)

In the mid 1990's, two South Church seminary students asked us to consider using gender inclusive language for God. Gender inclusive language was a move away from male language for God, call God just plain God, to avoid referring to God as "he" or "him", to refer to "humankind" rather than "mankind", "chairperson," instead of

---

<sup>64</sup> Brian D. McLaren, *Faith After Doubt: Why Your Beliefs Stopped Working and What to do About It* (New York: St. Martins Essentials, 2021), 31-40.

“chairman”. The goal was to avoid bias to any sex or social gender, in worship, study, prayer, and conversation. It was a feminist change with recognition and correction of male dominance in our church history and culture. It was a shift for all members to change their language, to stop and think before speaking, or reading or singing. We were introduced to a new version of the Bible, the *New Revised Standard Version(NRSV)*. We had a trial period titled, “How shall we Speak?” A congregation process was followed. The seminary students conferred with Sr. Pastor Cal Mutti, then approval was sought from the deacons and groups in the congregation. Group discussions followed always with prayer. After a year or more of listening and learning together, the deacons gave their final approval.

The change was controversial and once again a group of members left South Church. People didn’t want to change their Bible. I was an enthusiastic supporter; as a female, I have always had to mentally include myself, to believe whatever is written for males, was meant for me too in these modern times. I had learned that our Bible had been redacted and translated many times throughout the millennia, and now another translation to be gender inclusive was welcome. I wondered how this change would affect me in the long run. My answer after twenty-five years is that it has; I feel more included. It is grating to me to hear prayers, hymns, and scripture with masculine wording.

The changes over time affected all parts of the church, teaching, singing, praying, and everyday conversation and became a significant part of Christian Education and teaching both for youth and adults. Program changes were made to fit with the increasingly progressive members with emphasis on faith, not declared creedal

belief or dogmatic teachings. Sunday School and faith formation included gender inclusive, experience oriented programs with a welcoming curriculum made available to fit the schedules of busy people. New pew Bibles, the *New Revised Standard Version* were purchased. A committee was formed to choose a new hymnal and in the year 2000, *Hymns, Psalms, & Spiritual Songs*<sup>65</sup> was purchased, with gender inclusive language and increased creation/feminine imagery, to use alongside the traditional *Pilgrim Hymnal*. The words of the Doxology sung in worship each Sunday were changed from, “Father, son, and Holy Ghost” to “Creator, Christ, and Holy Ghost”. Some still, after twenty years, complain when we sing old hymns with new words, and stumble through the 23rd Psalm, memorized at an early age, now with new words. We were not forced to change the way we speak instantly, and over the years we have grown into the change. Still, when we sing the doxology, one can hear differing words, as people sing their preference.

I have since come to appreciate that these changes in Biblical interpretation and gender wording were a watershed moment in time for South Church. These two changes in reading, understanding and interpreting the Bible, and changing the Bible’s wording are major changes for Evangelical Christians. The congregation was faced with choices of do you believe everything the Bible says, and what version of the Bible will we read, resulting in a whole cascade of changes to how we speak, study, sing and pray.

I am increasingly amazed at the dedication of so many individuals, separately and joined in covenant, struggling to make sense out of a belief system they have lived

---

<sup>65</sup> *Hymns, Psalms, & Spiritual Songs*, (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, original printing, 1990).

with for a lifetime that so obviously now, doesn't make sense to a rational adult. Most of the time I just think I am "muddling through", but in reality, I feel a strong pulling, pulling me onward to question, to wonder, read, study, and discuss, to hang in and not quit, and to pray together and care for each other. This is a separate, individual process, and it is a group process too.

### **American Flag Removed from the Sanctuary, 1989**

There is another early Cal story I am reminded of, a fabled South Church story that surfaces occasionally. Cal Mutti is credited with removing the American flag from the South Church sanctuary in 1989. Actually, he explained to me that Kathy Musser, a divinity student at South Church removed it. Cal said he "let it be", and no one complained, and he passively takes the blame for not putting it back. However, my husband, a retired Air Force pilot, has always been hurt by the removal of the flag from the sanctuary, which forced me to try to understand why it was removed. What difference does it make?

After reading *Broken We Kneel: Reflections on Faith and Citizenship*, by Diana Butler Bass, I came to understand their thinking. God is a God for all people, God is not just an American God. It wasn't just to remove a decorative item, but a theological statement; church is not about being a good American. Our faith is not a civic faith, God is not a militaristic God. God is a God for all of humanity, for all countries. She quotes from Augustine's *City of God*, "The heavenly city while it sojourns on earth, calls citizens



out of all nations and gathers together a society of pilgrims of all languages...in its pilgrim state the heavenly city possesses peace by faith; and by this faith it lives.”<sup>66</sup> God is a loving, uniting God, a peace-making God.<sup>67</sup> Removing the flag from the sanctuary was a statement of changing times, moving toward welcoming a multicultural, multi-faith world.

---

<sup>66</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, New Advent, Fathers of the Church, 19:17, accessed May 12, 2021, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/120119.htm>, 19:17.

<sup>67</sup> Bass, Diana Butler. *Broken We Kneel: Reflections on Faith and Citizenship* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 24.

## Chapter 4

### Change to Welcoming Children to the Communion Table

Terry Ebner,<sup>68</sup> Director of Christian Education and Family Ministries (1995-2015), proposed that all children should be invited to the communion table, to eat with the family, to be included, not excluded. While studying at Andover Newton Theological Seminary in 1998-9, she explored what the Bible said about Jesus and children. She concluded that children were part of the family, God's family. It was important to include them at the meal. This is a radical change in the traditional practice and understanding of communion. In our tradition, we are invited to the communion table to "Do this in remembrance of me", the words of Jesus at the last supper. These words are carved in wood on the front of our communion table. All who would like to come are invited.

---

<sup>68</sup> Terry Ebner was hired in 1995, as Director of Christian Education and Family Ministries and joined the congregation as a lay member. Terry was always involved with children and family ministries. She stated that parents wanted their kids to have a moral base, to be loved for who they are, to feel welcome, to find friends, to learn about each other, to accept each other. Terry was always involved with change, responding to the changes of the times. She said, "We don't know where we are, we're finding our way". Terry's role in ministry and worship changed through the years. She led children's talks, led worship services, including preaching the sermon, and leading Communion. In 2011 Terry was recognized by the congregation and "Called" to become a Licensed Commissioned Minister. She led worship, and Communion, Baptism, and officiated at marriages. She fulfilled a new role within the UCC, with encouragement of Rev. John Zehring. While 'all members are ministers' at South Church, this was a new covenantal level of recognition with the "Laying on of hands and Blessing" by the Andover Association, UCC, and by the congregation.

Historically, Communion was only for baptized and confirmed members of the Christian church. Communion was for repentance and forgiveness of sins by Jesus, and thanksgiving for God's care and abundance. At South Church Communion was traditionally for baptized and confirmed members, but also informally included all people who wanted to take communion; I don't remember a firm demarcation, as all were invited to come. "Come not because you must, but because you may; do this in remembrance of me", were the words of invitation. At South Church members have roots in many different faith traditions and beliefs about the meaning and ritual of communion. The "right way" I was taught was Communion was only for baptized and confirmed members of the church. As a youth in the Episcopal Church, I could not take communion until I was confirmed at age sixteen. Communion was about the forgiveness of sins. Jesus took all my sins, to make me clean. To me this is a complicated theology of substitutionary atonement that as I have grown in faith, I really don't like. The idea of wrapping all my sin and wrongdoing around Jesus' neck for him to bear for me, just doesn't make sense; he's had enough pain and suffering. I don't read that in his words in the bible. Do we take communion for the forgiveness of sin? As I grappled with my faith, and sought help from a pastor, he said to me that God has forgiven humankind long before Jesus; you don't have to believe in substitutionary atonement. God will forgive you. As I have matured, I am so aware of one God, with a triune expression; God, Jesus and Spirit are one. I seek forgiveness on an ongoing basis; God has always forgiven those who ask and seek a better way to live. I take communion to remember Jesus, the Jesus I know from reading the Bible, and the Jesus I have experienced in my life, walking with me and reassuring me that God's grace, love is sufficient; Communion

is to be fed the “Bread of Life”, food for the journey, having my needs met in differing ways at differing times.

I learned while teaching Confirmation classes that people have many different experiences while taking Communion, from feeling included, being part of the family, to profound experiences of the holy, the divine presence. Many questions and conflicting rules and historical practices came to my mind about communion. Can I, can we, change the church traditions? What is the right way to take Communion? Each of us had to discern the way forward; what was more important, old exclusionary rules and beliefs, or inclusive love for all of God’s children?

I went to the Bible to read the actual words found in Matthew 26:28, Mark 14: 22-26, Luke 22:19-20, John 6: 56, and 1 Corinthians 11:24.

“Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, ‘This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.’” (Luke 22:19-20)

As I searched the scripture and placed it back into the context of a Passover seder meal, I heard anew that Jesus was the fulfillment of the Passover, his blood and death was for us, to save us from bondage. After grappling with the scripture, I was reminded of the sacredness of the meal, of remembering, feeling, perceiving Jesus’ presence, guidance, healing, and care in my life, and being thankful. I realize how important it is to be loved and included; that is theology in action.

