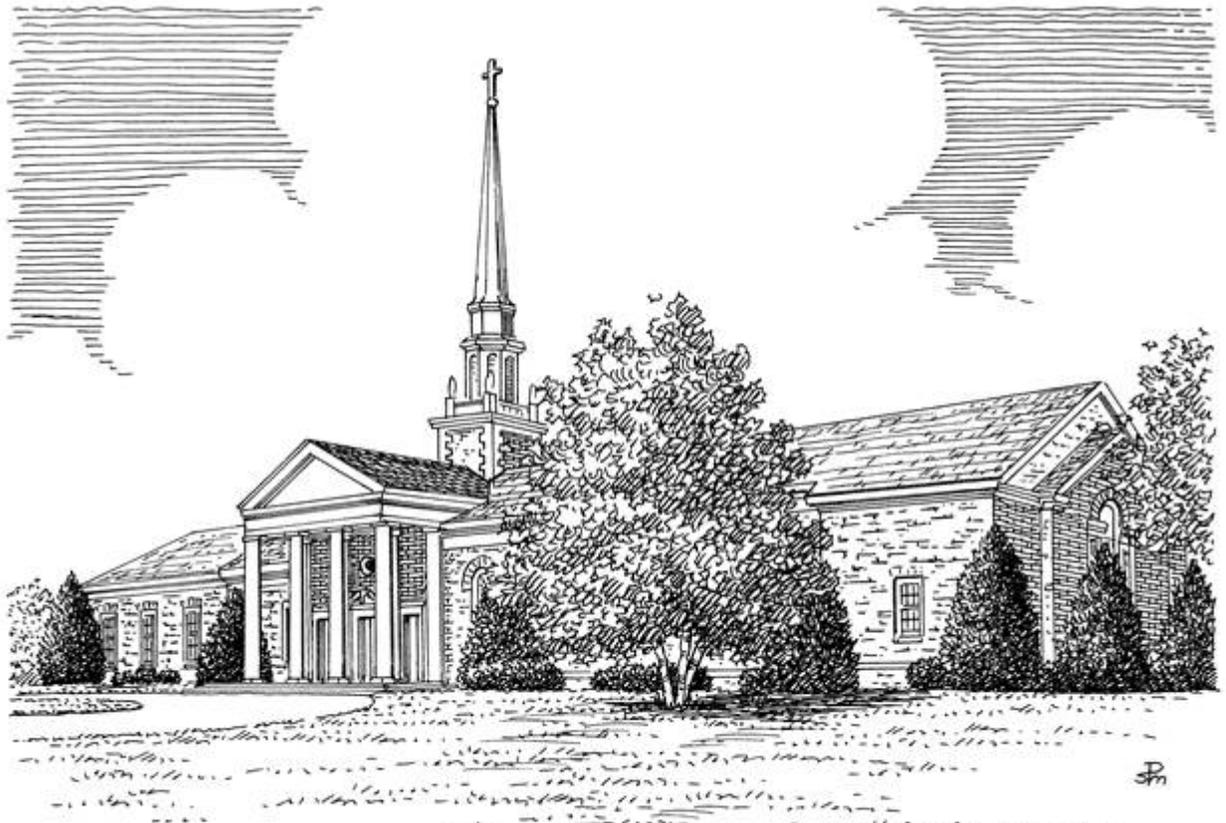


# WE'RE NOT DEAD YET: MOVING THROUGH DEATH TO RESURRECTION



The First Congregational Church      Waterville, Maine

Reflections and Recommendations  
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## I. Introduction

I am convinced that God is calling First Congregational, UCC, Waterville, to new forms of ministry, service, and witness. I am hopeful that these reflections and recommendations will stimulate conversations that will be helpful in discerning God's will for our congregation. This is a report of some of my learnings in my time as your Scholar in Residence, and recommendations and resources for the congregation as you move toward a new model of being and doing church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

This report is not footnoted since it is not an academic exercise. I am writing more academic versions of some of what is here, which I will make available to any who wish to see them. I will try to make it obvious when I am making my own observations and when I am building on the work of others. My recommendations are based both on my research and on my own observations. They are not comprehensive; they are a beginning point, and we should expect more areas for discussion, exploration, and action to emerge as the Spirit moves among us.

## II. Larger Context

### A. Brief Historical Overview

I begin with a quick history lesson. It may at first seem superfluous, but is essential for understanding why so many of us feel a sense of discomfort and some disorientation with the changes the church is undergoing. Those of us who are older grew up with a particular model of how the church relates to the world, a model which was in place for about 1700 years with relatively little change. Yet within our lifetimes that model has crumbled, and a new model is only seen dimly, through a glass darkly.

Western churches, more specifically North American, white,

middle class, mainline congregations, have been challenged by changes in their context and position in the world. We have entered into a situation where the relation of the church to its surrounding social and cultural world is more like the situation of the early church than it has been in about 1700 years. For that long, the church (at least most of the main streams of the western church, with a few notable exceptions like ethnic and some Anabaptist congregations) has had the blessing, either *de jure* or *de facto*, of the political and cultural establishments.

The shorthand term for this phenomenon is 'Christendom.' Christendom began when Constantine designated Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire around 313 CE. As the church became comfortable with its closer relationship with political powers, it gave up both an incredible diversity of expressions of faith and its commitment to non-violence. This is also the time when the 'great' councils wrote the classic creeds of orthodox Christianity. Note this, as I will return to it later.

