

A sabbatical journey:

RE-FORMED BY FIRE

**The stories of eight United Church of Christ congregations
with the shared experience of a building fire.**

Tim Devine

July 2017

ST. PAUL'S UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

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Dedicated
to David Anderson,
without whom
the St. Paul's fire recovery
would have been a much more difficult task.

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Prelude

Tim Devine is the pastor of St. Paul's United Church of Christ (UCC) in Seattle, WA. The church experienced a significant fire in late March 2016. This booklet is the result of Tim's sabbatical in June 2017.

In the aftermath of the St. Paul's fire, there was simply just a lot to do. Some folk told Tim to expect to be exhausted, emotional, and even forgetful at times from the real trauma of the event. And some also told him to be prepared to be surprised by all the good and grace-filled moments that would surface as well. And all of this did happen in both expected and unexpected ways.

But something else was going on. Even now, Tim still isn't certain of what it is other than the strong feeling that his ministry at St. Paul's is being separated into a pre-fire and a post-fire journey. Is there some thing we are missing? Is there a new direction that we could be exploring? Are we simply returning to the status quo?

In response to these questions and a basic nagging uncertainty about what is next, Tim set out on this journey to learn from the experiences of others – churches and leaders – all of whom have gone through a fire in their facility. And it was also good for him to be on a physical journey with plenty of time with quiet and solitude, for example going over a hill on a two-lane highway in Nevada or Montana and see the next half-hour (at least!) of the drive mapped out. It was a time of resetting – rebooting – recharging for whatever the next ministry chapter will be.

And, if nothing else, the sabbatical journey honors the covenant connection that we have in the United Church of Christ (UCC) simply by listening to each other's stories, and putting an empathetic voice to each of them. And Tim's hope is to learn from the shared experiences.

Sally Balmer, Pastor (at the time of the fire)

Interview: July 26, 2017

Fire: February 28, 2013

Tim knew about this fire as he and Sally are UCC colleagues and neighbors. The fire is one aspect of a significant series of events that were going on at the time for Pilgrim UCC, and during the sabbatical Tim realized that this story was unique and wanted to include it. So upon return to Seattle, he contacted Sally and they met for him to listen to the Pilgrim story.

The fire at Pilgrim UCC in Anacortes was an arson fire and set in the basement fellowship hall of the church, underneath the Sanctuary. It was set by a person who had been attending a 12-Step meeting in the facility. A few months earlier the church LGBTQ rainbow flag had been repeatedly stolen by a different individual. So, at the time of the fire there was some concern about being targeted for being the progressive religious presence in Anacortes. Over time as the responsible people were identified, and mental health issues were realized, this became less of an acute response and concern.

The building was closed for a period of time, however the Sanctuary only suffered smoke damage, and the fire itself remained on the lower floor. Previous to this, there had been a process of evaluating the future of the church and specifically the building. The structure was old and deteriorating, a challenge for accessibility, and more and more expensive to maintain. And it was complicated. Money had been raised (and some spent) to build an exterior stairway, so any changes or selling the building would have derailed that investment. There were three after-church meetings to explore these issues led by an outside facilitator. One of these was scheduled the Sunday after the fire and the church went ahead with this meeting, held by invitation from the Anacortes Presbyterian church in response to the fire. In retrospect Sally felt that she could “hold the space” for the congregation that Sunday, listen to fears and concerns, and let the facilitator lead the process.

There were strong and differing points of view among the congregation about this, and not everyone was on board with the idea that the building (even before the fire) was becoming a liability. One of the options was to rotate among different worship places exploring those possibilities, but it was decided that the church needed one spot. The 7th Day Adventist church in Anacortes was contacted, as their worship was on a different day, and this arrangement was secured for the duration of the time that the Pilgrim building was closed.

With insurance payment available to clean and restore the Sanctuary, that option became one that was hard to challenge. It was also probably the easiest route to calm the anxiety about the building that was only intensified after the fire. So Pilgrim went forward with restoring the building and continued the process in exploring its future.

In the midst of this time Sally was approached by a neighboring congregation, Guemes Island UCC, about her offering shared leadership to both churches, as both were ½ time positions, and the Guemes pastorate was available. Sally was open to this and shared this request with the leadership at Pilgrim. If Pilgrim was open to exploring this, Sally had suggested that this be tried for a six month experiment, and then re-evaluated. In late April the building reopened and worship returned to the Pilgrim Sanctuary.

One of the realities of such an experiment was that both churches would have to change their worship times. Both could still meet on Sunday mornings, but a ferry schedule was part of the situation, and was a reality that couldn't be negotiated away.

So, at the third facilitated meeting to explore all these issues, in early May, a motion came from the floor on whether or not Pilgrim could change the time for worship. (The presenting issue for the congregation in response to the request from Guemes Island UCC.) It was an anxious meeting and the motion to change the worship time was defeated by one vote. After the meeting Sally took some time to reflect about it and came to the conclusion that she wasn't being an effective leader for Pilgrim. So, after Sally's nine-year pastorate that as a colleague and neighbor Tim viewed as effective, she decided to resign from the pastorate at Pilgrim.

Again, in retrospect for Sally, there was already a lot of anxiety within the Pilgrim congregation and this shared leadership question probably only added more fuel to the anxiety fire.

Sally did resign in June, stayed through July, and later accepted a call from Guemes Island UCC where she is currently serving. After Sally left, Pilgrim did vote to sell the building in mid-2014 and there were folk who left the community because of this. In an unusual step Pilgrim opted to have two years of pulpit supply, without an interim pastor, and chose one of the original worship alternatives – a basement space at the Anacortes Methodist church. Once the building sold and there was “money in the bank,” they called a settled pastor. They continue to meet in the social hall in the Methodist church, but have adopted a new logo and name – New Pilgrims Community UCC – and are working at continuing to be an effective progressive Christian presence in Anacortes in this new chapter of church life.

During the time leading up to Sally's decision to leave, she had a recurring dream. There was first a wall, and then a wall with a crack in it, and then trees and water on the other side of the wall. Over time the dream seemed to move from a barrier to a new chapter where ultimately the message was that all would be OK. For Tim, the dream serves as a metaphor for both Sally and Pilgrim / New Pilgrims. Only by moving through the various barriers that we experience in day-to-day life can we approach the new life that is on the other side.

Bruce Swanson, Pastor (at the time of the fire)

Interview: June 5, 2017

Fire: April 8, 2004

Bruce is a retired pastor and is a long-time friend of Tim's. Tim wanted a practice interview and the perspective of someone who could look back and reflect on an event some time ago. The interview took place where Bruce currently lives in Portland, OR.

The fire occurred on the afternoon of Maundy Thursday. Bruce was driving home from an errand, getting ready to change for the evening service and he heard the news of a church fire on the car radio. Without hearing the specifics he realized that it was First and St. Stephen's – the church (two names from an earlier merger) where he had been the pastor for fifteen years. He also realized that it was a severe event as the radio reported that the road access had been closed.

The Sanctuary and Fellowship Hall were still open and operational (these were never closed during the duration of fire repairs) so they went ahead with the Maundy Thursday service with many folk coming already knowing what had happened. The utilities and electricity were turned off in the educational wing and that part of the building was closed and had sustained significant smoke and water damage.

Amazingly (!), they stayed with Maundy Thursday precedent and departed that Holy Week worship service in silence without discussing the fire. The first real conversation together and processing of what had happened occurred at the Easter breakfast – although between times the phone lines were buzzing!