I ask again, should children be included in the sacramental meal? Jewish children are included and given parts in the Passover seder each year as the family

celebrates. I can imagine Jesus growing up and being included in Seder meals, and Jesus was always inviting children to come to him. Can a young child possibly understand all the communion theology? Are we to invite all children and babies to the table? I believe that children learn as they are included and involved in the repetitive readings of the story of faith and the love of the family, and family traditions. They learn what it has meant to others in the past, and incorporate a deeper meaning as they grow. I decided I am in favor of this change to include children of all ages in our Sacrament of Communion and extend God's grace, presence, and welcome to all.

Terry followed a process within our church; after approval from Sr. Pastor, Cal Mutti, she discussed the idea with the Board of Christian Education, and the Deacons, and had conversations with groups within the congregation. After perhaps a year of deliberation, approval was obtained from the Deacons. The congregation has embraced this new way with warmth and smiles. Terry developed a very successful teaching program for families and children to meet together and learn about Communion and invited the young children to make biscuits before church and serve them at Communion with the help of a deacon. At South Church all people are invited to the Communion table; now children and families take Communion together, setting the example for all ages to be welcoming to all.

## Chapter 5

### **Change to Becoming an Open and Affirming (ONA) Congregation (1997-2004)**

Change to becoming an “Open and Affirming” church, welcoming LGB (lesbian, gay and bi-sexual) individuals to all rites and responsibilities in the church was initiated by a Linda Zimmerman, a life long UCC member whose daughter had just married in a same sex union. Linda was distraught, assuming the church could not announce her daughter’s same-sex marriage in church, the church she had grown up in, that loved and nurtured her. She was angry at the stigma and restrictions in society and in the church.

What followed was the beginning of her mission, with others, to lead South Church in becoming an ONA congregation. “Open and Affirming” is the UCC designation for churches who have decided by vote to welcome all LGB to full membership, rights, and responsibilities of their church. Each church within the UCC decides, as UCC churches are autonomous.

The Open and Affirming process was a major undertaking and commitment, and risk for the whole congregation. It would set a new direction for our church, our theology, identity, mission, finances, friendships, and our radical welcome to all for the future. A great deal was at stake. This change was challenging long held, theological, and cultural beliefs, and Biblical interpretation. There was radical, widespread disagreement over the issue. Some thought homosexuality was wrong, sinful, an abomination. Others thought all people are children of God, loved, and welcomed, created good. I

half-jokingly asked if our steeple would come tumbling down? What is Samuel Philips, our founding Pilgrim pastor, thinking now?

The “Committee for Open Dialog” was formed by Linda Zimmerman and led by Fran Fink, a sympathetic, involved deacon and a small group of committed people which grew in size quickly. Many in the congregation had children or family members who identified with the LGB community and actively supported the initiative. Society, in general, was actively moving to accept LGB people. Our Sr. Pastor, Cal Mutti, was non-committed, an active listener to both sides. The ONA process was totally lay-led by members committed to welcome all LGB people, to broadly widen the welcome statement to clearly state the inclusion to all boards, committees, teaching, staff, rites and sacraments at South Church.

The committee worked for over six years organizing small and large informational gatherings. There were educational events, speakers, panel discussions, and presentations. One panel presentation had church members representing each side of the issues. Another panel was made up of local experts, psychologists, and religious leaders from outside the congregation. All the issues were talked about, including “saving” people from being gay or lesbian, with conversion therapy. Books were read together and discussed, including *The Good Book* by Peter Gomes,<sup>69</sup> about LGB issues and the Bible, and forums were held about what the Bible said about homosexuality .

Personally, for me, this was a time of discernment; I am very open minded, letting people just be people, whoever that might be, but unsure what to think about gays and lesbians when I add God into the picture and I have to vote. Isn't homosexuality just

---

<sup>69</sup> Peter Gomes, *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart*. (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollinsPublishers, Inc, 1996).

wrong, against nature? Doesn't the Bible say homosexuality is an abomination? What really does God, Jesus think? Can I just make it up, what authority do I have to decide one way or the other?

I took advantage of the variety of events to learn about the LGB issue. I attended all the meetings and presentations, panel discussions and listened. Additionally, I utilized book groups, Bible study, Faith Forum, prayer, as well as had many private conversations with friends and strangers. Culturally, I was very accepting of homosexuality; that's the way some people are wired. But, what did the Bible say about this? How would I vote, was it okay to vote yes? Growing up, I assimilated from my culture that sex should be between two consenting married adults, male and female, and the Bible said homosexuality was wrong. I was grappling with my faith and my culture, and my authenticity. I was a nurse working on an HIV team, caring for people of diverse sexual expressions and practices, and affirming them. My nursing career has been a calling, inspired by Jesus' story in Matthew 25:35-46 of caring for the least of these, "Whatever you did for the least of these, my brothers, you did for me". Can I do this job and think that they are living in sin? Can I worship a God who would exclude them? Is it right to welcome them into my church, but not allow them to teach Sunday school, be a deacon, or become a pastor? Finally, can I change my beliefs and my church? Can I understand my beliefs in a new way?

Reading and studying *The Good Book*,<sup>70</sup> by Peter Gomes, minister at Harvard's Memorial Church in Cambridge MA, helped me understand what the bible says about homosexuality, actually, what it doesn't say, according to Gomes. He picks out the "hard texts", texts that are used to stigmatize and alienate those that identify as homosexual.

---

<sup>70</sup> Gomes, *The Good Book*.



He uses his exegetical skills to discuss each text, setting them into the context of their meaning of their era for both Old and New Testament. He interprets the Sodom and Gomorrah story in Genesis 19:1-9 historically, examining many Biblical texts describing the sin of Sodom as arrogance, inhospitality, pride, not caring for the poor, and that homosexual rape, or any rape, in any situation is an abomination. There is more to this story than is easily discerned, especially with all of its bad reputation and known interpretation (150-230). In Leviticus 18:22, the word “abomination”, refers to not “being pure in heart” to Gentiles living in a “frontier society” with lots of purity laws to protect a new fragile society, for nation building. Gomes states that we no longer are this fragile society, that we no longer follow many of these rules, homosexual activity is just one of this very long list(153-4). He discusses them in the context of today’s world and culture (145-172). Seen in this new light and understanding, he reconciled the texts for me.

I attended all the meetings and presentations, panel discussions and listened. I learned many of my friends had gay or lesbian children. I heard their stories of loving their children, not abandoning them. I had known these children as they grew up in the church. I heard the stories of families whose children were mistreated and alienated.

Culturally, I was welcoming from the beginning, but uncertain if that belief could be reconciled with the Bible. My final decision was based on several things. First, on having several gay or lesbian friends, second, on reading and studying Peter Gomes’ book, *The Good Book*, and reconciling the “hard” Bible texts for me, as I said before. And third, two Biblical texts are also central in my decision making process, the Genesis creation story in which God created all things and proclaimed all creation good, and the

loving, affirming words of Psalm 139 for all humankind, that we all are known and created good by a loving God.

<sup>1</sup> O Lord, you have searched me and known me.

<sup>2</sup> You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away.

<sup>3</sup> You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways.

<sup>4</sup> Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely.

<sup>5</sup> You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.

<sup>6</sup> Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.

<sup>13</sup> For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb.

<sup>14</sup> I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works that I know very well.

<sup>15</sup> My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

<sup>16</sup> Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed. (Psalm 139)

After reading and studying with the group, I decided that welcoming gays and lesbians, the LGB community, people of all sexual expressions was the right thing to do. Jesus' demonstrated inclusive love for all. I believe that Jesus would welcome the LGB community to his table, as he welcomed all who came to him.

The Open Dialog Committee met for over 5 years with the goal to come to a consensus; it was not the intention of the Committee for open dialogue to vote before people were comfortable. However, because of a major building project and an on-going capital campaign drive, someone within the church council demanded a congregational

vote be taken at the up-coming Annual Congregational meeting. Members wanted to know what to pledge, or if to pledge to the campaign, because they would leave if the vote went the wrong way. Church members on both sides of this question were threatening to leave the church, if the vote did not go their way. There was a great deal of anxiety on both sides, turnout for the vote was overwhelming, the sanctuary and the balconies were packed. At the 293rd Annual Meeting of South Church on Jan. 28, 2004, The congregation voted to be an Open and Affirming Congregation of the United Church of Christ.

Julie Pike, in her book, *The history of South Church in Andover*, wrote,

This decision concluded a five-year process of discussion and dialog. The vote affirmed and welcomed all persons into the full life and ministry of the church including all rites and sacraments, with no distinction made regarding sexual orientation, race, economic status, age or physical ability.<sup>71</sup>

Pastor Emeritus, Rev. Dr. Cal Mutti wrote in an email to me:

The vote outcome was 240-yes and 161-no. While a prior motion was made and seconded to require a 2/3 majority for acceptance, the motion was ruled out of order by the parliamentarian,... The church bylaws specified a simple majority requirement for such actions to be approved. And so it was. While it is true that our losses included somewhere between 70 to 100 adult persons (most active and some potential) plus their children the actual number of formal resignations was between 30-40.<sup>72</sup>

It was painful, tearful, to lose close friends, sisters in brother in faith, who I had worked with, taught with, served with, worshiped with as we loved and supported each other on life's journey. I know they have found new congregations to join. We have had

---

<sup>71</sup>Julie Pike, *The History of South Church in Andover Massachusetts*. (North Reading, MA: Cheshire Press, 2011), 145.

<sup>72</sup> Rev. Dr. Cal Mutti, email to me, June 25, 2021

a whole new influx, over the years, of people joining us in the wider welcome, bringing new understanding and energy.