The close relationship of the church with political powers, even empires, and other established powers, e.g. economic, led the church to defend, rather than criticize, the status quo, in other words, to mute the prophetic voice of faith. The Christendom model continued through the upheavals of the Reformation as the main strands of the Reformation picked up where the Roman Catholic church left off in relation to the powers that be. Our ancestors were part of the system of state-supported churches in Europe, and that heritage shaped church relations with the government and with society in North America even with our constitutional commitment to freedom of religion.

Shortly after the time of the Reformation, modern ways and patterns of thinking began to appear in philosophy and in broader intellectual circles. Modern philosophy, especially natural philosophy, led to the development of the scientific method and eventually to a form of rationalism that judged truth statements by methods of science, arguing that only empirically verifiable statements could be 'true.' This, of course, was a tremendous intellectual challenge to traditional theology, which deals more with the ineffable than the empirical. Modern philosophy laid a foundation for the criticism of religion, Christianity in particular, by literary, academic, and artistic elites and for the eventual wholesale exodus from church involvement we see in western society today.

One writer, often quoted, says that the Christian church has a giant theological rummage sale every 500 years. I think that underestimates the nature of the change, even crisis, the church as a whole is now in. We are living through a change in the relationship of the church to government and society more drastic than at any time since the time of Constantine. Simultaneously, we are at the end of one intellectual era and paradigm, and the beginning of a new era which is still emerging. The end of Christendom and the end of 'modern' ways of thought together create changes in the church's surrounding environment, and force changes in the church's relationship with its environment, that are unprecedented in the history of the Western church.

It's no wonder we feel at loose ends. An important thing to learn from this quick review is that these larger trends are affecting all of us in the church. They are greater than any individual congregation (or pastor). And it is important that we

identify how the end of Christendom and the end of modernity play out in the life of congregations.

## B. The End of Christendom

Currently, the 'mainstream' Christian church, as it has been constituted in Western Europe and North America, is undergoing drastic changes, a process which began to be noticed by a few in the 60's and 70's but has now become evident to any observer. Almost everywhere, with only a few exceptions, attendance and giving are down, as are baptisms and weddings, and even funeral services as secular 'celebrations of life' become more popular. We no longer live in a society with the informal and often unstated expectations that most people will be involved in a church. In the Christendom era, most people identified at least minimally as Christian and, if involved in nothing else, looked to the church for baptisms, weddings, and funerals, known colloquially in clergy circles as hatch, match, and dispatch.

A few examples of how things worked in Christendom:

I have been told that at one time executives of Scott Paper were informed when they came to Central Maine that they were expected to participate in the community. That participation included church involvement. The era of 11 out of 12 top executives being members of our church has passed, both because the paper mill is gone and because avenues of community involvement have changed in more secular directions.

For approximately the first half of my years in ministry, schools and community sports leagues left time for youth to be involved in church activities. One night a week was kept free on the school schedules, and Sunday, at first all day and later at least the morning, were

sacrosanct times for church activities. A few years ago I overheard a conversation in our hallway between services. One person was bemoaning the lack of young people in our Sunday School. The other person replied, “Go look at the end of the block at the soccer fields if you want to know where the kids are.” A few weeks later I took a quick trip and saw for myself the three soccer fields crowded with youth while seemingly hundreds of parents and grandparents congregated on the sidelines. That wouldn’t have happened in the Christendom era.

Forty years ago when I began in ministry, it was rare to have a wedding where at least the bride or groom, if not both, were not involved members of a congregation. Then, for a number of years, couples felt they wanted church weddings even if they were not active church participants. Those were years when the Christendom model was waning but still had some hold over the general public. Now couples have no qualms about being married by a friend who has obtained ‘clergy’ credentials over the Internet and can legally marry them – no church or traditionally ordained clergy necessary. The Christendom model has collapsed.

Under the Christendom model, people had at least a vague idea they should be members of a church. When they moved, they looked for a congregation to join as part of their settling in to a new community, just as they registered their children for the local schools, registered to vote, and found a trustworthy mechanic. A congregation like ours, with a highly visible location and a good reputation in the community, benefitted. Strangers and newcomers to town came through our doors without us having to worry about inviting them. We just had to be receptive. And for many years that worked. But no longer.

In the later years under the Christendom model, we in the church got lazy and we looked at the world with blinders on. We only talked and listened to certain people, most often those in positions of power and privilege. We did not talk much about listening to God. Our friendships in large part were limited to people like us socially, economically, educationally, and culturally. And so was our hospitality. Church people gathered in ‘tribes’ of like-minded souls, so much so that a theologian in the early twentieth century could write a book titled *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* and the church growth literature was filled with variations of ‘like recruiting like’ methods. We limited our relationships to only part of the world outside the church, hiring missionaries to relate to certain sectors of the world for us rather than directly engaging in those relationships ourselves. At the same time, we looked at the world with blinders on. We only had personal relationships with people who looked like us. Our blinders prevented us from seeing the incredible diversity among God’s children.

Changes in the social positions of the western church, i.e. the end of the Christendom model, and in our cultural milieu, i.e. the end of modernity, have forced us to take off some of our blinders and have enabled us to see God’s world in new ways and have helped us see the beginnings of a new model for the church’s relationship to the world, a new model that will take a tremendous amount of work to develop compared to just floating along with the tides of Christendom, which is no longer an option.

But I’m jumping ahead a little too much. In addition to the end of Christendom, we need to be aware of the cultural and intellectual changes

associated with the end of modernism and the rise of postmodern ways of thinking.