A few years earlier the church had received a large (\$4½ million) and unexpected bequest, had done a study about building improvements, and there were stages to a subsequent building project. First, there was an electrical rewiring of the entire building. Then 9/11 happened and the decision was made not to do a total renovation until the church knew more about the status of the endowment. Second, about a year later the process was begun towards the rest of the renovations and an upper level addition. It was during this phase that the fire began in a faulty light fixture that had been replaced in a classroom that was being used as a construction office. Because of the building project there were things in basement storage (pews, music, etc.) that were ruined by smoke and especially water damage.

A conflict between the church and the insurance company surfaced as insurance wanted to have two or three bids for property restoration work. The church was already under a legal contract with the construction company doing the ongoing renovations and could not start up with a new company. The church hired an attorney, but the parties came to an agreement before legal proceedings were taken.

Also during the post-fire renovations a staff member was fired by the church as this person disagreed with having all damaged resources going into a general fund rather than having specific resources going into specific funds.

Bruce remembers these issues as headaches during the process but not ones that defined the process. There were church leaders that rose to the occasion, did a lot of work, even developed a sense of humor, and saw the process through. Bruce was the chief fire responder and was grateful that his spiritual and physical discipline of long-distance running (then closing in on 100 marathons) served him well during this time.

The fire ended up being about \$1½ million in damages, and costing the church about \$½ million (including loss of earnings on the investments) when the insurance was finally closed out about three years later. The work itself concluded about a year after the fire, and about sixth months after the original (pre-fire) projected completion date.

Bruce remembers this as a time when the church became more fully diverse, liberal, and even radical in its theological presence. It didn't sit on its unexpected endowment and become cautious, and the membership actually became more egalitarian without any particular financial giver seeking more influence because of their giving.

A highlight was the first Sunday after the work was completed and the building was rededicated with an elevator, ramp and being fully physically accessible. Events at that time also pushed them to work on being fully accessible around other issues including mental illness.

Bruce remembers this as but one of a series of thoughtful responses to a variety of potentially challenging issues in the life of the congregation during his tenure: the disclosure that his predecessor had embezzled funds from church members, Bruce coming out as a gay man, the ONA process with an affirmative vote, the unexpected bequest, and the fire.

The fire was seen as a "glitch" in the building renovations. There was little conflict among the church membership although there was certainly grief. It was a healthy congregation in the midst of great change.

After the fire Bruce understood that new members did not share in the fire experience. There would need to be both reflecting and remembering for those who had gone through it, but a place of welcome and recognition that not everyone shared the story.

Bruce stayed another six years after the fire before retiring from ministry. As a congregation that had developed a sense of humor even in the midst of pain, during the celebration "roast" for Bruce at his retirement party, the church leadership burned a Popsicle church in his honor!

Molly Baskette, Senior Minister

Interview: June 13, 2017

Phil Porter, Minister of Art and Communication

Interview: June 10, 2017

Fire: September 30, 2016

This congregation is one of the largest and most influential UCC churches on the west coast. Tim had known Phil through other UCC connections, and the St. Paul's Church Council had read Molly's book, Real Good Church. Tim attended Sunday worship and a Saturday "Planning for the Next 100 Years" visioning workshop, interviewed Phil, and interviewed Molly in the context of her weekly "office hours" in a local coffee shop with four First Church members present.

The fire began mid-day on a Friday in the upper areas of Pilgrim Hall, a three story structure that housed church offices, meeting rooms, a kitchen, a sexton's apartment, and thrift shop. It was adjacent to the church Sanctuary. There was a roofing project that was going on at this time, and it is suspicious that this happened in the upper part of the structure near where the roofers were working, but as yet no conclusion has been made.

There was significant damage to Pilgrim Hall with the whole building at present just an exterior shell surrounded by scaffolding. There was also some smoke and roof damage which extended into the Sanctuary next door. The congregation worshiped at the First Presbyterian Church of Berkeley (across the street) for a few weeks on Sunday afternoons. Then it settled into worship at a local Berkeley synagogue (Congregation Beth El) on Sunday mornings for about seven months. They returned to the Sanctuary on May 21, about a month before Tim's weekend visit.

The Sanctuary had been renovated in recent memory and there was an intentional decision to mainly keep it as it was before, to return to that familiar worship space, and focus on the rebuilding of Pilgrim Hall.

Molly was in San Francisco and Phil in Oakland when they received texts that there was a chimney fire in Pilgrim Hall, which quickly changed into something much more significant. Both made their way back to Berkeley with Phil realizing the seriousness when he found the street approaching the church closed, and Molly seeing the plume of smoke in Berkeley from the Bay Bridge and realizing that it was from First Church.

Phil is realistic about this being the "new normal" for at least the next three to four years and is hopeful that the church can continue on in its full ministry context, rather than be caught waiting for all things to resume. Wearing his other hat as co-founder of the organization Interplay (www.interplay.org) which has a fluid and improvisational nature, he has had to be able (successfully!) to be adaptable – for example the annual Interplay fundraiser was scheduled to be in Pilgrim Hall the day after the fire.

Molly had been in her Senior Minister position for about five months and had completed meeting over 200 people in small group settings, hearing their stories, and learning about the major issues of the church. So, she had met many folk and the beginnings of trust had been established. Yet, this was a tremendously disrupting event and with that came a sort of freedom for other things (ideas and practices) to be disrupted as well.

There was a fondness among the coffee shop interview members of the worship space in the synagogue, as well as the catered lunch for First Church the first time they met in the Presbyterian church two days after the fire, and many other acts of kindness and support from UCC, ecumenical, interfaith, and local secular friends and colleagues.

A church member from the coffee shop interview, Emma, remembers the unusual experience of being hospitalized at the time (in Berkeley) and seeing the church fire from her hospital room window. Rather than feeling isolated, Emma felt more deeply connected because people rallied to support each other in that moment of deepest need.

Throughout the process all recall the church membership being calm, thoughtful, caring about those who were experiencing grief more deeply, and doing the work to move forward. In Phil's words "turning this into an opportunity." Before the fire there was some thought about a capital campaign with a focus on Pilgrim Hall, as this part of the campus was not accessible and did not meet California seismic requirements for new construction. So the current focus on Pilgrim Hall was not a new idea. And much remains to be decided about sources of funding, what proposals are eventually chosen, and how much insurance will cover.

One particular aspect of community grief has been on behalf of the sexton and his family who had been living in an apartment in Pilgrim Hall. In addition to being relocated and having all of their possessions destroyed, it is looking like the insurance policy does not cover personal items and will not cover their replacement. So there has been a church-wide effort to help out.

Molly shared that early on there were four things that the congregation was asked to do:

- Show up – don't wait until this is over;
- Step up – look for ways to help out;
- Give – keep giving in all the ways that you are able;
- Practice radical self-reliance.

Tim observed these qualities during his weekend visit. The Saturday workshop (with 110 participating) was presented by members of both the Fire Recovery Committee and the Blue Sky (the sky's the limit) Visioning Team. The options presented were done thoughtfully and honestly. For example, simply returning to the pre-fire building would make for a smaller usable footprint with current building codes requiring accessible bathrooms, an elevator, etc.

There was some anxiousness and energy about a previous (pre-fire) plan and the possible letting go of a thrift shop on site. However, rather than being held to the past, the stronger energy was

around looking forward with new uses in the space, being environmentally (LEED) focused, and even using this as an opportunity to let go of a ground level parking area and another structure (Durant House) and open this area up to a developer for affordable housing. The wild card might be in adding another floor to Pilgrim Hall (if that is chosen) this would change the exterior enough so that there would be Berkeley public hearings on this change. It is unknown if this would include historic preservation concerns from outside the church community.