We continue to live into the LGB covenant, with an expanding understanding as we welcome new members with different gender expressions resulting in rewriting our mission statement to include welcoming all gender identity and gender expressions. Recently, we added more letters to the acronym, becoming LGBTQ+ (adding transgender, queer, plus) as we have welcomed Renee Manning, a “T” into our congregation.

A new Statement of Welcome was written:

We are a Christ-centered community that celebrates the love of God.  
Although we are of varied minds, we are one body, bound together in Christ.  
We recognize the uniqueness of every individual as God’s beloved child.  
We seek to respond faithfully to God’s call for justice for all creation.  
We strive in word and deed to be faithful to Jesus’ model of loving acceptance.  
We seek to create a sanctuary where all will know they are welcomed and included.  
You are welcomed, no matter your age, gender, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, marital status, race and ethnicity, physical and mental ability or economic circumstance, into full life and ministry of South Church, including worship, sacraments, and rites.  
We grow together in God’s love.<sup>73</sup>

LGBTQ+ groups and support groups meet at South Church and have organized Interfaith LGBTQ+ groups. The first gay marriage in the sanctuary was held on July 16, 2005. We have a colorful “Pride” group who join in local pride celebrations. We have many members, adults and youth, and friends who fall into this category and blend into the congregation, unidentified, known only to God, or as they desire.

---

<sup>73</sup> South Church Welcome Statement posted in the narthex of the church.

Additionally, Renee Manning, a transgender member, has joined South Church and has expanded and enlightened our understanding of transgender people with her totally open position of “ask me anything”. She sings bass in the choir, and is willing to share her life story with anyone who wants to hear. She knows herself to be a beloved child of God, a girl, since age four. It is transformational to know and understand a person who is living this different journey. Rev. John Zehring, pastor (2009-2014), encouraged her to respond to her call, to be a voice of transgender people. She has completed her Master of Divinity degree at Andover Newton Theological Seminary and is in the final process of becoming an ordained minister in the UCC. She is a transformational spokesperson for transgender people struggling in today’s world, and for all who are trying to understand.

Has being ONA changed our church? We think, I think, only in positive ways, personally, spiritually and in community. I have learned so much about diversity, to be open to others, to listen to others, to find common ground, to see God and Jesus in others, to truly believe that we are all created good, in all sexualities, and are loved unconditionally by God. I have grown spiritually. I want to stand up and shout, don’t you understand? We are one humanity, we need to learn to love and live together peaceably. We are more aware of the need to be open to all diversity, welcoming, and embracing all of humanity, whatever you believe, or doubt, whoever, or wherever you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here.

## Chapter 6

### Change: Declared to be a “Progressive” Church-(2015)

#### Dana Allen Walsh and Progressive

Rev. Dana Allen Walsh, first female Senior Pastor at South Church, proclaimed it to be a “Progressive Church” on Sunday, July 18, 2015. I was ecstatic! Someone finally claimed this! This change process has a name. I have grappled with many changes through the past twenty-five years wondering what do we believe, what am I supposed to believe, what is the right way, what do I base my decisions on in my leadership roles, what do I teach the youth? How do I explain, defend, my faith to my family and friends? Can I really make these changes? I have been off the edges of my faith journey map, feeling my way along in unknown terrain. Now, perhaps, there is an extended map to help plan the way. There is comfort in knowing that others are on this journey also.

The UCC has been encouraging change for years, but I have never heard any particular change described, except for encouraging churches to become “Open and Affirming” congregations. I have never heard “progressive” used to describe us. I have been searching the website, “progressivechristianity.org”, for fifteen years or more, for ideas, for books and videos, teaching materials for Faith Forum, our adult Sunday morning study group, but I was uncertain about the website because no one else seemed to be aware of it or identified with Progressive Christianity. Progressive Christianity was an emerging idea, not yet named until 2004. Our group has studied books by Marcus Borg, and video series by Living the Questions, and Bible studies by Bishop John Spong before this time. Together, we have searched, studied, prayed, and grown together in a loving community, sharing leadership, choosing diverse topics to

study, according to the group's interest, still including the Bible. We have developed a "Green" advocacy and a social justice focus as well. I have wondered where we are going, is someone with a vision leading the way? Now I ask, what does it mean to be "progressive?"

Dana's leadership has been all about change, in good ways; she is innovative in worship and in life. We learned to expect change; it started with her welcome statement! This new welcome statement is now used at most worship service and gatherings:

Welcome to you whether you're young or old – and a little bit of each.  
 male or female, – and a little bit of each.  
 queer or straight, – and a little bit of each.  
 fearful or hopeful – and a little bit of each.

Wherever you are on life's journey, you are welcome at South Church.<sup>74</sup>

She continues to surprise with change, even with her "Diva" clothing, classy thrift store finds, designer dresses, and sneakers with white pom poms, or shiny red spike heels under her liturgical robe. She really dislikes being described by her clothing, but it is an outward sign of her vibrant, innovative, alive spirit.

She invited the Rev. Alex Shea Will to join her ministry team. He was our first "settled", openly gay, associate pastor, a colorful spirited leader, always doing a new thing. Dana is a young mother, building her family, building programs for young mothers and babies, young children, and attracting young new members, and building a future for progressive church. She listened to Hooks Johnston, a long involved leader of South Church, when he identified the need for a new vision and plan for South Church. She developed a team, "ONCET", Our Next Chapter Exploration Team, and worked with

---

<sup>74</sup> "South Church Welcome", southchurch.com, August, 2021.

them to lead the congregation to develop South Church's vision and mission for the future which I will describe in the next section.

I asked Dana about changes at South Church during her six years of leadership. She answered succinctly:

My short answer to your question is that rarely have changes come from me. They've often been organic to South Church, rising up out of the congregation. My work is to listen well -- to our people and to the Spirit and to give voice to what I see and hear. God is always doing a new thing and nostalgia can be a dangerous force in churches. I believe in the notion of "traditional innovation" -- we have 310 years of history and tradition and at the same time, we need to lean into God's creativity and innovation.<sup>75</sup>



76

---

<sup>75</sup> Rev. Dana Allen Walsh, Email from May 23, 2021.

<sup>76</sup> Picture used with permission of Rev. Dana Allen Walsh.



Pastor Dana's Newest Welcome on South Church website:

Our traditional tall, white steepled church stands as a beacon in Andover, yet we connect with visitors and members from across the Merrimack River Valley and beyond. We are a diverse congregation with a rich mix of young and old, gay and straight, single and partnered, believer-since-birth and spiritual-but-not-religious.

If you're wondering what to do next, worship with us on a Sunday. Sit in our pews or watch our worship service [on YouTube](#) and experience the diverse mix of people, the vibrant music, the inspiring preaching, and the wide array of activities. And if it feels like the right spiritual home for you, or if you have questions and want to learn more, don't hesitate to be in touch. God's peace on your search for a church home, we'd love to see you here, Dana.<sup>77</sup>

### **Now I Ask, What is Progressive Christianity?**

I asked Dana for advice, for help understanding Progressive Christianity. She recommended two books, *Emergence Christianity*, by Phyllis Tickle, and *Beyond Resistance*, By Rev. Dr. John Dorhauer, General Minister and President of the United Church of Christ. Additionally, I will include *Transforming Congregational Culture*, by Anthony B. Robinson, and books by and Brian McLaren, and Marcus Borg, theologian, who has influenced me for many years.

Progressive Christianity is part of Emergence Christianity, a movement, not yet a religion or a defined entity. It is change happening independently, in various places and ways. Phyllis Tickle in *Emergence Christianity* states:

The Great Emergence is an across-the-board and still accelerating shift in every single part and parcel of our lives as members in good standing of twenty-first century Western or westernized civilization. Intellectually, politically, economically, culturally, sociologically, religiously, psychologically—every part of us and how we are and how we live has... been reconfiguring over the last century and a half (25). As Christians...we are watching the formation of a new presentation of the faith (28).

---

<sup>77</sup> "South Church Welcome", southchurch.com,, accessed 1/16/22.

John Dorhauer, in *Beyond Resistance* states when describing new emerging paradigms:

Something fundamental shifted, something very basic. What happened wasn't just a tweaking of what came before...something was fundamentally different...When that new way is clearly identified, the world will forever distinguish what was and what will be(63).

He believes that the emerging church will be something distinctly different from the present church. The foundational structure will be changed, no longer “sola scriptura”, but he doesn't know yet how or what. He resonates with Phyllis Tickle who postulates that the Holy Spirit may be the foundation. It is an emerging option that will be written three hundred years from now in retrospect (71-73).

Progressive Christianity uses the modern media in all ways, and is a web itself of connections; some churches and groups meet on the web, have Bible studies on the web, others are organizers and connectors. I have included two examples from websites. ProgressiveChristianity.org. is a movement itself, a facilitator; it provides resources, books, information, progressive children's curriculum, a blog, the “Eight Points Poster” which I have included, and so much more.<sup>78</sup>

Also, for another fuller expression of Progressive Christianity, The Phoenix Affirmations can be found on the Progressive Christianity website.<sup>79</sup>

---

<sup>78</sup> ProgressiveChristianity.org.

<sup>79</sup> “The Phoenix Affirmations Full Version”: ProgressiveChristianity.org, accessed 1/16/22.