### C. The End of Modernism & the Beginning of Postmodernism

Mainstream Christianity has always adjusted itself to the culture in which it finds itself. Sometimes it has influenced the culture for good. An example is the effect of congregational meetings in pre-colonial congregations on the development of town meetings in New England, thus contributing to the development of our democratic form of government. Most often, mainstream churches have blessed the wishes of the established authorities, both political and cultural. An example is the drumbeats in churches in support of an unquestioning patriotism and of a long succession of wars.

Theology, as the intellectual expression of faith and as apologetics, has used the forms of thinking of the cultures that the church inhabits. Among Roman Catholics, Augustine is noted for using Platonic philosophical ideas in his theology and Aquinas for using Aristotle. The Reformers used ideas from humanistic scholars of the late Middle Ages, especially the push to consult and study original sources, which for the Reformers meant placing more emphasis on reading the Bible.

Modern ways of thinking, beginning with Descartes, are rational, logical, scientific, technological, and materialistic. The developments of science and technology are undeniable gains. None of us want to return to the daily lifestyles of the middle ages.

But not everything about modernist ways has been beneficial. The idea of inevitable progress combined with a certainty about possessing the Truth, created problems. For many European

intellectuals, World War I shattered the modern myth of progress. The Holocaust and the use of atomic bombs made people realize that technology could be used for evil purposes.

For several centuries, theology tried to follow the model of modern ways of thinking – leading to many conundrums, dead-ends, and puzzles (rather than mysteries). Now, more and more theologians are realizing that the ‘truth’ of theology and faith cannot be explicated by using the methods of science and technology, which deal with tangible, concrete objects, while theology and faith deal with the intangible and ineffable. (By the way, there have been parallel developments in the areas of the visual arts and music. The term ‘postmodern’ was apparently first used in architecture.)

One major effect of modernity has been a questioning of traditional authority. Early scientific methods of thought led to challenges to traditional beliefs, such as that the earth was the center of the cosmos. Copernicus and Galileo are well-known examples of scientific thinkers who got in trouble with established religious authorities for questioning certain traditional beliefs, more recently Darwin and his theory of evolution have evoked the ire of segments of Christianity, not to mention issues around climate change. The growth of the discipline of Biblical criticism, the study of the Bible based on the scientific principles of fields such as philology and archeology, raised serious questions about some traditional theological commitments. In these and similar ways, the authority of the church, clergy, and sacred texts such as the Bible, came to be questioned.

I had an example in my early years of ministry which I did not fully appreciate until later. During an Elders meeting (in the E & R side of the UCC the Elders were

similar in function to Deacons on the Congregational side), a theological question was raised. I don't remember what the specific issue was, but I do remember giving a nuanced theological perspective based on my then-recent years of graduate study, only to have the chair respond. "Well, that's just your opinion." This Elder, who was chronologically around my age, had little respect for the authority of learning and study or for the office of clergy, an attitude that would have been unthinkable in an earlier era.

Another effect, this time of the end of modernity and the beginnings of postmodernity, has been a loss of certainty. As the search for Truth, with a capital T, has run into the problems of different certainties in different historical eras and in different geographical locations, confidence in knowing Truth, other than scientific Truth, has waned. Constructively, this loss of certainty has led to a growth of tolerance and a recognition that 'truth' can have a plurality of expressions. We join most other mainline Christians in recognizing the legitimacy of other expressions of faith, and we no longer attempt to convert everyone to our expression of faith, recognizing our limitations of perspective.

Popularly, we can see this in the expression: "It doesn't matter what you believe as long as you believe something." As an expression of tolerance and respect for other faiths and value systems, this is to be applauded. A danger is that it also gives expression to a radical relativism that is not warranted. Postmodernism is not an expression of "anything goes." Postmodern philosophers and theologians are reluctant to speak of Truth (one Truth with a capital T); they prefer to speak of 'interpretations.' And most also affirm that some interpretations are more adequate than others. Interpreters are not free to

make a text, for example the Bible, say whatever they wish. Much as a classical music performer is bound to the score of the music being interpreted, interpreters are limited by their text. We might say that there is no one right and correct interpretation, but there are wrong and less adequate interpretations.

In summary, the effects of the end of modernist ways of thinking and the new development of postmodernism on theology and the church have led to a loss of authority and certainty, a loss reinforced by the societal changes associated with the end of Christendom. They have also led both to a recognition of the limitations of our standing in a particular place and time in history, a renewed understanding of our finitude, and to a new respect for and appreciation of other religions and expressions of faith.

The end of modernity's arrogant sense of certainty has meant a partial ending of centuries of colonial and paternalistic treatment of people who differ from us. This is a great gain, but we easily fall back into old habits – witness the survival of racist attitudes, not always even thinly veiled, in the United States. Postmodernity's recognition of the influence of historical time and place on us has led some people of faith to actively search out others who are different in order to begin developing relationships with them. We listen to them, befriend them, and share hospitality in ways we would not have thought of while wearing the blinders of Christendom and modernity. When we get to know them and learn their stories, we are moved to examine ways they may have been treated unfairly and unjustly. In other words, we find a new impetus for social justice, for building God's kin(g)dom on earth.