Even in the midst of this strong congregation with an amazing skill-set and work ethic, there was the acknowledgment that there is still community grief. At the time of Tim's visit there was still scaffolding that could be seen from the interior of the Sanctuary, and the Pilgrim Hall shell is clearly visible throughout the campus. For the time being on Sundays after worship there are folks who have been trained as listeners through the BeFrienders (www.befrienderministry.org) program to listen to any church folk who would benefit.

Even though the fire, in Molly's words "broke us open," it has done so in a way that has opened the congregation up to look at the "next 100 years" (as the Sanctuary and Pilgrim Hall are / were about that old). The fire has actually assisted First Church is dealing with the most problematic part of the church campus.

There is much still to decide and then to do, but the staff and congregation seem able to accept that challenge, as seen in the Bible passage chosen to ground the "next 100 years" discussion:

According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it. Each builder must choose with care how to build on it. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— the work of each builder will become visible, for the day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each has done. If what has been built on the foundation survives, the builder will receive a reward. If the work is burned up, the builder will suffer loss; the builder will be saved, but only as through fire. Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.

[1 Corinthians 3:10-17 – NRSV]

Interlude

The actual interviews were done on in the order of Tim's geographical driving route:

- Portland, OR (present location for the pastor retired from Baltimore, MD)
- Vancouver, WA
- Berkeley, CA
- Cannon Ball, ND (on the Standing Rock Reservation)
- Eau Claire, WI
- Sussex, WI

At the end of the official sabbatical time in June, Tim wrote up the St. Paul's story, and later after returning to Seattle and day-to-day life at St. Paul's, interviewed at Pilgrim / New Pilgrims Community UCC in Anacortes, WA.

During the sabbatical month there was quite a drive between interviews in northern California and central North Dakota. And that ended up being helpful. Several years ago Tim attended a continuing education week at the Vancouver School of Theology in Vancouver, BC, Canada. On the first day he was paired with a First Nations woman from coastal British Columbia. They were asked an introductory question by the workshop leader. Tim very dutifully answered, but his partner replied: "I can probably answer that question tomorrow, once my spirit has caught up to my body."

The physical distance between Berkeley, CA and Cannon Ball, ND is matched by the differences in resources between First Church and Memorial Congregational. The long drive was helpful in letting Tim's spirit be ready.

It wasn't intentional, but there were three specific places of preparation:

- On the route he visited Pyramid Lake, Nevada and the Paiute Reservation museum. There was a temporary exhibit on the Dakota Access Pipeline and a statement of support and solidarity from the Paiute Reservation to the Standing Rock Reservation.
- At the Big Hole National Battlefield in Montana he reviewed the long history of broken treaties and promises from (as best he could) a Native perspective.
- At Theodore Roosevelt National Park he noted the irony of a national park honoring the President who founded modern conservationism; literally surrounded today by excavating for coal and oil.

And eventually Tim was ready to leave behind the Berkeley world of People's Park and Telegraph Avenue, and enter the Cannon Ball world of Backwater Bridge and Sacred Stone.

Memorial Congregational UCC – Cannon Ball, ND – Standing Rock Reservation

Mike Kills Pretty Enemy, Pastor

Interview: June 22, 2017

Toni Buffalo, Interim Administrator, Dakota Association

Phone Interview: June 26, 2017

Gordon Rankin, Conference Minister, South Dakota Conference

Phone Interview: June 28, 2017

Fire: October 11, 2015

Tim had heard of this fire from UCC news when it happened and sent a donation for fire recovery. Very little has been mentioned ever since. So Tim was curious about this and especially with the later developments on the Standing Rock Reservation around the Dakota Access Pipeline. So he contacted the pastor, Mike Kills Pretty Enemy, by phone and set up a time to meet. They met on site in Cannon Ball, ND.

Tim met Mike at a gas station on the state highway outside of Cannon Ball, and after getting acquainted for a few minutes, followed him into town. In town Mike drove off the road and into a field that surrounded the site (now just a foundation) of Memorial Congregational Church. Tim followed a bit cautiously with his lack of field driving experience and city car. They stood looking at the remains of the church and spoke for over an hour, with the Great Plains wind being a constant backdrop to their conversation.

Mike explained that he had a “three point charge” (meaning that he had three different churches to serve) with well over a 100 mile commute every Sunday. He lives near McLaughlin, South Dakota, over an hour away from Cannon Ball, North Dakota. He still serves the other two churches (Elk Horn UCC and Pine Little Eagle UCC), teaches at the local community college, and takes care of about 40 horses. He was originally Roman Catholic and had been an ordained deacon in that tradition. But for a variety of reasons he returned to his roots (his mother was a Congregationalist) and became a licensed UCC minister serving three of the thirteen churches in the UCC Dakota Association. Already past official retirement age, he was ordained in the UCC in 2012.

During the conversation another vehicle pulled up into the field. A woman joined us and asked if we were going to rebuild the church. She was the sister of the former caretaker, Wilson Elk. As a part of this larger conversation she spoke about the tragedy of a child playing and setting a hay bale on fire north of town. According to her, the winds came up and the fire spread from that incident. In addition to the church, two homes were destroyed. None of these structures have been rebuilt. Winds are fickle, it is said, but Mike shared that the winds drew the fire on a direct path for the church, sparing and even dodging other buildings that were nearby. A theological question that has come up for some was if this was meant to be?

The South Dakota Conference Minister, Gordon Rankin, remembers being with folk in Cannon Ball for a worship service a week after the fire, when the burned path through the prairie was still visible. Like Mike, Gordon also remembers a meandering path, but at one point it seemed to make a straight line pinpointing the church. So it would seem natural for that question to arise.

On the day of the fire, Mike was on his way to officiate a memorial service in Cherry Creek, South Dakota. As fire trucks were coming from the other direction, he realized that there was a big incident going on. Only after the memorial service did he learn that Cannon Ball was the site and that the Memorial Congregational Church had burned. He wasn't able to be on site until the following Sunday, but learned in the meantime that the building was a total loss and that there was no property fire insurance coverage.

The governing structure for Memorial Congregational Church and for the other twelve Native American churches in the Dakota Association is different than what is traditional for UCC churches. In this instance, the Dakota Association (now) owns the buildings and property, manages the affairs, pays the leadership, and in essence acts as the local church with thirteen different sites. The following was posted on the Dakota Association page of the UCC South Dakota Conference website on the day of the fire and remains:

Today we lost one of our beloved churches to a prairie fire. High winds and very dry conditions contributed to the fire, prayers for the families that are members of our Dakota Association Church! There were also private homes lost. We would like to thank everyone for their concern over this devastating loss. Due to the high cost of insurance we can only afford to carry liability on our churches. This is a total loss for the Memorial Church of Cannon Ball. We have set up a fund site specifically for this. Any donations can be sent directly to: Dakota Association of Churches, P.O. Box 567, Pierre, SD 57501 - be sure to specify that it is for Memorial UCC Church of Cannon Ball. Thank you all for your concerns, prayers, and in wanting reach out and help

A few days after being on site in Cannon Ball, Tim spoke by phone with Toni Buffalo, the Interim Administrator of the Dakota Association. She already was teaching full time before accepting this additional work after the sudden death of long-time Dakota Association leader Winifred Boub, who served as Administrator for the past 21 years. For Toni, this is already a big enough job without having the institutional memory gone.

At some point before the fire, and predating both Toni Buffalo and Gordon Rankin in their respective positions, there was an initiative by the UCC Insurance Board to study the church properties of the Dakota Association, and there was a recommendation on which churches were viable enough to carry full insurance, and which to only carry liability, with an accompanying increase in premium payments. So the decision was made to follow the recommendation as they could not afford the changes, and Cannon Ball was one of about half the churches whose coverage was limited. How this was communicated is unclear, but this insurance information was posted on the Dakota Association page of the South Dakota Conference website (see paragraph in italics above) on the day of the fire.