## By calling ourselves progressive Christians, we mean that we are Christians who...

- 1 Believe that following the path and teachings of Jesus can lead to an awareness and experience of the Sacred and the Oneness and Unity of all life;
- 2 Affirm that the teachings of Jesus provide but one of many ways to experience the Sacredness and Oneness of life, and that we can draw from diverse sources of wisdom in our spiritual journey;
- 3 Seek community that is inclusive of ALL people, including but not limited to:
  - Conventional Christians and questioning skeptics,
  - Believers and agnostics,
  - Women and men,
  - Those of all sexual orientations and gender identities,
  - Those of all classes and abilities;
- 4 Know that the way we behave towards one another is the fullest expression of what we believe;
- 5 Find grace in the search for understanding and believe there is more value in questioning than in absolutes;
- 6 Strive for peace and justice among all people;
- 7 Strive to protect and restore the integrity of our Earth; and
- 8 Commit to a path of life-long learning, compassion, and selfless love.



"The 8 Points" (version 2011)  
The Center for Progressive Christianity  
ProgressiveChristianity.org

80

<sup>80</sup> "Progressive Christianity Eight Points Poster", Progressive Christianity.org, 2011, Version, modified on July 16, 2013, by ProgressiveChristianity.org, <https://progressivechristianity.org/resources/8-points-poster-12x15/>.

Also, I include some of the church website from the Bethel Congregational United Church of Christ, Beaverton, Oregon, outside of Portland, Oregon, which I have condensed.

#### WHAT IS PROGRESSIVE CHRISTIANITY? Origin of Progressive Christianity<sup>81</sup>

Progressive Christianity is described on Bethel Congregational United Church of Christ website, Beaverton, Oregon, outside of Portland, Oregon. I have copied some of it here.

In keeping with our 'reformed and reforming' identity, we have embraced a movement that began in 2006 called Progressive Christianity. The movement was a part of a larger movement called "the emerging church." At the heart of these movements was the desire to articulate a way of being Christian that was an alternative to the Christian faith portrayed in the public realm. The leaders of Progressive Christianity had grown weary of defining their Christian faith in negative terms: "We aren't fundamentalists. We don't believe the Bible is the inerrant or infallible word of God. We don't agree that Creationism should replace the science of evolution in public schools. We don't believe that God hates gays. We don't believe that people of other faiths are going to hell unless they convert to Christianity. We don't deny the right of women to choose what happens to their bodies."<sup>82</sup>

#### **Biblical Foundation:**

**The Bible is read** at every one of our progressive Christian worship services and is the foundation of our beliefs, faith, and values. Progressive Christian Beliefs Are Rooted in Jesus.

**We believe in the Trinity:** God the Creator, Jesus the Christ, and the Holy Spirit. We believe that Jesus' commandment to "love one another as I have loved you" is foundational. We are more comfortable acting on our faith than talking about it.

**Saint Francis of Assisi's wisdom:** "preach the gospel always, and when necessary use words" resonates deeply. We believe that Christian faith is a journey, not a destination. We think of ourselves as "work in progress" Christians.

---

<sup>81</sup> "What is Progressive Christianity?" Bethel Congregational Church, accessed May 24, 2021, <https://www.bethelbeaverton.org/progressive-christianity>.

<sup>82</sup> "What is Progressive Christianity?"

**We believe that God's will and way were revealed in Jesus** of Nazareth. We believe that the historical Jesus, the Jewish Rabbi carpenter who lived in ancient Palestine, became the Christ as his followers encountered him in their midst after his earthly death. The Holy Spirit awakened them to the power of Jesus' presence in their midst. Jesus came alive when they trusted that his love, guidance, support, comfort and challenge remained with them even though his physical body did not. Jesus' life, death and resurrection provide the inspiration and challenge for us to live as followers of Jesus today".<sup>83</sup>

### **Our Progressive Beliefs**

1. The Christian faith is founded on three primary calls we see through Jesus; To love God, to love our neighbor, and to love ourselves.

2. The Christian faith is our way of being faithful to God. But it is not the only way. Christianity is the truth for us. But it is not the only truth. This principle stems from the reality of the 21st century. We share our lives with people who are Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist. We experience these people as loving and caring by following their religious traditions. To deny that is to deny that God can only draw people with one way. That simply isn't born out in our experience.

3. Love of God involves all aspects of life, not just human life. Care of the Earth and its ecosystems is an expression of Christian faith and stewardship.

4. Love of Neighbor means extending kindness and care...To those in our family and in our local and global communities. Further, love of neighbor includes affirmation of the LBGTQ community, immigrants, people of other faith traditions and even those who are enemies.

5. Love of self means engaging in spiritual disciplines, worship, prayer, music, study of the Bible and other literature feeds the mind, heart and spirit. Love of self also includes giving time for rest, recreation, nurturing friendship, a healthy diet and physical exercise. Love of self requires humility and humor.<sup>84</sup>

---

<sup>83</sup> "What is Progressive Christianity?"

<sup>84</sup> "What is Progressive Christianity?"

## **Phyllis Tickle and The every 500 year “Rummage Sale”**

Phyllis Tickle writes about Emergence Christianity, its roots, and its progression over the last 160 or more years. She continues by tying the changes into a longer, two thousand year history of church evolution. Tickle describes how change has been happening and is ongoing, changes are in response to great changes within the culture, economic, political, technological, social times. A main theme of Tickle’s is that culture and religion are intertwined. “One of the function of religion is to inform, temper, and counsel society in which it exists, just as surely is every religion informed and colored by it’s hosting society”<sup>85</sup>

Tickle’s states that approximately every five hundred years for the past two thousand years, the church has gone through a major upheaval and change, she calls this the church’s “rummage sale” with cultural change intertwined. She predicts now, the next upheaval and change is happening, “The Great Emergence”. It is well over five hundred years since the Great Reformation. I have summarized her theory starting at the birth of Jesus and the beginning of the Christian era:<sup>86</sup>

***The year 0 “Great Transformation”, Jesus’ birth***, Christianity emerged from Judaism to inform everything about us in the West, whether religious believers or not”. Time was reordered to start our modern calendars. Christianity grew and spread.

***476 “Great decline and fall of the Roman Empire”***, breaking up the amazing accomplishments of the Romans; roads and transportation, communications, literacy, knowledge and wisdom. Christianity grew, especially in monasteries.

---

<sup>85</sup> Phyllis Tickle, *Emergence Christianity: What it is, Where it is Going, and Why it Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012), 18.

<sup>86</sup> Tickle, *Emergence*, 17-21.

***1000-“Great Schism”, the eleventh century split between Rome and the Eastern Orthodox Church*** over the definition of the trinity,—preceded by one hundred and fifty bloody years of changes,...“militarily, economically, culturally, linguistically, intellectually, and of course religiously”. Christianity grew and spread now from two world centers.

***1517 The “Great Reformation”, Luther challenged the pope’s authority***

cultural and economic changes —Nation-states emerged from fiefdoms— rising merchant class—need for a literate population, —capitalism was birthed, —new worldwide shipping began,—the physical world is understood in a new way. Christianity grew and spread becoming more diverse and widespread.

***2000, according to this cycle, it is time for the next big change***, highlighting the every five hundred year major shift of religion and society.<sup>87</sup>

Tickle states this most recent upheaval was started in 1868 with a challenge to Papal authority, by the Anti-slavery movement, the Civil War, and the Darwin’s theory of Evolution. Vatican 1, declared papal infallibility to maintain power and at about the same time in 1879-95, a group of Americans, called the “Believers” or the Committee of Biblical Conservatives gathered at the Niagara Bible Conferences. This group, feeling biblical inerrancy was threatened by Darwinism and the abolishment of slavery, formulated five principles of faith that they considered were non-negotiable called “Dogma”:<sup>88</sup>

---

<sup>87</sup> Tickle, *Emergence*, 17-21.

<sup>88</sup> Tickle, *Emergence*, 39.

“The inspiration of the Bible by the Holy Spirit, absolute Biblical inerrancy as factual reportage;  
 The historicity of the virgin birth;  
 The doctrine of the crucifixion and death of Jesus as the atonement of sin;  
 The physical and attestable reality of the bodily resurrection; and the historicity of  
 The recorded miracles of Jesus”.<sup>89</sup>

Tickle continues that Evangelicalism and Protestantism would wrestle with the fundamental beliefs over the next one hundred and fifty years.<sup>90</sup>

“Once such an upheaval had begun, there was no stopping the evolutionary lurch forward in human complexity, not to mention every part of human life, especially its moral, spiritual, emotional, and religious parts .”<sup>91</sup>

In *Beyond Resistance*, John Dorhauer states the theme of his book about people changing, that “there will be those whose orientation to the new will be resistance at all costs. There are going to be those whose orientation to the new will be acceptance. Either way, a call to what you believe is essential.”<sup>92</sup> He is referring to Tickle’s rummage sale and that it is necessary to discern what is essential to Christianity. The book is about going “beyond resistance” to finding a new paradigm for Christianity.

Marcus Borg, in *The Heart of Christianity* asks, what is the “Heart” of Christianity? What is deeper than a set of ideas or beliefs and gives the power to transform people’s hearts? There are two views now and the emerging church involves specific conflicts with foundational issues: “How to see the Bible, God, Jesus and the

---

<sup>89</sup> Tickle, *Emergence*, 39.

<sup>90</sup> Tickle, *Emergence*, 39.

<sup>91</sup> Tickle, *Emergence*, 33.