#### D. Prospects for the Church in North America

I would like to reiterate the drastic nature of the changes facing the church in our post-Christendom and postmodern world. I believe these changes are unprecedented in the history of the church. The only period that comes close is the transition from the early church to becoming a state church at the time of Constantine. As happened then, it will take several generations for the church and theology to respond and adjust to its new context in the world. We are still in the early stages, as evidenced by the reference 'post.' We don't have a name yet for what is coming for the church. Some have used terms like 'emergence' and 'convergence,' but no term has yet caught on in either the church or secular worlds as descriptive of the new situation.

Those of us who have experiences and memories of the Christendom model may long for a reconstruction of a golden era, but the changes impacting the church are far beyond our control. We must adjust and re-think the church for effective ministry in the world/context in which we find ourselves. We are placed (by God?) in a new situation with new dangers and new opportunities.

I ran across a YouTube video that illustrates how difficult it is to change well-entrenched skills and ways of thinking. The video centers around an adult learning to ride a new kind of bicycle. This bike steers in the opposite direction of all the bikes we are used to. Turn the handlebars to the right and the front wheel goes to the left, and vice versa. Conceptually it sounds easy; just turn in the opposite direction. However, in practice, no one was able to ride the bike on a first try. It took the maker of the video about eight months to learn to ride the newfangled bike. And then he had

trouble riding a traditional bike. His young son, just beginning to ride a bike, was able to master the new bike in a month or two.

Similarly, those of us long-termers in the church struggle to adjust to the new situation of the church.

In spite of the drastic changes, we will find continuities as we proclaim and witness in this new context. Our tradition (theologically liberal, broadly Reformed and Calvinist flavored) has always had a concern for the world and its inhabitants, the world God created and in which we live and move and have our being. This concern has been expressed through active involvement in political, social, and community affairs. We have been concerned about our neighbors and organized various social services when there was need. We have tried to listen to the voices of those ignored by others and have assisted them in bringing their concerns to a wider audience. At times, this has involved critique of particular attitudes and laws and actions. We might summarize by saying that we have expressed love for our neighbors by working for the common good, a value currently in decline in our society.

Our concern for the common good will continue into new forms of the church. However, the particular expressions and the flavor of our work for the common good will change. As the church itself has become marginalized in our culture and society, we will find it easier to empathize with those who are left out and are on the margins. We ourselves will feel marginalized and misunderstood as liberal, progressive (in a theological rather than political sense) Christians. We will experience directly the frustrations of speaking and not being heard or taken seriously.

Because the church is no longer part of the establishment status quo, we

will see the world in a new way – more sympathetic to the underdog, less likely to defend the status quo, and consequently more of a critical voice in the public arena. The prophetic role of the church in the Reformation was thought of as its teaching role. This will continue. But we will be able to recover more of the Old Testament role of prophesy as critique of society, culture, and government because we are no longer defenders of the powers that be as we were in the era of Christendom. This newly developing role will make some of our members with experience in the Christendom church uncomfortable, but we will be more faithful witnesses to our faith.

In the Christendom church, Christians began to serve in the militaries of their governments, a change from the pacifism of the early church. The (non-biblical) theological doctrines of just war theory were developed to defend this practice. I foresee a gradual return to the pacifism of the early church, with the formerly mainline churches finding common cause with Anabaptists and others who have traditionally maintained a pacifist position.

The postmodern, post-Christendom church will be a place of refuge, recuperation, and resurrection, an alternative community helping people strengthen faith and values commitments that are challenged or ignored by the rest of society and culture. Those identifying with and committing themselves to the church will form themselves and be formed by values other than those of the dominant culture.

Many in our culture find themselves searching for meaning and purpose in life. This is a spiritual search for which we in the church are well-equipped. However, we have not been seen as a safe place for spiritual searching.

We have to find ways of communicating theological and spiritual openness rather than the doctrinal rigidity those outside liberal/progressive churches assume. We need to recover a sense of being a Pilgrim people, a people on the way, a people who are ourselves searching and questioning. We need to develop relationships more than to share tracts, creeds, and various other propositionally-based approaches. A look at the early church (before Constantine) could be helpful. Early Christians were known in many places as people of the Way; orthodoxy was not a major concern; theological and liturgical diversity reigned.

In the mid-twentieth century, UCC theologian H. Richard Niebuhr wrote a book analyzing five ways the church historically related to its culture. He saw our tradition as being ‘Christ transforming culture.’ With the end of Christendom and modernism we have been thrown, perhaps against our will, into the ‘Christ against culture’ group. In the near future, we will realize the ways we need to speak against cultural values like materialism, while carrying on our tradition of working within our culture and society for the betterment of all, i.e. the common good.

In many ways, it is easier to see and feel the losses for the church as we transition through the end of the Christendom and modern eras. Many of us have personal experiences with the church in its modernist and Christendom modes; we are familiar with what has been lost. The future is uncertain. We are entering uncharted territory.

Or are we? Back in the dusty stacks of our faith heritage there are charts for navigating a pre-Christendom model of relationship to the world and society. The ship of the church has sailed in similar waters before: a minority in the larger society and culture, a diverse menu of

theological positions, a stronger emphasis on faith rather than on beliefs, a willingness to stand and speak against injustice, and relationships built on a common commitment to walking the way of Jesus.

Today we are in the early stages of building a new vision of the community of faith. It will have a few resemblances with the immediately preceding Christendom church. It will have even more resonances with the communities of faith before 300 CE. The new vision, or should I say 'visions' (plural) in keeping with the spirit of diverse viewpoints and approaches to faith, will be oriented around relationships. Later in these reflections I will propose conversation, friendship, and hospitality as three necessary relationships around which to construct new communities of faith.