On the day of the interview in Cannon Ball, when they had concluded their time on the site of the church, Mike and Tim then went to the home of a church member, Iola Two Hearts, also in Cannon Ball. She is a matriarch of the church community and again, an early question to Tim was if he was there to rebuild the church? In the ensuing conversation, Iola shared that the burning of the church and lack of rebuilding was an unexpected loss. The whole town had been evacuated the day of the fire, and it started and went very near Iola's home. She was actually more fearful of her home being burned than the church. And Iola only learned that the church did not have a full insurance policy until after the fire.

Since the fire there have been a few instances where Mike has come up and led worship in the community center building – baptisms and Easter, for example. That building is accessible, and Memorial Congregational had a ramp, so the accessibility for worship was present before. The issue is an important one. Iola, for example, uses a wheelchair, and needs to have accessible access to participate in worship.

In the setting of that wider three person (Iola, Mike, and Tim) conversation it expanded to include the post-fire events on the reservation surrounding the Dakota Access Pipeline. Mike shared that bullying is a huge issue on the reservation, and Mike and Iola saw the reversal on the pipeline decision by the Trump Administration as just one more example in a long history of bullying, broken treaties and promises, and environmental racism. The pipeline had originally been planned to be closer to the city of Bismarck, but was later changed to the Standing Rock location. The environmental reasons that were used to protect Bismarck (the state capital) were not successful in protecting Standing Rock.

In addition to bullying (between and among ethnic groups), there are the related problems of younger folk committing suicide, isolation, under employment (due in part to that isolation), drug use (as in many other parts of the rural United States), and poverty. According to the most recent census data, Cannon Ball has roughly half of its 864 people living under the government defined level of poverty.

These are the realities of this location, and without insurance, there simply are not the internal resources to rebuild the Memorial Congregational Church without external help.

On November 3, 2016 over 500 clergy from over 20 ecumenical denominations and interfaith groups gathered in Cannon Ball with folk from the Standing Rock Reservation for a day of solidarity and repentance. This included a planned formal repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery. (<http://uccfiles.com/pdf/DoctrineofDiscovery.pdf>) This official guidance for the European colonization of the present-day United States came about in two forms. It was originally a Roman Catholic Church doctrine, but one that was also adopted by Protestant churches. And it was codified into law in an 1823 Supreme Court decision (Johnson vs. McIntosh). In essence, this justified the killing and oppression of indigenous people by giving European explorers the right to claim non-Christian land and resources. In recent years, several Christian denominations (the UCC among them) have formally repudiated the Doctrine of

Discovery and pledged to work towards dismantling its effects on current-day policies, programs, and beliefs.

This was certainly an important step in naming the realities of our shared history and being present with present-day Standing Rock folk. Yet the day-to-day issues remain there: poverty, bullying, suicide, drug addiction, a church too poor to carry property insurance, and a church whose future status is still unknown more than a year after the fire. On top of this Mike offered items for the pipeline activists (earlier protestors, not the November 3rd clergy) who either didn't return them (tents, cook stoves, etc.) or returned them damaged. For justice to be realized, words and actions need to match.

In this process of matching words and actions, the South Dakota Conference had once owned the Native American church property, from an earlier more paternalistic era. The conference has been returning the property to the Dakota Association, and this has been completed except for the one church in North Dakota – Memorial Congregational UCC in Cannon Ball – where this has been tied up with local county process and controversy. So even if there were the resources to rebuild, it is unclear if the church has the authority to build on site. And to make matters even more complicated, there is litigation around the fund set up for rebuilding. And finally, the UCC Insurance Board questioned the sustainability of the Memorial Congregational Church, a question which has never been fully addressed or answered.

In this setting where hope is hard to come by, there are four more baptisms of young children from the Memorial Congregational Church family ready to be scheduled. When that happens, Tim feels that it will be like rain coming to a parched earth. The sacrament of God's enduring love for everyone coming to a community so ready to experience tangible signs of that love.

Looking east from Iola's home the land sweeps gently down to the Missouri River. The landscape carries a stark beauty. Knowing the history of this land and some of the stories of its indigenous people makes the landscape almost haunting. And to further that final quality, was Iola's last comment to Tim as he was leaving: "God has sent you to us for a purpose. We just don't know yet what it is."

[Mike let Tim know that Iola died on July 23. She had been in the hospital, was discharged for the special baptism Sunday, and went back in the hospital before she died. Mike also shared with her a copy of the first draft of the Cannon Ball story from Tim's sabbatical booklet, which she appreciated, and for which Tim is grateful. They will miss her guiding spirit in that place.]

David Huber, Pastor

Interviews: June 24 and 25, 2017

Fire: September 22, 2016

Tim read about this fire on the UCC news, being sensitive to news of fires in the time following the fire at St. Paul's. He was reminded of this again when St. Paul's received Christmas cards from the children at First UCC in Vancouver, WA. The accompanying note shared that we (First Vancouver, First Berkeley, St. Paul's, and Plymouth) had the common fate of experiencing fires in 2016. So when the sabbatical was developing and it looked like Tim was headed to the Midwest, he added Plymouth to the list. Tim met David on site on a late Saturday afternoon and worshiped with the congregation on Sunday morning in the chapel of Grace Lutheran Church in Eau Claire. Following worship all the congregation stayed in the chapel to share their stories of the fire and aftermath with Tim!

David received a phone call in the middle of the night from the Eau Claire fire department saying that Plymouth Church was on fire. He arrived soon after, and with a few other church folk, watched as the firefighters were fighting a defensive battle. The offices, fellowship hall, kitchen, and classrooms were gone. A fire wall was protecting the Sanctuary from being burned. It was a drenching rain all night long, but that wasn't enough. Initially they thought the Sanctuary might be saved, but there was such extensive water damage it was realized that it was not salvageable.

David lives near the church and he, along with several other neighbors, remembers a particular lightning strike earlier that night which was accompanied by a strong jolt – so much so that people living closest to the church had items fall off shelves, appliances disconnect with power going off briefly, and so forth. The investigation found that the church had been struck by lightning which caused the fire. And the assumption is that the dramatic lightning strike that folk remember was the one that struck the church.

As the fire began to fade, firefighters went into the Sanctuary and brought out the baptismal font, pulpit, pulpit Bible, and altar candle sticks. Other than these items, there was very little able to be saved. This loss included the church records, historical documents, and personal items and mementos from the church office and the pastor's office. For David this might have been the hardest loss – gifts, stoles, handwritten cards, pictures, the personal items that one saves during a ministerial career – all gone.

A secondary and more community loss, is that this building was not very old. The church had moved from a site downtown, and their fourth building (since being founded in 1885) was built in two stages. In 1994, the handicap-accessible fellowship hall, kitchen, and office wing was built. In 2008, after years of saving money, the Sanctuary was built and the first service of worship was held on Easter. So there is shared memory of a building project for many in the congregation, with the accompanying thought that we have gone down this road before. And this time without advance notice or planning.

When a church is struck by lightning (and especially with insurance jargon like “acts of God”) one might wonder about this. Was this an act of God? Are we being punished? The Plymouth congregation really has not gone there. When one long time member had a friend from a less progressive Christian tradition tell her that the church would not have been struck by lightning if it wasn’t so friendly towards gays and lesbians, the church member would have none of that. And yet, this issue is around us, as David shared that all of the Eau Claire mainline churches have been supportive and helpful, while the conservative churches – with one exception – have been silent.