<sup>92</sup> John Dorhauer, *Beyond Resistance: The Institutional Church Meets the Postmodern World*. (Chicago, IL: Exploration Press, 2015), 56.



faith, and the Christian life”.<sup>93</sup> Issues that have caused a “paradigm shift”, a new way of being Christian, are the ordination of women, welcoming gays and lesbians and all sexual orientations, to inclusion instead of exclusion, recognizing the importance of justice issues, and reading the Bible historically/metaphorically.<sup>94</sup> Literal reading of the Bible rejects science, subjugates women, rejects different sexual orientations, and emphasizes personal righteousness instead of justice issues. Exclusivism, believing Christianity to be the only way to God, excludes all other faiths and beliefs, and seems unreasonable.<sup>95</sup> While we are moving in new ways, responding to the changes in culture today, we retain the tradition by envisioning it in a fresh way<sup>96</sup>. Borg’s compact definition of the emerging paradigm is “seeing the Bible (and Christian tradition as a whole), as historical, metaphorical, and sacramental...and seeing the Christian life as relational and transformational”.<sup>97</sup>

John Dorhauer states, change is happening; it’s inevitable, a response to the changing culture. The Emerging church “sees the power of the gospel of love, of welcome, of grace, and inclusion, of extending an extravagant welcome to all, as a means to change lives and communities, and to use precious resources to proclaim the gospel”.<sup>98</sup> Dorhauer advises us to make allies of all Christians and like minded people of

---

<sup>93</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: How We Can Be Passionate Believers Today* (NY, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003), 3.

<sup>94</sup> Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*, 1-3.

<sup>95</sup> Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*, 16.

<sup>96</sup> Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*, 1-3.

<sup>97</sup> Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*, 13.

<sup>98</sup> John Dorhauer, *Beyond Resistance: The Institutional Church Meets the Postmodern World*. (Chicago, IL: Exploration Press, 2015), 145-6.

all faith communities, all who work for love of neighbor, for peace and justice, for the good of all humanity; we need each other, “no matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, we have need of you.”<sup>99</sup>

In summary, I have read and learned about Emergence and Progressive Christianity for the past year and learned there is a major shift going on within not just my church, but the wider Christian church. It is an ongoing process, begun perhaps as long ago as one hundred and fifty years, and is still developing. Churches meet in different places, rented buildings, pubs, theaters, yoga studios, parks, or on the internet with no building, or in traditional church buildings and cathedrals as before. They may be small gatherings or mega-churches, or huge yearly concerts. They may be monastic. Theology and practice vary widely with opposing views, but not causing friction as there is no overarching governing body or control. Groups are independent and probably unknown to each other. Churches have differing structures; some remain within their judicatory heritage church while embracing emergence ethos, while some are collaboratively organized or are on a website with shared leadership.<sup>100</sup>

There are widely varying expressions of Emergence Christianity evolving in response to the postmodern culture, with different expressions, especially deinstitutionalization, living into the scientific, postmodern, technological, computerized age of globalization, instant knowledge, and access. Postmoderns challenge authority and hierarchy, rules, dogma, and creeds.<sup>101</sup> Church structure, pastoral education and

---

<sup>99</sup> Dorhauer, 153-4.

<sup>100</sup> Janet Clarke, Seminar paper, May 2021, 39.

<sup>101</sup> Tickle, *Emergence Christianity*, 130-2.

leadership are under scrutiny.<sup>102</sup> Social Justice, climate change, human diversity and sexuality are cultural issues of importance. Dialogue and open conversations are needed in this globalized world, with “triple citizenship”<sup>103</sup> now in the church, the state, and the electronic world.<sup>104</sup>

It’s no wonder that I felt lost in the process of change, as we have made changes at South Church one at a time, as we discerned our way forward, always responding to the changing times and needs of our own congregation. There truly is no right way, or right belief, or someone telling us how or what to change. Now I see trends and a whole spectrum of ways to express God and find meaning for my life. My way of being an active part of a faith community, worshiping, studying, praying, learning together, listening for the leading of God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit has been authentic and valid for me. And surprisingly to me, the outcome is similar to the process of so many others.

---

<sup>102</sup> Dorhauer, 88.

<sup>103</sup> Tickle, *Emergence Christianity*, 129-137.

<sup>104</sup> Tickle, *Emergence Christianity*, 129, 134-137.

## Chapter 7

### **Change: Rewriting our Vision and Mission Statements by a Congregational Process Led by “ONCET” (2017-2019).**

### **Change: Rewriting of Operational and Governance Systems of the Church to Include Rewriting By-laws, with Progressive Goals<sup>105</sup> (2018-2022+).**

The last chapter described the changing church. Progressive and Emergence Christianity is set within a myriad of cultural changes. This chapter describes South Church’s reorganization in order to survive and thrive in the new millenia in the midst of these changes, creating new vision and mission statements, and new operational and governance systems and by-laws.

Hooks Johnston, a previous moderator of South Church, a past MACUCC Board Member, a forty year active church member, life long Christian, and a corporate business leader, initiated the process, discerning the need for new church vision, mission statements and new governance structure and by-laws. He thought that we needed to overhaul the planning and budget process, not to set the financial goal each year by the Trustees budget requirements. Additionally an Action Plan should be developed setting out our goals and next steps. I am unaware of a previous vision or mission statement, but we probably had one. He hired a Minister of Giving to work with the Giving Committee to set five year goals for growth, maintenance, staff, and all needs, as a corporation would do. Hooks felt that giving represents the health of the church, and is a mirror of the spirit of the church: healthy church equals healthy

---

<sup>105</sup> In a Seminar paper for RTS 5601G I wrote about changes at South Church including the ONCET Vision and Mission process and the governance restructuring and by-law writing with interviews with members of the two teams. The document is unpublished and is available upon request from me at janetrn45@gmail.com.

generous givers. Hooks spoke with Dana, senior pastor and made his plea for a major new vision, mission and structure plan.

These changing times required developing a new structure and rewriting the church by-laws to fit with the postmodern culture. Twenty-first Century Culture changes are described by Albert Nolan in *Jesus Today: A Spirituality of Radical Freedom*. Postmodern people reject authority, institutions, and the established church. It is the age of skepticism; everything is being questioned. There is a loss of cultural heritage and traditional values, a loss of confidence in our government and economic systems. People were not joiners, people were highly technologically oriented, they questioned authority, and tradition, and had little or no church background, or had been hurt by a previous church. It was difficult to get new people engaged. Scandals have rocked the church. Decreasing numbers of people are attending church and organized religions. But, there is an increased interest in spirituality, a hunger for spirituality...Many claim to be spiritual, but not religious. Postmoderns have found interest in the past mystics, yoga, spiritual practices, Christian meditation, and centering prayer and are looking for connection, while rejecting dogma and doctrine(14). Nolan identifies postmodern characteristics of self-sufficiency, individualism, careerism, and feverish business. Egoism, selfishness, obsession with money and wealth are destructive problems (16).

This reorganization will be a major undertaking involving the whole congregation, asking who we are, what our core values are, what are we good at, what changes are needed, and who do we want to become? The goal was to develop a vision and mission statement that is like a logo, authentic and easily remembered.

The Rev. Dr. John Dorhauer, General Minister and President of the United Church of Christ, in his book, *Beyond Resistance*, stresses,

The church is about one thing: its mission. We are called into being for a purpose... Owning one's mission with clarity, with passion, with purpose, and with intention is, I believe, what will keep the Church alive and vital and relevant. It is where the Spirit invests herself. She invites churches, their leaders and members to trust her and to go where they are sent(33).

Each church needs to clearly know its mission and vision to be a successful congregation(33).

### **ONCET: Our Next Chapter Exploration Team (2017-2019)**

The following year Dana formed a team known as the “ONCET, Our Next Chapter Exploration Team”, to lead the congregation in identifying its core values, write a new Vision and Mission Statement, and formulate an Action Plan for next steps. The team led by Ted Harris, Lenore Stubenhaus, with four other members, worked with pastors Dana Walsh Allen and Alex Shea Will.

Two consultants from outside the church were hired, Renee Liabraaten, a church consultant specializing in Vision Planning and Jim Mullins, a Strategist Planner for corporate management and visioning. The process took over a year and a half and was extensive. They asked, who is doing bold new things? They gathered advice and information from the Mass Conference and other area churches, large and small, including Rev. Nancy Taylor at Old South in Boston. She asked, “You need to decide, do you want to see your grandchildren baptized, or do you want to turn into a country club?” They developed a strategic plan. They set up Internal and External outreach. They set up focus groups to meet in person with all members of the congregation, sent

out surveys to the whole congregation to learn core values and changes needed, set up workshops and group meeting interviews, and personal interviews, and after worship luncheons. They worked for over a year and a half gathering information from the congregation to know what they thought.

Here is an early description of ONSET's early planning:

As we begin our church and school years, ONCET is beginning it's major work around visioning and planning this fall. We are thrilled to provide you with a few updates on what we have accomplished and what is next for YOU:

1. We have hired two facilitators to help us with visioning and implementation planning.

Jim Hartrich and Renee Liabraaten were introduced on Homecoming Sunday. See bios below. They will combine their experiences in the corporate and church world to guide us and objectively support us on this journey.