### III. Local Context

#### A. Economic & Demographic Changes in the Waterville Area

This is an impressionistic description of the Waterville area based on my experience and what people have told me. Specific demographic information is available through sources for U.S. Census data, and the Center for Progressive Renewal, a UCC-related agency, has available detailed analyses with information about the common religious and spiritual preferences and needs of different demographic groupings.

In recent decades, Waterville and the surrounding area have experienced a decline in population and in economics. What was once a thriving mill town with vital small business, many located downtown, is now a center for health and social services. The population is roughly half of what it once was, both in the town and in the schools. There is a high rate of poverty. About three-quarters of the students at the George Mitchell

Elementary School qualify for reduced-fee or free lunches. The parents' organization has started a food pantry within the school. Drug and alcohol abuse are rampant.

The major employers in the area are educational and health care institutions, and the health care piece has declined with the move of the hospital to Augusta.

#### B. Impact on the Waterville Church

The changes in the immediate area of the congregation have had a multiplier effect on the broader social and cultural trends. The loss of Christendom's implicit support of churches combined with a declining population to have a negative impact on church membership and worship attendance. This can be tracked by looking at the church attendance records. I haven't researched this, but I have a hunch that regular Sunday worship attendance began to decline a little before attendance at special services like Christmas and Easter. Parallel declines in the number of weddings and baptisms have happened. I also believe the number of requests from non-members for funerals has shown a decline. In my early years of ministry, non-members, operating under the Christendom model, had a vague feeling that, even if they were not church members, their children should be baptized, they should be married in a church (or at least by an ordained minister), and that funerals should be conducted by a minister. If my memory is correct, in recent years I did not have one funeral (or celebration of life) for a person who was not connected with the church in some way, past or present, or was related to a church member.

Church finances have become a struggle as attendance and participation have dropped. The economic decline of the Waterville area exacerbates the social

trend away from churches. Another factor, not previously mentioned, is the growing gap between the extremely wealthy and the rest of us. Large sectors of the middle class in the US have experienced stagnant or declining incomes in recent years. And these are the folks who are the backbone of financial support for congregations.

Declines in attendance and finances lead to questioning ourselves and to self-doubt. If we aren't who we used to be, who are we? Can't we do something to get back to where we were? Long-time members can remember when our congregation was a 'tall-steeple' congregation. We still have the tall steeple (and the building under it is not inexpensive to maintain) but we no longer have the financial and social elite of the area (what is left of them) as members, or at least not enough of them to maintain the tall-steeple image. A few remnants remain. [When some non-churched members of the financial and social elite, e.g. business leaders, social workers and counselors, teachers, and government officials, of the Waterville area have felt the need for pastoral service and spiritual guidance, they have quietly called on me. I expect that will continue with Mark but gradually decline.] The remnants of who we once were that remain in our public image and reputation can provide entrée we might not otherwise have that can be used for good purposes. However, the remnants are not enough to serve as a foundation for building the future.

Who are we if we are no longer who we once were? There is a sense of a death. We grieve the loss of who we were. And we long for a resurrection but maybe aren't sure we really believe resurrection can apply to us and to our congregation. We have grief work to do and issues of life cycle of congregations changes from program to pastoral size to deal with.

People have a tendency to look back, to search for what worked in the past. It doesn't work. With the radical changes of the ending of Christendom and of modernity, it is absolutely necessary to look at the present and toward the future to which God is summoning us. We can learn from the past, but we cannot imitate or reproduce it because Waterville and the world have changed. We need new visions of and for the Church and of local congregations.

The rest of my report is my take on areas and issues to examine looking to the future, attempting to discern what kind of resurrection God might be calling us to in the US church generally and in Waterville specifically.

#### IV. The Need for Relationships and Relational Theology

##### A. Faith or Belief?

I have thus far avoided quoting other authors and the technical theological arguments necessary to support what I have been saying, but at this point I find it helpful to refer to Harvey Cox, retired professor at Harvard Divinity School and lifelong observer of the contemporary religious scene around the world.

In a book written a few years ago, *The Future of Faith*, Cox writes about a worldwide shift in understanding of what it means to be religious. Because we live in a 'global culture' (Cox's term), this shift affects all of the world's religions. Cox thinks this shift "is especially evident in Christianity, which in the past fifty years has entered into its most momentous transformation since its transition in the fourth century CE from what had begun as a tiny Jewish sect into the religious ideology of the Roman Empire." (p. 2) In the terms I used earlier, Cox is saying that the end of Christendom is the most profound change to confront the church

since the beginning of Christendom at the time of Constantine. [A personal aside: See why I like Cox. He's the only author I have found who has said that he shares my conviction that the Christian church is facing its most drastic change since the time of Constantine.]

Cox reminds us of a distinction between faith and belief.

"It is true that for many people 'faith' and 'belief' are just two words for the same thing. But they are not the same, and in order to grasp the magnitude of the religious upheaval now under way, it is important to clarify the difference. Faith is about deep-seated confidence. In everyday speech we usually apply it to people we trust or the values we treasure. It is what theologian Paul Tillich (1886-1965) [another theologian identified with the UCC] called 'ultimate concern,' a matter of what the Hebrews spoke of as the 'heart.'