The fire was early on a Thursday morning, with folk remaining on site all day. There was an amazing outpouring of support from the community, with a prayer service in the parking lot that evening. By Sunday it had been arranged to worship with Truax UCC, a more rural congregation on the edge of Eau Claire. This happened for a few weeks until Plymouth settled into the chapel at Grace Lutheran Church in downtown Eau Claire. There they could live into their new reality, walk down their own path, and even have office and storage space until their own future was determined and new building ready. On the day that Tim joined the congregation folk were seated around round tables for worship, there was a fellowship time before worship, and there were architectural plans for a new church building on display for viewing and comments.

Weather has not been a friend to Plymouth UCC during this time! There was another prayer service planned for the parking lot the evening before the demolition of the building in January. There was a significant snow storm that evening, however, and only a few braved the storm to attend. And that says something about that snow storm in winter-savvy northern Wisconsin. Yet, at the time of the fire the lightning continued all night and the firefighters had to keep coming down off the ladders for safety. No one was hurt throughout that dramatic night, and for that the church is deeply grateful. And as long as they are at Grace Lutheran, renting from another church, for the time being there is no lawn to mow or snow to shovel to prepare for Sundays.

At the time of the interview with David on site, the site was just empty. The grass was mowed. There were still a few places where there was a basement retaining wall along the edge of the property. There was a small storage building that was not touched by the fire. And there was a large and empty parking lot. The physical setting emphasizes just how much has yet to happen before Plymouth can return to whatever the new normal will be. And David shared, as Tim has experienced himself, that the insurance process is very slow. David has been at Plymouth for 13 years, but understands that this stage will take time and needs him to see it through when he says, “I guess I’m not going anywhere.”

There were many comments shared from the congregation in the time after worship. One member, George, shared with Tim that his significant life events had all happened in Plymouth church - meeting his wife, their wedding, his son being baptized, teaching church school, and the memorial service for his wife after her death. There were two lovely wooden framed canvas banners in the chapel which were rescued from the fire, and his wife had created them with church school children. This was one of the many small joys in the midst of such loss.

Other comments that were shared included:

- It is hard to imagine the new Sanctuary being even better than before, because before was very nice – creative, comfortable, flexible – but this time with no leaks and there will be a lightning rod!
- They miss the lack of community events in their own space – socials, bazaars, thrift sales – the working side-by-side in community projects.
- But ministries have continued – an ecumenical street ministry and the group of quilters (who have received so many donations from the wider community that they have had to ask for this to stop!).
- There was a learning to keep your back up computer files somewhere other than in the same office as the computer.
- There was a garden that had originally been the Eagle Scout project of a church member, and faithfully kept over time, and one of the many things that is gone.
- Thanks for the donation of New Century Hymnals from other UCC churches.
- There are new opportunities in the designing of a new space.
- There is a feeling of gratitude that it was not anyone's fault.
- There is an appreciation of relationships beyond the church with representatives from a local synagogue and mosque present at the prayer service the night of the fire, neighbors stopping by to simply be present, and an anonymous bouquet of flowers and homemade wooden cross leaning against a pine tree on the property.
- There has been a pulling together of the community and a deep appreciation for the extra work and the draining of energy for the Leadership Team (governing board), staff (office and musician), and especially David.

When folk were asked about what practical things that they have learned that could be shared – the response was to take the time to understand your insurance policy, to periodically take an inventory of your belongings, and to back up your computer information, and keep that off site!

David shares this story (before the Plymouth fire) on the church website: *There is a book called "I Am a Holocaust Torah," about a Torah that was burnt in Germany during WWII. It has these words: "Some scrolls live fortunate lives, happy lives. They are carried around during services... Rabbis dance, holding them aloft. Other scrolls are unlucky, pushed to the back of the ark, unloved, silent. Still other scrolls suffer a tragic fate and go through fire and suffering, die, or survive in a damaged condition. Yet, all contain the same sacred words. All are holy in the eye of the beholder."*

Sadly, or ironically, this book was burned in the fire.

Plymouth Church has gone through a fire and remains a sacred spiritual space. But rather than feeling damaged or unlucky, they are holding on to the words of two teenaged boys on bicycles who rode by soon after the fire, spent time with folk there, and as they were riding away said to the Plymouth folk: "Don't worry, you'll come back even stronger than you were before."

Tim Devine, Pastor

(Self) Interview: June 30, 2017

Fire: March 29, 2016

At the conclusion of the official sabbatical time (the month of June) Tim wrote down the fire story of his own church.

The phone rang at 4:30 am on a Tuesday morning, two days after Easter. It was the Seattle fire department saying that St. Paul's Church had experienced a significant fire and could someone from the church come to the site? Tim and David Anderson arrived shortly and discovered that the building seemed to be structurally sound, but that there were "hot spots" throughout the building. The firefighters told them that one of the furnaces had caught fire and that flames had spread through the heating ducts and electrical cables. This began a busy and intense time as there were about 50 12-Step groups that were using the building each week. They had to be notified of the fire, other churches were told about what had happened and asked about housing the groups, and the building needed to be secure and rekeyed as soon as possible as every group had keys. Plus the fire department told Tim that if the building was not secure, there would definitely be "squatters."

The Sanctuary had part of the floor opened up and a few pews were tipped over and moved aside as the fire started directly underneath and the wooden support beams were still smoldering. The Nursery was the most dramatic scene with parts of the ceiling opened up, insulation falling out, walls charred with smoke, and the baby changing table broken in half and lying in the middle of the room. The smell of smoke was something that stayed with the building for some time.

There were lots of gestures of support, calls, and e-mails from neighbors, church friends, and colleagues. Church volunteers were on site to direct the 12-Step group folk who were coming to meetings not knowing what had happened and a locksmith had rekeyed the building entrances by mid-morning. By noon St. Paul's had an invitation to worship in a parlor-type room (Haavic Hall) at Ballard First Lutheran Church eight blocks away. At the other end of the emotional spectrum there were several property restoration representatives that came by to offer their company's services, leaving their business cards. All were polite but it had the feeling of vultures circling road kill.

The Church Council met that evening in the home of a nearby church member after a brief on-site tour with face masks and booties, and the work of restoration began.

The following Sunday a larger-than-average group met at the St. Paul's parking lot, prayed, read a poem together written for that occasion by a church member, and processed the eight blocks to worship at the Lutheran Church. A man who was homeless was sleeping in a tent (with permission) in the back of St. Paul's the night of the fire, heard the smoke alarms, called 911, and

stayed on site. He was still there on site and spoke with Tim when Tim arrived. One of the most emotional moments of the whole fire recovery journey was when he accepted the invitation to join the congregation for worship that first Sunday afterwards, and then the church folk thanked him for being willing to “be involved,” essentially saving the building.

As it became clear that the basic footprint of the building would remain the same, a group was appointed to determine some building security upgrades which were later incorporated into the rebuilding project. It was an opportunity to make the building safer and easier to manage – an important thing for a building that had seen over 1,500 people in it (12-Step groups) each week.

The interim time was a creative but challenging time. Bulletins were printed at another church. The office was at Tim’s home. (The office manager had retired and the position had not been filled due to budget constraints, with those responsibilities going to Tim.) All the contents had been moved off site for cleaning and the building was completely empty, down to the wall studs, with no utilities (heat, electricity, and plumbing) on site.

In looking back Tim remembers the theme of the time was of waiting – for asbestos to be abated, for the city to respond to questions about required code upgrades, for all of the sub-contractor work, and for insurance to approve decisions and then to act (pay out).

Insurance would not pay the higher cost for the pews to be repaired, but would pay a set amount for St. Paul’s to purchase new seating. So there was a fairly intense e-mail conversation among the membership about keeping pews or going to chairs (and more flexible seating.) There were three examples of chairs in the worship space in Haavic Hall during this time. Eventually it was decided to go with chairs; and it was a good, thoughtful, and respectful conversation and process.