2. Deacons, Trustees, and Council have been interviewed to start to document our values and collect our hopes for the future

3. YOUR VOICE will now be captured. Dates to follow next month.

In the month(s) ahead, you will have opportunities to meet either individually or as a group to share your love of South Church and your hopes for our future: big and small. ONCET will host a variety of house gatherings  
Renee Liabraaten will conduct individual and group interviews

4. This Spring, we will translate our vision and goals for the future into a strategic, achievable implementation plan through a church wide action planning process.

The ONCET team worked to identify the core values of South Church and write a new Vision and Mission Statement, and formulate an Action Plan for next steps. After several tries, the new short, meaningful, easily remembered Vision and Mission Statements were accepted.

### **The Vision of South Church**

To boldly embody God's Love and Compassion.

### **The Mission of South Church**

Following in the way of Jesus, we welcome all and actively nurture connections within and beyond our walls that bring meaning and joy in spiritual growth, fellowship, and service.

### **Three Overarching Priorities for South Church**

1. To nurture connections with Individuals through spiritual growth, fellowship, and service
2. To nurture connections with the Community through spiritual growth, fellowship, and service
3. To improve Governance and procedures to be inclusive, efficient and meaningful to those involved (Action Plan).

A major initiative of ONCET was to develop South Church as the "Service Hub " of the town, a place where all can come in and be involved in Service projects, whether one was a member or not.<sup>106</sup>

The Vision and Mission statements were presented for a vote at the semi-annual congregational meeting in June 2019. The congregation had been involved in the process for a year and a half and enthusiastically accepted the new statements. The

---

<sup>106</sup> "Action Plan- Next Steps". South Church ONCET, <https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1wBCI9sUKVDmoExDwrhdoo2yeRYXeWqjXBLiCqSgmJ3E/edit#slide=id.p1wBCI9sUKVDmoExDwrhdoo2yeRYXeWqjXBLiCqSgmJ3E/edit#slide=id.p>



vision statement is widely known, used as a logo, on the web, and in correspondence, on shopping bags, and buttons, and on the Sunday bulletin.

**Change: Reorganization of Operational and Governance Systems  
of the Church to Include Rewriting By-laws, with Progressive Goals  
(2019-2021 and ongoing)**

The operational structure of the church needed to be changed to adapt to the changing times. A new design needed to be created and new by-laws were needed to empower the new operational design. Dorhauer advises: “By-laws are incredibly important documents in the life of the church (152).” “Don’t amend your by-laws....start over and find a church that has just done this and use their document as a template” (153). Good by-laws make mission and vitality possible” (152). He advises developing bylaws that shorten bureaucratic levels of approval, speeding new initiatives into action, promoting vitality, creativity (151-3).

New governance was needed to streamline the structure; council meetings had too many members to run effectively, there were too many committees and some committees' functions were outdated. The need for operational change was long overdue. “The old system wasn’t working”; the Nominating Committee had difficulty filling 200 positions for officers, boards and committees with three year commitments. It was difficult to get people to commit to the usual three year committee assignments. People wanted more flexibility; three years was too long. The system was not flexible to allow new members to immediately work on a committee or volunteer when available. Change was needed to increase church membership and vitality, and to fix the broken Nominating Committee’s recruitment process. Times had changed with women working,

people were busy with kids activities, and fathers were busy with work and kids too. Stores were open long hours and on Sundays, and people worked throughout the weekend, and children had sports commitments.

Marty Mason, Dave Welbourn, and Kate Jagger, three past moderators, with the help of Fran Fink, Amy Hellauer, Linda Zimmerman, and Jenn Hoenig are the present team working on rewriting the church bylaws and formulating the new governance design and structure. Its first draft was created by the team working creatively together. The new governance is the first major governance change in anyone's memory. They gathered information widely, from various sources, other congregations, Super Saturday events, Rev. Wendy van der Hart, Area Conference Minister (ACM), and by-laws from other churches.

Their vision and goals were to design a simple, rational, functional management structure, a system to allow flexibility, to streamline management, while maximizing the number of people involved, and include the opportunity for new ministries to begin, and to spread responsibilities and appropriate decisions out to lay leadership, to free up the senior pastor and associate pastor from being the clearing house for all decisions and initiatives.

In a self designed process, the three past moderators sat down together to develop a simplified structure. These three leaders, with their vast amount of experience and knowledge of the corporate and non-profit working worlds, formulated the new governance design. It was an "organic" process, taking the present system and breaking it down and reassembling it in a streamlined design. They listed all the church jobs they could think of, wrote each on an index card, spread all over the floor, and then

placed them into categories, which evolved into the seven ministry categories in the new governance model.

The outcome is a simplified structure, with a more corporate feel. Members vote each year at the semi-annual meeting, for the executive positions of moderator, treasurer and clerk, as before, and members will still vote for Ministry Team chairs and assistant chairs under a new structure. Boards and Committees are divided into 7 new ministries, Worship, Learning, Congregational Life, Community Service, Finance, Facilities, and Human resources. The ministry chairs, assistant chairs and the executive officers, make up the slimmed down church council who meet and discuss the ongoing church business, and vote on issues not specified as issues which require a congregational vote. The New Governance model was presented to a “Zoom” annual meeting on June 20, 2020 as the church was closed then due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Several zoom informational and discussion opportunities were made available to the surprised congregation, as we had been isolated at home by the pandemic and had not been meeting and worshipping together in our usual manner. After gaining an understanding of what was being proposed and why, and being assured that the structure would maintain the the place of each voting members at the top of the structure, and trusting our church leadership, the new governance was passed by a congregational vote of remotely gathered, electronically connected members for a one year trial. The church by-laws were put on hold. And subsequently, the trial and hold were extended in June of 2021, again with COVID keeping us from meeting together. It was a bold change made during the uncertain times of the worldwide life-threatening pandemic.

A problem still identified is how to design a volunteer system for the 500+ members, including new members? New volunteer software is being developed to facilitate the processes of how to connect, communicate, and include volunteers in a spontaneous manner. The trial new governance has been in use this past year, but COVID has closed the church and most functions. Meetings have been held remotely on zoom, with people not able to gather together. Not much has been normal this year for meetings, volunteer activities or discerning how the new system is working. The work continues trying to identify what is working and what needs modifying. The volunteer system website has been slow to start and teach people to use the system. The process to create new by-laws continues, and to modify the new governance structure as areas of concern are addressed . The new governance system and bylaws will be reviewed, perhaps amended, and voted on in the future by the wider congregation.

Living into being a progressive congregation is South Church's growing edge. Living into the Vision and Mission statements is an ongoing process. Each individual person comes with their own understanding of the process and becoming a progressive church. Living with diversity and doubt is a challenge for all, an evolving process. We continue to work on our governance, bylaws, and living into the concept of the "Service Hub" for the town, as we continue with Habitat for Humanity projects, the Giving Garden, the weekly Farmers Market, and the many service and justice ministries of the congregation. We invite all to come and participate, to be part of the community, whether they want to join the church, or not.

## Chapter 8

### Change in use of UCC Statement of Faith

This summer (2021), I asked our Associate Pastor, Alex Shea Will about our use of the UCC Statement of faith and when we last used it in worship? He stated that he and Dana use it with newcomers meetings, and as a base for the confirmation classes. He couldn't remember when we last used it during worship, not recently. I can't remember either, but probably not since Dana's arrival in 2015. I asked about theological basic belief changes, when did we change, what has changed, and how did that happen? He asked me what I meant. I answered by suggesting things like dogma and the virgin birth. He stated, "What you believe, well, it's not so important today. It's about how you want to live." I was stunned by his response, I hadn't expected it. Then, I realize I hear those thoughts in the welcome statement at the beginning of each worship service: "You are welcome here,... believing or doubting, wherever you are on life's journey, you are welcome here."

Previously, for about twenty five years or more, South Church used the UCC Statement of Faith during special worship services, baptisms, confirmation, and new members joining. It is glued inside the cover of our hymnals purchased in 2000. South Church is a non-creedal church, which means that we do not use traditional creeds, such as the Apostles' or Nicene Creed. In the UCC we do not throw away the ancient creeds, we hold them in reverence as part of our heritage, as creeds of our historical past, having guided many people in their life of faith to knowing God and Jesus.

The UCC Statement of Faith, its development, meaning and use is described and explained by Roger L. Shinn in *Confessing Our Faith*. He states a creed states your beliefs, and that can separate people. Historically, it has been divisive, even deadly.

“The UCC... chose to develop a Statement of Faith, a less rigid, less authoritarian document than a creed.” “The statement would be a ‘testimony’, not a test of faith. ...It is not a basis for heresy trials.” “The UCC makes no claims of infallibility,... or for the right way to state the core of Christian belief” (6-7).

Reciting the Apostles or Nicene Creed was a practice from my Episcopal Church youth, but I have a hard time believing some of those statements and often joked about having to cross my fingers when saying a creed. Upon joining South Church, I was quite happy to make this change to a statement of faith; it is beautifully written, allows one to acknowledge the core ideas of the creeds, and also leaves room for further understanding, doubt and questioning. In this scientific world it is hard to believe in a virgin birth, or bodies rising from the dead. How can I believe these in a metaphorical way or accept them as useful ideas for people in an earlier era? The Nicene Creed and the Apostles Creed were written in the fourth century AD, to solidify a Christian belief system. Although it is hard for me to believe the statements of the creeds, they are deeply infused into my religious memory of the right way to believe, causing a background feeling of warning: not negotiable. While my cognitive brain has learned new scientific information, my central childhood beliefs nag at me, making me feel guilty and uncertain at the same time calling out, “heresy”.