"Belief, on the other hand, is more like opinion. We often use the term in everyday speech to express a degree of uncertainty. 'I don't really know about that,' we say, 'but I believe it may be so.' Beliefs can be held lightly or with emotional intensity, but they are more propositional than existential. We can *believe* something to be true without it making much difference to us, but we place our *faith* only in something that is vital for the way we live. Of course people sometimes confuse faith with beliefs, but it will be hard to comprehend the tectonic shift in Christianity today unless we understand the distinction between the two." (p. 3)

Cox goes on to divide Christian history into three periods. He calls the first the "Age of Faith." This period began with

Jesus and the disciples and continued through the "explosive growth and brutal persecution" (Cox) of early Christianity. The second period is the "Age of Belief," which began as the first catechisms were written to acquaint new converts who had not known Jesus with his teachings, "replacing faith *in* Jesus with tenets *about* him." (p. 5) Constantine's establishment of Christianity as the state religion of the Roman Empire marks the beginning of the full-blown Age of Belief. This second period is ending.

"Now we stand on the threshold of a new chapter in the Christian story. Despite dire forecasts of its decline, Christianity is growing faster than it ever has before, but mainly outside the West and in movements that accent spiritual experience, discipleship, and hope; pay scant attention to creeds; and flourish without hierarchies. We are now witnessing the beginning of a 'post-Constantinian era.'

[another term for what I have called post-Christendom] Christians on five continents are shaking off the residues of the second phase (the Age of Belief) and negotiating a bumpy transition into a fresh era for which a name has not yet been coined.

"I would like to suggest we call it the 'Age of the Spirit.'" (p. 8)

One of the characteristics Cox sees in the Age of the Spirit is that "the pragmatic and experiential elements of faith as a way of life are displacing the previous emphasis on institutions and beliefs." (p. 3) A corollary of this is that relationships are more important than propositional statements of belief, such as creeds. I think we see elements of what

Cox is describing and need to be aware of them as we think about practical matters of worship, mission, and church life – all of which I will explore later.

The distinction between faith and belief has been a part of traditional academic theology, but in the popular mind the distinction has usually collapsed. We need to recover the distinction because it can help us in both personal and communal expressions of faith.

### B. Individual & Communal Spirituality

First some observations about faith orientation in individuals.

One of the common phrases we hear, which sometimes drives me bonkers, is “I’m spiritual but not religious.” Several different attitudes can be covered under this phrase. The first is an anti-institutional attitude. Many people have been hurt by the institutional church along the way of their spiritual journeys. The hurt might be abuse of several kinds. The hurt might be dogmatically closing off spiritual exploration and questions. The hurt might be autocratic and/or uncaring leadership. Whatever the hurt, some people who have serious spiritual hungers distance themselves from the institutional church by saying they are “spiritual but not religious.” These folks are potentially reachable with the right kind of approach.

Others who use the phrase ‘spiritual but not religious’ have a vague sense that they ought to be more religious (perhaps as a remnant of Christendom) but don’t really want to make a commitment to a faith community. Other interests take up their time.

Still others have a feel-good type of spirituality that they do not want challenged by a community of faith. They tend to be very self-oriented in their spirituality. From a Christian perspective,

this is love of God (being generous, because sometimes their worship is directed toward false gods) without love of neighbor, which is an incomplete love. This type of spirituality is rather fragile and does not hold up well in a crisis. These folks may turn to a minister, or even a faith community, in the midst of a crisis, staying in relationship until the crisis subsides and then drifting off.

Outside of evangelical churches traditional practices of piety and spirituality are declining, although a surprisingly high proportion of the general population report to survey questioners that they pray frequently. My impression is that saying grace before meals is an almost forgotten practice. Biblical literacy, once the impetus for the founding of great institutions of learning, is appalling even among regular church attenders. Note how many churches print the page numbers of the scripture readings in their bulletins because that’s the only way most people could find them.

Individuals with spiritual hungers are turning to a number of places for nourishment. Meditation and yoga classes, Native American spiritual practices, mindfulness, Buddhism, Hinduism, in some communities Islam. Notably absent from this list is the Christian church. They may also turn to mission and service projects in non-church settings. When my son organized a law school student trip to New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, more students than could be accommodated wanted to participate.

Notice that these later examples are not as individualistic as the earlier ‘spiritual but not religious’ examples. There is some recognition that a community is important, whether it be a yoga class or participants in a mission trip. Both spirituality and service, in these examples, have a dimension of community

and are expressions, perhaps not described in this way, of love of neighbor. It's not just "me and God," but includes others in some way.

Which moves us into the communal dimensions of spirituality.

Within Christianity, certain communities have flourished even in the midst of the general decline of congregations, the traditional community of our faith. Communities like Taize in France and Iona in Scotland have attracted many, particularly young people, interested in deepening their spirituality through an experience of community. This fits with Cox's observations about the rising importance of experiential faith.

Although people are moving away from the church as a resource for their spiritual lives, and many have had negative experiences with the 'institutional' church, I think the problem with the church has not been that it has been an institution. The problem is that the church too often has become merely an institution and not paid enough attention to the community side of the institution/community polarity. The church has gotten out of touch with much of its constituency and has continued to form itself in an institutional way appropriate for the past, the era of Christendom, and not yet re-made itself into an institution appropriate for post-Christendom and postmodernity. Yes, we need new institutional forms for communities of faith, but more importantly we need to rebuild a strong sense of Christian faith communities.