Another early decision of the congregation was about the evening custodial help. There were two people who shared a position of locking and cleaning the building six evenings a week. (Volunteers did this once a week.) They both happen to be immigrants from Africa and would economically suffer from the lack of work. The congregation wanted to continue paying them while the building was closed with the agreement that they would return when the building reopened. And insurance did pay for this arrangement.

Another important development during this time was St. Paul’s participating in a new outreach venture. The church had served a meal in a day shelter for homeless folk once a month for over twenty years. The facility closed and St. Paul’s had been without a hands-on outreach project. A new project was developing in Ballard (the local neighborhood) called Sunday Dinners. Five local faith communities plus the group Sustainable Ballard joined together to offer these weekly meals for the local homeless population, which was significantly growing. St. Paul’s began a once a month commitment, as before, and it was good for the church to participate in something beyond its own immediate situation. Eric, the fellow who called 911 the night of the fire, is a regular at these dinners. And St. Paul’s is paired with another smaller neighborhood congregation with whom it has had a complicated history – but the two churches are working very well together.

St. Paul's returned to the building in early September for worship, downstairs in the social hall called Foster Hall. Once again the congregation met in the parking lot, read a second poem written by the same church member, and processed inside. The building was still an active work site so everything had to be brought out and put away before and after worship. It was also a time when folk could see what was happening, as there was progress to note almost each week. It was an encouraging time.

There is a bi-annual auction at St. Paul's, and it occurred in October after the partial move back into the building. It was held in Foster Hall, renamed the Fire Recovery Fiesta, and with all the pent-up feelings of wanting to help out, it was one of the more successful auctions the church has ever had. Also during this time the Seattle-based hip hop artist Macklemore filmed a music video with the closing scene in Foster Hall. He is public about being helped by the 12-Step NA program, and has attended meetings in Foster Hall. His donation of a Macklemore gift basket was a big hit at the auction.

Probably the time when Tim felt most overwhelmed was right before Christmas when the rest of the building was opened again (except for the Sanctuary). Over 250 moving-type boxes holding church items were returned along with furniture. The office was open but phone and internet access had yet to be established. And Tim was meeting with liaisons from the 12-Step groups outlining the security changes, giving out new keys, etc.

The first worship service in the Sanctuary was in January and was quite emotional. The room looked very different than before, with the new chairs and without the old carpet. The wooden floors underneath had been newly cleaned, stained, and varnished. Much like a house blessing, there was a Sanctuary blessing, as well as a third poem! Because the Nursery pictures online were so visceral, there were plenty of donations to restock that room. (Because of asbestos rules everything in the Nursery that survived the fire was taken away and destroyed.) There were too many donated teddy bears! So the church solicited more, they were brought into the Sanctuary on that first Sunday back, loved during the worship service, dedicated and blessed with the offering, and afterwards taken to the fire department to be delivered to families with children in the aftermath of a home fire.

In April there was a special dinner fundraiser that had happened in the past, but had been in Foster Hall. It was held in the Sanctuary. There were round candle-lit tables, a pianist at the grand piano, and an amazing five course dinner. It was an elegant evening. It is doubtful that "elegant" would have been used to describe the Sanctuary before. It was also a very successful way of showing the possibilities for a newly multi-purpose space.

At present the restored building is basically complete. The waiting for insurance to answer questions and pay out on our policy continues. Tim looks forward to that anxiety-producing reality to be over. There were also two banners in the front of the Sanctuary that did not survive the fire. The original artist is completing two new replacement ones, which when they are dedicated will most likely formally complete this chapter of St. Paul's journey. And then the

church can continue on with its mission, it its mission statement (everything has become new!) adopted some time before the fire:

At St. Paul's United Church of Christ we seek to follow the example of Jesus' radical love, reaching out in openness and affirmation to seekers, believers and doubters: to all who come looking for God and community. At St. Paul's we are not called to change people; we are called to offer a space where growth can take place. Through worship, prayer, learning, and service, we honor and celebrate God's presence in ourselves, in each other, and in the world.

* * *

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see everything has become new! All this from God, who... has given us the ministry of reconciliation.

[2 Corinthians 5:17-18 – NRSV]

Bob Ullman, Pastor (at the time of the fire)

Interview: June 26, 2017

Fire: March 11, 2004

*During the post-fire time for St. Paul's Tim was spending a lot of time waiting – for insurance to respond, for asbestos abatement to be completed, for all kinds of service and repair folk to show up on site. He was feeling that a great deal of his working life was “on hold.” In response to this he read a book titled [Seven Spiritual Gifts of Waiting](#), by Holly Whitcomb, a UCC minister / retreat leader – www.kettlewoodretreats.com. The book was dedicated “to the people of Redeemer United Church of Christ, Sussex, Wisconsin, and to pastor Bob Ullman, all courageous people in waiting... **after the fire.**” This piqued Tim's interest, so he researched the story, realized that it would be good to have another perspective from several years later, and added this church to the list.*

Tim was met on site and given a tour of the building by the parish administrator, Connie Pinzl, and two church members, Jim and Dawn Hobbick. Bob Ullman had retired from a 34 year pastorate at Redeemer the previous year, so in following normative local UCC protocol, he did not come on site but rather met Tim for lunch afterwards.

Jim and Dawn were not yet members of Redeemer UCC, but were in the first group of folk who joined the church after the fire. They joined because they were so impressed with the congregation in response to the fire: “We wanted to join the church because of how they handled it.” One of the unusual aspects of the fire was that the pastor, Bob Ullman, was away – about 10 days into a three month sabbatical. It was a Friday night when the fire occurred, and it was most likely an electrical issue that caused it. When firefighters arrived the winds were too strong and it was too late to save it. The church burned to the ground. The news spread during the night, people gathered, and the news media asked the question: “How do you feel about losing your church?” To a person, they all responded: “We didn't lose our church, we just lost the building.”

There had been a previously scheduled church leadership meeting the following day. They met in the local library and were joined by several supportive local clergy. When they called Bob (in Hawaii) they told him about the fire, that they were up to handling things, and wanted him to stay. It was a tough decision for Bob, but he did remain on sabbatical. “I needed to let them know that I trusted them,” he told Tim. In addition, in return for staying in an available parsonage (the Hawaii church was between pastors) Bob was to preach for four Sundays, so he couldn't return to Sussex without letting go of these responsibilities while away. Bob had been called to Redeemer UCC in 1982, so there was a well established and trusting relationship between the church and its pastor by the time of the fire 22 years later.

On the physical tour of the building it was clear to Tim that the church was well thought out and well cared for. He was told that the Moderator at the time of the fire had a background in interior design. There were questions for the congregation and wish lists were created. There was a 30

member focus group that helped pull the dreams together and eventually a building committee with six members. People with specific building skills (plumbers, electricians, etc.) who were members of the congregation were pulled in as advisors on their particular skill set. A few folk left over disagreements over particular rebuilding decisions (as is inevitable), but the vast majority remained and bought in to the new building because of the inclusive process.

There were many things to note. On the exterior there was an intentional curve to the driveway approach so that one would “slow down” mentally and physically in preparation for worship. The facility sits on 10 acres in a rural area and there was a seeding of natural prairie on much of the property. Tim was told that 85% of the rain water remains on site “feeding” the property as a rain garden. There is also a lovely outdoor worship space and well maintained parking.