Now, Alex is saying that the creedal beliefs are not that important. I don't have to believe them. I am still surprised. I have been reading and embracing progressive ideas for years, but not really thinking it's okay to outspokenly deny creedal belief and still be

part of this church. I see change happening, but then I don't see change happening. How can it be both ways?

Phyllis Tickle states the five dogmatic beliefs, defining fundamentalism, which the creeds are a major part of, will be the challenge points where Emergence Christianity will disagree over the next century and a half.<sup>107</sup>

This is a radical change for me to really embrace and claim, and a relief too, as I no longer have to try to understand or defend these unbelievable ideas wrapped with complicated theology. I am free to think for myself. I can embrace the Jesus and God I have found reading and studying and praying. I have been held back by my early church teaching of the right and only way to believe to be a good Christian. Can I really question and change? Am I rebellious, heretical? Alex has given me permission to change, to doubt, to grapple with my beliefs and feel confident.

Now, I find almost these exact words in the books I am reading by Dorhauer, Borg, McLaren, and Tickle. They stand out and speak to me again, but now they are real. In the past several weeks I have tried to explain my progressive faith to my family and friends. Christianity is about Love, compassion and kindness; it's not about the virgin birth, or stating creeds, it's about how you live. It is challenging, and shocking to say, as Brian McLaren said, that we are changing Christianity to be more Christian.<sup>108</sup>

---

<sup>107</sup> Tickle, *Emergence Christianity*, 39.

<sup>108</sup> McLaren, *Great Spiritual Migration*, 19.

## Progressive Christianity, If not creeds, then what is important?

Dorhauer quotes a seeker living into her postmodernism,

Christianity is going through a shift of paradigms, from Christianity as a belief, to Christianity as a way of life,...dogma and doctrine and belief, while important, weren't the same as living a life consistent with one's core values (143).

Dorhauer states the church exists for the purpose of mission, and he summarizes his "greatly simplified" ecclesiology on pages 84-85, which I will quote only in part:

I believe that every human being is a child of God, endowed with inherent worth and dignity, and deserving of respect. I believe: God desires us...to be in covenant,... right relationship,... to preserve the common good... to be an agent of God's *shalom*. It (the church) exists so that people will come to understand their fundamental value and worth... and to proclaim the Good News of God's love and acceptance...and God's redeeming and transformative love.

Jesus summed up the law: love your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. Love your neighbor as yourself.<sup>109</sup>

Brian McLaren in *The Great Spiritual Migration*, states Christianity is "branded" wrong. Christianity, as a set of beliefs (that have become problematic), should be known instead, as a "generous way of life, rooted in contemplation, that makes amends for its mistakes and is dedicated to the beloved community for all"(2). He suggests a better way is to experience Christianity is as a loving, healing, reconciling spirit, present within all creation. And to see "the core Christian ethos as creative, constructive, and forward-leaning--an organizing religion,...to learn, to grow, and mature toward a deepening, enduring vision of reconciliation with God, self, and neighbor, enemy, and creation"(3).

---

<sup>109</sup> Dorhauer, 84-85.



Next, I ask what does deleting the creeds mean for my life, a life I have lived trying to understand and live those beliefs? I am angry. Did I throw away my life trying to live by some imaginary tale? What about the whole Christmas story? I struggle with how I can find meaning for the holiday season. I am grieving the loss of a central part of my faith. I find I am unable to delete the entire core of the Christian belief system. I question again who is Jesus and God and how will I express this to others, teach this to others? What is the core of Progressive Christian faith? Who are we becoming?

Prayer brings me back to the reality of my faith journey and my long relationship of seeking God and Jesus. Instantly I find myself at the core of my faith, God's love and grace is real at the center of my symbolic dream labyrinth<sup>110</sup> and Jesus' loving presence and reassurance on the pathway<sup>111</sup> is real. God's Grace and love are sufficient. God's mystical Spirit fills me with love and gratitude for care, presence and guidance, for finding a better way to live with kindness and purpose, to love and be loved, to spread love, to become one humanity. Suddenly a scripture pops into my presence: "Faith, Hope, and Love abide, but the greatest of these is love." (1 Corinthians 13:13)

Borg, in *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, describes my change:

"Secondhand religion,"... being religious means believing in what others have said, believing what the Bible says, and the doctrines of the church

---

<sup>110</sup> In my labyrinth dream the voice of God represented as a golden orb at the center of the labyrinth spoke to me, "You are my Beloved child, I love you. Take my yoke and your burden will be light, and I will wipe away your tears."

<sup>111</sup> While walking and talking with Jesus at Goldsmith Woods, suddenly his face appeared next to me in a "pixelated" form, saying to me, "My grace is sufficient". I was filled with peace, and wonder; what just happened? Did that really happen? Yes.

“Firsthand religion” is a relationship in which the Bible and the teachings of the church point, ... along with life centered in the Spirit, the reality that we call God and the Spirit of God.<sup>112</sup>

I have been transformed, again, found a new way, given courage to believe in what God has led me to understand. I have moved to a firsthand religion as I struggled with my traditional Protestant teaching. Robinson states the purpose of the church is “transformation, to change human lives, ... surrendering ourselves and giving ourselves to God’s love and purpose for our lives”, that change is not a one time event. Change is ongoing throughout one’s life, in the light of God’s grace revealed throughout history.<sup>113</sup>

Marcus Borg continues on transformation:

The gospel of Jesus--the good news of Jesus’ own message-- is that there is a way of being that moves beyond both secular and religious wisdom. The path of transformation of which Jesus spoke leads from a life of requirements and measuring up (whether to culture, to God) to a life of relationship with God. It leads from a life of anxiety to a life of peace and trust. It leads from the bondage of self-preoccupation to the freedom of self-forgetfulness. It leads from a life centered in culture, to life centered in God.<sup>114</sup>

### **Jesus, an example of change**

Borg identifies Jesus as a “spirit person, subversive sage, social prophet, and a movement founder who invited his followers and hearers into a transforming relationship with the same Spirit that he himself knew, and into a community whose social vision was shaped by the core value of compassion.”<sup>115</sup>

---

<sup>112</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith* (NY, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994), 87-88.

<sup>113</sup> Robinson, *Transforming Congregational Culture*, 38-8.

<sup>114</sup> Borg, *Meeting Jesus*, 88.

<sup>115</sup> Borg, *Meeting Jesus*, 119.

Brian McLaren, in *The Great Spiritual Migration*, tells the story of Jesus overturning tables at the temple in John 2:13-22, I think, with the intent of telling us post-moderns that we can reinterpret and expand the meaning of our faith traditions. Jesus did it, we can too. Jesus challenged tradition, beliefs and practices at the temple when he overturned the tables where the sacrificial animals were sold (25-28).

13 The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. <sup>14</sup>In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money-changers seated at their tables. <sup>15</sup>Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. <sup>16</sup>He told those who were selling the doves, 'Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a market-place!'<sup>17</sup> His disciples remembered that it was written, 'Zeal for your house will consume me.'<sup>18</sup>The Jews then said to him, 'What sign can you show us for doing this?' <sup>19</sup>Jesus answered them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.'<sup>20</sup>The Jews then said, 'This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?' <sup>21</sup>But he was speaking of the temple of his body. <sup>22</sup>After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken. (John 2:13-22)

The traditional interpretation is that Jesus was angry about the high price of sacrificial blood, beyond what the poor could afford, and angry at the corruption of the temple priests, and politicians, and the systems of political and economic domination oppressing the masses of people. McLaren posits still another interpretation of the story; Jesus was angry at the Temple's fundamental belief that God was an angry God and needed to be appeased with blood offerings. Perhaps Jesus was trying to do away with all sin offerings. Interpreted in this way, Jesus not only turned over the tables to rebel against religious and political systems of domination, but also the whole Jewish religious belief system. By denouncing the system of sin offerings, and stating the temple would crumble and be rebuilt in three days, McLaren posits that Jesus "rebuilt on

a system of extravagant and generous grace, open to all people devoid of appeasement in any form, a more human way of relating to God, self and one another, and all creation” (27).

McLaren continues suggesting that Jesus was referring to words of the prophets Isaiah, Micah, Amos, and others, requiring not burnt animal offerings, but people acting instead with love, kindness and justice? Isaiah 1:11-17, “Stop doing evil deeds...Learn to do right..seek justice. Defend the oppressed”. Micah: 6;9, “Do justice, to love mercy/kindness, and walk humbly with God”. Amos 5;24, “But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream”.

**Micah 6:6-9.**

<sup>6</sup> With what shall I come before the Lord,  
and bow myself before God on high?  
Shall I come before him with burnt-offerings,  
with calves a year old?  
<sup>7</sup> Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of  
rams,  
with tens of thousands of rivers of oil?  
Shall I give my firstborn for my  
transgression,  
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?  
<sup>8</sup> He has told you, O mortal, what is good;  
and what does the Lord require of you  
but to do justice, and to love kindness,  
and to walk humbly with your God?

**Amos 5:21-24**

<sup>21</sup> I hate, I despise your festivals,  
and I take no delight in your solemn  
assemblies.  
<sup>22</sup> Even though you offer me your  
burnt-offerings and grain-offerings,  
I will not accept them;  
and the offerings of well-being of your fatted  
animals  
I will not look upon.  
<sup>23</sup> Take away from me the noise of your  
songs;  
I will not listen to the melody of your  
harps.  
<sup>24</sup> But let justice roll down like waters,  
and righteousness like an ever-flowing  
stream.