Our UCC congregations and wider church structures are organized on a rational, bureaucratic model. The word 'rational' should give us a clue that this model of organization worked for a modern, rational mindset. It still works for many organizations, e.g. commercial

profit-making enterprises; it no longer works as well for religious organizations. I would argue that religious organizations were never purely rational, bureaucratic organizations. Larger and/or suburban congregations tended most in this direction. For small, or ethnic, or rural, or inner-city congregations, being a rational, effective, bureaucratic organization was not the purpose of a congregation. Rather, congregations were places of identity and relationships.

Sociologists distinguish two broad types of organizations. One type is rational and bureaucratic, business-like, known by the German word 'Gesellschaft.' The other is called 'Gemeinschaft,' the word for community. Gemeinschaft emphasizes relationships among people rather than rational, efficient organization. In the fifties, one popular model for pastoral ministry was the 'pastoral director;' the ideal pastor was seen as an effective manager of a religious organization. This was the Gesellschaft model of organization in a congregational context. Seeing the pastor as a shepherd would be an example of Gemeinschaft organization in congregations.

I think the rebellion against church organizations is a rebellion against Gesellschaft-type churches, which can seem formal and uncaring. In a postmodern and post-Christendom era, the Age of the Spirit, a congregation organized around relationships seems more appropriate and more tuned in to the needs of the time.

All of this points to a need for changes of emphasis in the life and ministry of congregations. The elements we need for the future are already part of our traditions but they have been secondary motifs rather than dominant themes.

### C. Practical Implications

**Worship:** A congregation emphasizing relationships takes seriously relationships (friendship) with God and Jesus. People are looking for an experience of the presence of God in worship, not just information or propositions about God. The growth of prayer concerns being verbally expressed by worshippers is an illustration of this. Forty years ago this was a rarity in the UCC. Now, if I can generalize from my visits to other congregations, most include a time of prayer concerns in worship.

**God:** Post-moderns long for a relationship with God that includes rather than excludes wrestling with questions of faith, trust, meaning, and purpose of life. They/We want to experience God's presence rather than debate propositions about God's existence and nature. But they/we need help in discerning and naming experiences of God. This takes conversations with each other about God and with God. Under the influence of the narrow modern rationalism we have lost facility with the language of experiences of God. Awe and wonder and natural beauty can all point us toward God's presence. For some, God is primarily known through relationships with other people (perhaps even in marriage and deep friendships) that go beyond superficialities to the mysteries of life and love and the universe.

**Mission:** Experiential, hands-on. There are reasons beyond the ease of travel for the growth in popularity of mission trips. People are changed by the relationships nurtured and developed among those on mission trips and those at the destination of the trips. Strangers become equal partners in God's larger mission. 'Others' are recognized as God's children also and become brothers and sisters in faith. The day of contributing to

send other people to evangelize and serve on the mission field is over. Mission is now with those who are marginalized at home and around the world. The day of 'colonial' missions is waning in favor of relationships of equality with indigenous leaders and faith communities, e.g. the partnership between the Maine Conference and the Evangelical and Reformed Church of Honduras.

**Christian education:** Sunday School and Confirmation are no longer about memorizing Bible verses and catechism questions. The purpose of Christian education is forming relationships, with God and with others, which help us in the formation of Christian disciples.

**Justice:** Justice and witness ministries have been the domain of a few. In the post-modern, post-Christendom church, justice and witness ministries become a primary component of who we are as faithful people. We hold on to and hold out a hopeful view of how the world could be based on the teachings of Jesus and scripture about the Kin(g)dom of God.

Loving God and loving our neighbors takes concrete form through relationships with others of God's children. One way of organizing our thinking about these relationships is to group them around the practice of conversation, friendship, and hospitality.

### D. Theology and Ecclesiology

Our practices in the community need to be grounded in our faith. So we are pushed by the new context and by contextually adjusted practices of the church to reflect theologically about who we are as communities of faith and what God is calling us to do in new contexts of ministry and service. Ecclesiology, theological work about the nature and mission of the Christian church, the

community of faith and faithfulness, becomes one of the primary areas for theological work and research. Ecclesiology is the crossroad of sometimes arcane and abstract theological work and the concrete practices of the Christian community.

Theological work necessarily involves propositions, but the theological work needed for the post-Christendom, postmodern church will be primarily about relationships. In addition to the traditional verbal methods of theology, there will be a recognition of the theological and spiritual value of multiple approaches to theological reflection. The most obvious examples are art and music. Rembrandt, Van Gogh, and Bach are examples of artists whose work is filled with theological reflection and spiritual insight. Multiple intelligence theory can provide a grid for other areas of theological exploration that would better connect with people whose primary intelligence is not verbal.

In Christian history, there have been two main ways of identifying and describing the characteristics of the Church, usually called marks of the church. One is based on the great creeds of the church, especially the Apostles' Creed. The Church is one, holy, Catholic, and apostolic. Theologians have reflected and argued about the meaning of one, holy, Catholic, and apostolic at great length. Although this way of thinking about the Church originated in the Roman Catholic church, it is not limited to them. At the time of the Reformation, the Protestant Reformers, among them our theological and ecclesiological ancestors both Reformed and Congregational, proposed an alternative understanding of the Church. For most of the Reformers, the Church is where the Word is rightly preached and the sacraments properly

administered. Notice that the Reformation marks of the church are less abstract, more concrete, and more closely related to the people in the Church.