Inside the entire building is accessible. In the Sanctuary there are two ramps leading up to a raised Chancel, which has the only steps (stairs) in the building. The front-facing sides of the ramps are lined with stone that was salvaged from the previous building. The kitchen, sound system and acoustics in the Sanctuary, and office and work space were particularly well designed for the needs of the congregation. One of the things that Tim noticed immediately was the fact that there was so much interior glass in the building. One could see into almost all of the rooms from the central gathering space – the Great Hall. This was an intentional decision in thinking about a “safe church” especially for children. (An irony now is that it may not be as safe a space with the changes in the world since the building opened in August of 2006. The shootings in the Sikh Temple in nearby Oak Creek, WI in August of 2012 highlighted that with so much glass in the church interior it would be difficult to hide.) And finally, there is exterior glass bringing in natural light and a connection to the intentional prairie outside.

There were things that were on the congregational wish list that were not included in the new building. A dedicated social hall and a steeple for the bell (salvaged) from the previous building were excluded because there was no money for those projects. On site Tim was told that the church had good insurance, but just not enough of it. Later, Bob shared that Redeemer thought they had replacement insurance coverage only to learn that the policy limits were only sufficient to cover half the actual cost of rebuilding. This required taking out a \$1½ million dollar mortgage for a \$3 million dollar building project. After the project was completed the church changed insurance carriers, moving from the UCC Insurance Board to Church Mutual.

During the time after the fire and before the new building opened, the congregation was known internally as the “Church of the Good Schleppers.” Redeemer was welcomed to a hastily-arranged afternoon worship service at a nearby Lutheran church the first Sunday after the fire. After that they continued to worship for the next 2 ½ years at the local high school just up the road from the church property. Once there, they discovered that worship was more lively in the cafeteria with big windows than their first try in the theater (theater seats are loud and thump and theaters are designed to absorb, rather than resonate sound, especially congregational singing!). There was donated office space in a nearby office building. There were occasional Sunday tours of the building site after the conclusion of worship at the high school. There were also intentional small

group meetings during this time to help with all of the accompanying natural anxiety – for example occasional Saturday morning breakfasts and “Dine with 9” small groups meeting in members homes for dinner and conversation. During this nomadic time in Redeemer’s life, the congregation discovered that instead of having one church home, they had many “homes.” All recall that throughout this time there was good leadership and communication.

Redeemer UCC is the result of a church merger that occurred in 1968. Both church properties were sold and a new partial building was built with worship in the social hall. Bob arrived in 1982 and felt that his initial work was in rebuilding a struggling congregation before reviving the original vision of adding to the multi-purpose space. After this initial focus, the physical building project commenced and the Sanctuary, greeting hall, offices, and meeting space were finished in 1995. The church was within \$100,000 of paying off the capital campaign to complete the original merged church building when the fire happened in 2004. So Redeemer has been a church that has carried a financial debt in its annual operating expenses for much of its life.

One memento Bob longed to retrieve from the remains of his office was a small jade cross, but he didn’t hold much hope. When he did return to the site, the rubble had not yet been cleared so he donned knee pads and work gloves and sifted through the charred remains. Under a pile of ashes in a former closet, he found the cross. The theory was that the gold chain had melted, dropping the cross to the floor to be protected by the ashes above. The other item that was rescued was a small figurine of the baby Jesus wrapped in a baby blanket in one of the canvas bags from General Synod. The baby was used during Advent and passed between homes to practice “welcoming the child.” The doll had been wrapped in a fire retardant blanket. The bag was gone and all that remained was a charred blanket and an intact baby. Everything else in Bob’s office – pictures, documents, records, mementos – was lost. Bob refers to this as a time of “severe mercy.”

In the aftermath of the fire Bob put more effort into understanding family systems theory, and found that to be helpful. It was certainly a time of anxiety for the church, as well as a time of both personal grief and community grief. And several years after the fire, in anticipation of Bob’s retirement, the church engaged in the intensive New Beginnings process using Appreciative Inquiry and the skills of a professional consultant – Peter Wells. In his closing comments of a 100 page report Peter wrote this:

What I discovered was a faithful congregation with a wonderful past – a fruitful present and great potential for the future. It would be naïve to say that you are not facing some challenges – you are. Not the least of which is the retirement of your beloved pastor the Rev. Bob Ullman. But history says you are more than capable of meeting those challenges in creative and exciting ways.

Redeemer UCC has gone through a lot of changes in its relatively short (merged) history. And it has “endurance produces character” to draw upon. It is like the jade cross found in the remains of Bob’s office closet in the previous building – the cross had become a deeper and richer color. Bob was told by a jeweler that part of the reason the jade cross made it through the fire was that “jade gets harder with fire.”

Jennifer Brownell, Pastor

Interview: June 6, 2017

Fire: May 25, 2016

Jennifer was a member at St. Paul's UCC in Seattle while she was a student at Seattle University, earning her M.Div. degree, and was ordained at St. Paul's on November 14, 2004. Knowing her, it made the news of the fire at First UCC in Vancouver all the more intense for folk at St. Paul's, and so closely following their own fire.

Jennifer received a text at about 6:00 am from a friend (a new mother who was up early with her baby) saying that she was so sorry to hear about the church fire. Jennifer quickly then saw the news of the fire, went to the church and joined the people who were already there. She had texted the conference minister, who contacted the insurance agent, and that morning they began the process of answering questions from the news media, arranging for a property restoration company to begin work on securing the building, dealing with the swarm of other property restoration hopefuls descending on the site, receiving help and an offer from a local Jewish synagogue to hold worship there over the summer, and to begin to sort out all that had happened and needed to happen.

It was a dramatic scene and there was also the realization that this was intentional – an arson fire. There was an emotional prayer service on site that evening and the church community worshiped under a tent on the outdoor church labyrinth for a short time before moving to the next temporary location at the synagogue.

Jennifer remembers needing to work at creating a safe space in worship because of the various media that were present, due to the arson and related questions there.

As things unfolded, there were two other local churches that experienced arson fires that week and the churches were all across the theological spectrum. So, although there were definite feelings of violation, it didn't take on the extra personality of feeling attacked because of holding differing views or being the recipient of a hate crime. And as there has been no suspect ever apprehended; there has been no person, trial, or process on which to focus grief or anger.

A particularly difficult moment was in relation to two groups of homeless folk who were residing on the property. The site was literally toxic and had an active asbestos clean-up going on. They were asked to leave and refused, so they had to be evicted. It was a difficult but necessary action.

An ongoing challenge has been the movement of worship locations and the scattering of different programmatic aspects of the church over different locations. Currently the offices (limited) are in a trailer on the church site (alongside a trailer for Belfor – the property restoration company) and worship is presently at a local Senior Center in Vancouver.

There have also been gaps in regular connection with the insurance carrier. The church has gone through two different levels of property coverage and is now in the third level. Under current insurance practices, each time they enter into a new (higher) level of coverage it is a new adjuster, different rules and practices, and having to establish new communication with that new insurance representative. It can feel like a lot of “hurry up and wait.”

Attendance and participation has increased over this time, there is a strong lay leadership team in place, and folk are asking good and deep theological questions. In particular there is a church member who is serving as the primary liaison with the insurance and property restoration companies, and has previous work experience to do that well. There has also been a confirmation program (only held from time to time, not annually) that is uniquely bonded through the experience of the fire.

Jennifer had been called to First UCC as an interim pastor the previous November. And there had been additional staff turnover in addition to the previous pastor. After the fire it became clear that the church was not ready to continue to work on a church profile and the search for a settled pastor. In particular, they could not answer the question of just to what would a new minister be being called? So there has been a transparent process of moving Jennifer from an interim, to an assigned, to her current title of Designated Term Pastor, with the likelihood of becoming the permanent settled pastor. She lives with her family in Portland. So there have been challenges and some stress over a difficult commute that was initially only thought to be for 18 months, a high school aged son who is settled into his youth group in a different UCC church near home, and the family moving into something more permanent that had once been interim.