## Conclusion

As I consider the new vision and mission statements South Church has just written, they are clearly written in the spirit of the prophets, Micah, Amos and Isaiah calling for justice and compassion, and to live, to embody God's love with a wide welcome to all to be a part of the community. South Church has embraced a Progressive vision and mission.

**The Vision of South Church:** To boldly embody God's Love and Compassion.

**The Mission of South Church:** Following in the way of Jesus, we welcome all and actively nurture connections within and beyond our walls that bring meaning and joy in spiritual growth, fellowship, and service.

South Church members have traveled a journey of faith together, and continue to travel together in covenant. We have changed, each of us in our own ways, we have become, or are in the process of becoming progressive Christians. We have changed our church. We have chosen to change through worship, study, fellowship and prayer, working side by side to nurture, care for, and love each other with compassion. We are reaching out into our community and the world with love and compassion to make the world a better place to live. We have questioned our belief systems prayerfully, asking for God's guidance and direction. And we have listened for the Spirit, in silence or in song or in whatever creative way the spirit comes.

We often sing the hymn, "Here I am Lord, is it I Lord?" by Daniel Schutte, as a call to each of us to listen for God's call, to serve those in need, with love and

compassion, to send our youth off on mission trips, or recently to ordain our newest pastor.

I, The Lord Of Sea And Sky,  
 I Have Heard My People Cry.  
 All Who Dwell In Dark And Sin,  
 My Hand Will Save.  
 I Who Made The Stars Of Night,  
 I Will Make Their Darkness Bright.  
 Who Will Bear My Light To Them?  
 Whom Shall I Send?  
 Here I Am Lord, Is It I, Lord?  
 I Have Heard You Calling In The Night.  
 I Will Go Lord, If You Lead Me.  
 I Will Hold Your People In My Heart.  
 I, The Lord Of Snow And Rain,  
 I Have Borne My People's Pain.  
 I Have Wept For Love Of Them, They Turn  
 Away.  
 I Will Break Their Hearts Of Stone,  
 Give Them Hearts For Love Alone.

I Will Speak My Word To Them  
 Whom Shall I Send?  
 Here I Am Lord, Is It I, Lord?  
 I Have Heard You Calling In The Night.  
 I Will Go Lord, If You Lead Me.  
 I Will Hold Your People In My Heart.  
 I, The Lord Of Wind And Flame  
 I Will Tend The Poor And Lame.  
 I Will Set A Feast For Them,  
 My Hand Will Save  
 Finest Bread I Will Provide,  
 Till Their Hearts Be Satisfied.  
 I Will Give My Life To Them,  
 Whom Shall I Send?  
 Here I Am Lord, Is It I, Lord?  
 I Have Heard You Calling In The Night.  
 I Will Go Lord, If You Lead Me.  
 I Will Hold Your People In My Heart.

Rev. Dr. John Dorhauer, General Minister and President of the UCC, asks us two questions: can you partner with the Holy Spirit to birth the new movement,...for the sake of the gospel about to be made relevant again by those who understand postmodernity? Can you see postmodern faith leaders *not* as heretics...but instead as friends and allies in a common purpose and cause”(157-8)?

He finishes with UCC quotes and sayings:

“There is yet and still more light and truth to breakforth from God’s Holy Word.” (Pastor John Robinson, to parishioners boarding the Mayflower).”

“Behold, I am about to do a new thing: do you not perceive it?” (Is. 43:19).

“God is Still Speaking.” (The much loved refrain of today’s United Church of Christ).

We at South Church are not heretical, we are following Jesus' lead to envision God's kingdom of love and justice, and compassion, and make that our mission too. We can do this. The story of change at South Church, a large, thriving and growing church, is one positive example of people, disciples of Jesus, working together, listening for God's leading Spirit, to find Jesus anew in the world today. We were not led to become progressive; we were led to be authentic to our innermost beliefs about God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, to live fully in the world today. Progressive Christianity, is a new developing paradigm, a sweeping global movement, and we have found we fit into this emerging spiritual movement redefining Christianity. It is to live a life of faith in God, Jesus, and the Spirit of wisdom of the ages, finding Jesus in today's world and following him there, and to call people of the world together to work for peace, love, kindness, mercy, justice and compassion. We often talk of being "co-creators" with God. We have found mission and meaning for our own lives and the church. We are still working, grappling with issues of faith, we are still being transformed, still working to redefine our governance model, and live into our new vision and mission statements. We are all on a journey of faith together. May it be an encouragement for all who are in this struggle to find meaning, in God and Jesus and the Spirit in changing times.

## Bibliography

- Augustine, *City of God*, New Advent, Fathers of the Church, 19:17, accessed May 12, 2021, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/120119.htm>,
- Bass, Diana Butler. *Broken We Kneel: Reflections on Faith and Citizenship*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2004.
- Borg, Marcus, J. *Conversations with Scripture: The Gospel of Mark*. Harrisburg, NY: Morehouse Publishing, 2019.
- Borg, Marcus, J. *Convictions: How I learned What Matters Most*. NY, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2014.
- Borg, Marcus, J. *The Heart of Christianity: How We Can Be Passionate Believers Today*. NY, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003
- Borg, Marcus, J. *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith*. NY, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994.
- Borg, Marcus, J. *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time: Taking the Bible Seriously But Not Literally*. NY, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001.
- Borg, Marcus, J., and John Dominic Crossan. *The First Paul, Reclaiming the Radical Visionary Behind the Church's Conservative Icon*. NY, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2009.
- “Christian Spirituality”, St John in the Wilderness Adult Education and Formation, accessed 8/20/20, 11/21/21, [http://www.stjohnadulthood.org/spir\\_1.htm](http://www.stjohnadulthood.org/spir_1.htm) .
- Random House Webster's College Dictionary*. Toronto: Random House of Canada, 1991, Cognitive Dissonance.
- Denizen, Norman K. and Yvonne S. Lincoln, Eds. *Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publication, Inc., 1998.
- Dorhauer, John. *Beyond Resistance: The Institutional Church Meets the Postmodern World*. Chicago, IL: Exploration Press, 2015.
- “Forum on Faith: UCC is based on covenants, not hierarchy,” Newstimes, March 4, 2011, accessed Nov. 26, 2021, <https://www.newstimes.com/religion/article/Forum-on-Faith-UCC-is-based-on-covenants-not-1042917.php>,



- Gomes, Peter. *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart*. San Francisco, CA: HarperCollinsPublishers, Inc, 1996.
- “History”, United Church of Christ, accessed May 24, 2021, <https://www.ucc.org/who-we-are/about/history/>.
- Maxwell, Joseph A. *Qualitative Research Design: An Interactive Approach*. Sage Publication, Inc. Thousand Oaks, CA, 2005.
- McGrath, Alister. *Christian Spirituality*. Victoria, Australia: Blackwell Publishing, 1999.
- McLaren, Brian D. *Faith After Doubt: Why Your Beliefs Stopped Working and What to do About It*. New York: St. Martins Essentials, 2021.
- McLaren, Brian D. *The Great Spiritual Migration: How the World’s Largest Religion is Seeking a Better Way to be Christian*. New York: Convergent Books, 2016.
- Nolan, Albert. *Jesus Today: A Spirituality of Radical Freedom*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis books, 2006.
- Pew Research Center, “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace: An update on America’s changing religious landscape.” October 17, 2019. Accessed 1/14/22. <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>
- Pike, Julie. *The History of South Church in Andover Massachusetts*. North Reading, MA: Cheshire Press, 2011.
- “Progressive Christianity Eight Points Poster”, Progressive Christianity.org., 2011, Version, modified on July 16, 2013, by ProgressiveChristianity.org, <https://progressivechristianity.org/resources/8-points-poster-12x15/>.
- PsychologyToday, accessed 9/29/2021, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/cognitive-dissonance>,
- Robinson, Anthony B. *Transforming Congregational Culture*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2003
- Rohr, Richard. *The Universal Christ: How a Forgotten Reality Can Change Everything We See, Hope for, and Believe*. New York: Convergent Books, 2021.
- Shinn, Roger L. *Confessing Our Faith: An Interpretation of the Statement of Faith of the United Church of Christ*. Cleveland, Ohio: United Church Press, 1990.

“The South Church, UCC, Andover, Massachusetts, Annual Report for 1986”, presented at Annual Meeting, January 28, 1987.

Taylor, Barbara Brown. *Holy Envy: Finding God in the Faith of Others*. NY, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2019.

“Theory of Cognitive Dissonance, Psychology Today”, accessed 9/29/2021, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/cognitive-dissonance>,

*The Holy Bible, NRSV: The New Revised Standard Version*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989.

“The Eight Points”, Progressive Christianity.org, accessed May 24, 2021, [TCP-8-Points-2011-web.jpg](https://www.progressivechristianity.org/TCP-8-Points-2011-web.jpg),

Tickle, Phyllis. *Emergence Christianity: What it is, Where it is Going, and Why it Matters*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012.

Tickle, Phyllis. *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012.

Walsh, Rev. Dana Allen, Pastor South Church Andover, July 18, 2015 to present.

“What is Progressive Christianity?” Bethel Congregational Church, accessed May 24, 2021, <https://www.bethelbeaverton.org/progressive-christianity>,

“Who We Are About, UCC Firsts,” United Church of Christ, accessed May 24, 2021, <https://www.ucc.org/who-we-are/about/>.