As in any setting, there are certain things that carry deep meaning and hold a strong history. Some of these include a cross, a skylight, and the unique roof line of the Sanctuary (“the ark on the hill”) – all of which were affected by the fire. The roof, in particular, is open to the sky and is a dramatic sight. Building codes have changed, and the setting of the previous kitchen most likely will not meet present code and will need to be moved to another location.

An architect and a design consultant are working with the congregation, and there have been several meetings. Decisions and votes have been accompanied by the optional statement “I can live with this either way,” which has been a most helpful addition.

It can be emotionally draining to visit the site. The church is surrounded by fencing and has scaffolding on one end. The roof is open. One must wear a hard hat to enter, and only with permission and/or accompaniment by Belfor. There are two temporary structures in the parking lot. And there are still a great many unknowns. Yet there is an itching to back there, so plans are underway to return to worship under a tent on the outdoor church labyrinth during the months of July and August.

During this time the church became 125 years old but has passed marking that anniversary for the time being. At present they are thinking of having a celebration on Pentecost 2018 – whether

back in the Sanctuary (homecoming) or not. They have taken to heart a phrase that Jennifer shared early on in post-fire life: "You can burn us down, but you can't burn us out."

Jennifer is one of the writers for the online UCC daily devotional. Here is her entry for September 30, 2016, titled **God's Intentions**:

Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good...

[Genesis 50:20a – NRSV]

In May 2016, someone started a fire at First Congregational UCC in Vancouver, Washington, rendering our sanctuary temporarily unusable. Over the summer the congregation gathered each Sunday in the sunny social hall of a local synagogue with a view of Mount St. Helens out of the floor-to-ceiling windows.

When Mount St. Helens blew in 1980, the volcano left a thick carpet of ash that covered the surrounding countryside for miles, decimating the woodlands, meadows, and rivers. Experts figured it would be years before anything grew there. But almost immediately, green shoots started coming up through the ash. By the summer following the eruption, a whole new ecosystem began to grow, including plants and insects that had not been in this area before.

Whoever set the fire in our building figured it would scare us, or inconvenience us, or even stop us. They intended harm for us, but God has already worked it for good.

Watered by the outpouring of prayers, gifts and even a visit from another church (shout out to Greendale United Church of Christ of Greendale, Wisconsin!*) and warmed by the sunshine of the Spirit, new life started poking up out of the ash of the church fire almost immediately. There isn't just one example of this, although I have been searching for one as I write this. Instead the new life is like a carpet of mountain flowers – sort of familiar, but unexpected too, and sprouting up in every direction, as far as the eye can see.

Let us pray: Holy God, thank you for the good you work from the most unlikely circumstances. And thank you for the covenant that binds our churches in care with one another. Amen.

*[*Two members of the UCC in Greendale, WI moved to the Portland, OR area and became part of the Vancouver UCC community. Through that connection, after the fire the Greendale church sent the Vancouver church a set of gifts, a letter of support, and later visited. The Greendale church had a roof collapse due to deep snows in 1998. The story is on the First UCC Vancouver website (www.vanucc.org) under Fire Information and then "Peace Be Upon This House."]*

[[On the last day of Tim's sabbatical, June 30, it was reported that the iconic metal cross from the roof of the building was restored – a significant event and sign of hope!]]

Postlude

On a very basic level, the sharing of experience helps with countering the feelings of isolation and of being overwhelmed with all of the details of recovery. There were also themes that surfaced:

These were traumatic events. Both the leaders and congregations need to understand what tools they might access in working through the aftermath of such a time. And in insurance language, “acts of God,” can make for even more complicated feelings. A lightning strike (Eau Claire) or a prairie fire (Cannon Ball) on a direct line to a building can raise theological questions for some. And arson (Anacortes, Vancouver) can open folk up an even deeper level of anger and even persecution. Seeing the church burn from near or far, and even the lingering post-fire smell can take a long time to fade and may need to be dealt with directly. And the personal sadness for pastors and staff who lost all or even many of the things in their offices is enormous.

Insurance is a complicated issue and in every circumstance (except Anacortes) there was some disappointment. On a practical level, all would have benefitted from knowing more about the details of their policies. Not having property insurance (Cannon Ball), not knowing about the lack of insurance for the personal items of the sexton’s family (Berkeley), and only having enough coverage for half of what was needed to rebuild (Sussex) were all surprises. In addition, all found the process to be slower than what they would have liked. Some churches (Seattle, Vancouver) had the experience of moving into higher categories of expense and then the feeling of “starting over” with a new adjuster. And the frustration peaked with one church (Baltimore) hiring an attorney at one point in the process, and another (Sussex) changing insurance carriers when it was all over.

Documentation and inventory were issues that came up. Not knowing exactly what was lost can become a problem in making a claim. In Eau Claire the computer files were on back up disks that were still on site in the church office. So the fire claimed both sets of information. And for some there was the ironic acknowledgement that those closets and store rooms that always had needed a thorough pitching of contents was no longer an issue.

The times of returning are emotional. Returning to a Sanctuary or beginning in a new worship space are times that have been anticipated for months or years, and grief can easily resurface in such a vulnerable time. And there is both a personal grief and a community grief which takes time to explore.

There are places where this can be an opportunity. St. Paul’s in Seattle was able to add to the renovations some building security upgrades that were helpful in returning to a building heavily used by outside groups without staff present. In Berkeley one of the options, and there was a leaning towards this option at the congregational workshop, was to sell off a parking lot and with part of that income sponsoring the creation of much needed local affordable housing on site.

Pastoral leadership faces a complicated future in the aftermath of a fire. For some it came after a long and settled time together (Baltimore, Eau Claire, Seattle, Sussex) and the leadership in these places remained (or plans to remain) to see the process through and live into the next chapter. For others (Berkeley, Vancouver) it came early in their pastoral ministry and redefined leadership, vision, and practical day-to-day life together. In Cannon Ball the day-to-day church life was put on hold, but the pastor has been available for special occasions. In Anacortes the anxiety level over all the changes was too much for a proposed pastoral change that could have been beneficial to both pastor and church.

As in any time of loss or grief, there will be a great deal of support. There will also be surprises about who is present and who is silent. Rather than keeping score, Tim tried to use this as a time to assess how he had responded to the grief of others in times before. And it was helpful to have a concrete list of items or actions on hand when people would ask “How can I / we help?”

An experience like this raises theological questions of place and spirit. Why us? Where does God live? What constitutes a church “home?” Is the relationship to the building or to the people? These are some of the questions that came up for many during this time. And even though the predominant answer was a realization that the connections were to the people, there was a hunger to reconnect with the physical space during the periods of building reconstruction and fire recovery.

Finally, there will be new folk that will come into the church family after the fire and have no experience with that time, or what the facility was like before. At some point it is important to let go of the more public “remember when” type of statements if those folk are to be fully integrated into the community.

For Tim, the question of “Why us?” is better framed “Why not us?” Tim understands that God does not direct these actions to punish or make a point. God also does not intercede. Rather, God accompanies us on the journey. We are offered support and presence, and are not left alone. There are times for silence, for lament, for listening, for decisions, for hard work, and for celebration. And each story will be unique.

We are told that contemporary church life in the UCC needs to be about transformation. If that is so, then “Why us / Why not us?” becomes “Now that it is us, what do we learn from this experience, and how do we move forward incorporating the lessons learned?” If we have suffered a fire, or some other significant issue, can we take our cue from the prophet Isaiah?

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.

[Isaiah 43:19 – NRSV]