Wearing my more theological hat, I have been working on developing an ecclesiology for the new church, an ecclesiology that moves farther along in the direction begun by the Reformers. To be in tune with the relationship and experiential emphasis of the postmodern, post-Christendom Age of the Spirit, the marks of the church need to describe relationships that Christians experience. I am proposing conversation, friendship, and hospitality as necessary relationships in the church. Conversation, friendship, and hospitality are among the ways we put into concrete action our love of God and neighbor. They may seem almost trivial at first, but upon reflection they lead us into depths of theological substance, all centered on relationships rather than beliefs (in Cox's sense). They push us along our way of life and guide us in our walk with God and neighbors with a greater emphasis on justice and witness actions, and even critique of social and cultural practices.

Conversation, friendship, and hospitality can be understood in a fairly common sense way as the words are used in everyday, ordinary language, with the addition of remembering we are using them in a Christian context. They are immanent (remembering Cox and the Age of the Spirit) ways of potentially discerning the presence of God in our world. They are about relationships among people and with God. And they are dynamic, interactive with each other, and describe actions and events. Within the context of Christian communities of faith, these simple, ordinary, innocuous-sounding practices can, when developed

theologically, become profound tools and practices of faith and witness.

Conversation: We are defined, in large part, by whom we choose as our conversation partners. We are Christian because we choose to take seriously conversations with God, Jesus, and the Bible as guides for our lives. We have conversations with others within our faith community, with visitors, with those of other faiths, with those out in the world. These are not casual conversations; small talk doesn't really count unless it leads to deeper conversation about meaning and purpose in life in the light of God's spirit of love. Among other characteristics of real and meaningful conversations is the willingness and openness to be changed by the conversation. Thus, conversations are a part of a continual process of growth and change, *metanoia* in theological terms.

When we choose to have conversations, real conversations, with those of God's children who are ignored or pushed aside by our culture, the conversation itself becomes a faithful witness that can be threatening. Rev. Will Campbell was a liberal Southern Baptist minister active in the civil rights movement of the 60's. A little later in life, he felt a calling to engage in conversations and get to know members of the Klu Klux Klan. Needless to say, these conversations generated a great deal of controversy, within and outside of the church. Campbell wanted to understand rather than demonize those who seemed to be enemies. Simple conversations are not always simple.

For Biblical grounding of the importance of conversations to a life of faith and faithfulness, we can look to Jesus and see who his conversation partners were. And we can notice that a great many of his conversations took place over a meal. For example, Jesus' 'Farewell

Discourse' took place around the table in the upper room on the night before Good Friday. There is a sense of communion in every deep and meaningful conversation, whether with God or with one of God's children. These kinds of conversation touch us deeply and feed our souls. On at least one occasion Jesus made sure the crowds gathered to hear him preach were fed. He created controversy by eating with notorious sinners. Many of Jesus' parables and teachings are set in the context of conversations. Jesus instructed us to love not just our neighbors, but also our enemies. Wouldn't loving our enemies begin with having a conversation with them?

The scriptures are full of examples of conversations. We have conversations in our faith communities all the time. However, we have reflected neither on either our actual ways of conducting conversations nor on how conversations can be understood theologically. In the post-Christendom, postmodern church, basic human and spiritual relationships like conversation take on a new importance and require new theological reflection.

Friendship: Conversations lead to friendships. Christian friendship is modeled on our relationship with Jesus. A Biblical grounding is found in John 15:15: "I do not call you servants [can also be translated as 'slaves'] any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my father." (NRSV) As Christians, we must be audacious enough to claim this gift of friendship from Jesus. We recognize as friends those others who are also friends of Jesus, i.e. other Christians. But our friendship does not stop there. We acknowledge as friends other brothers and

sisters who are children of God, potentially the whole human race. Of course, practically we do not know the whole human race, but Christian friendship is an open friendship; we are open to friendship with any of God's children. This is quite a different understanding of friendship than that of, for example Aristotle, who thought real friendship could only be among equals, equals, that is, in terms of socio-economic status, education, etc. For Christians, the only thing that counts is that we are all children of God and all sinners, a very different conception of equality. Christian friendship gives us a basis for solidarity with all people, not just a subset of humanity defined by a limited vision. The concept of open Christian friendship has ethical consequences and actions beyond individual relationships that move into systemic applications of friendship to peace and justice issues.

Hospitality: Hospitality keeps our friendships and conversations from being limited to a closed circle. Hospitality has been a practice of faith going back at least as far as Abraham, who welcomed three strangers, one of whom may have been God. In the face of xenophobia (an unreasonable fear of strangers, people from other countries, or the unknown), Christians are committed to the practice of hospitality, welcoming friends and strangers alike. However, Christian hospitality is more than a passive welcome of those who come to us. Christian hospitality reaches out to embrace others, especially strangers and those who are marginalized and voiceless. We reach out in faith, knowing the 'other' is also a child of God. We bring them into our circles of friendship and engage them in conversations – the dynamic nature of these three marks of the church – knowing that God can mysteriously appear in the

guise of a stranger. Our practice of active hospitality leads us into paths of social service and witness for justice and peace. We cannot idly stand by while a brother or sister is treated unjustly.

These three, conversation, friendship, and hospitality, are marks of the postmodern, post-Christendom church. They function as yardsticks and guideposts by which we judge how we are doing at being and becoming a community of faith and witness, and which constantly draw us forward into new ventures of faithfulness and witness.

As marks of the church, i.e. as theologically grounded characteristics of the church, conversation, friendship, and hospitality can be used to generate questions both for reflections on how we are doing currently and for concrete directions we may move in the future. Just a few examples: Are we having conversations with God? Are we listening to what our still-speaking God is saying to us? Are we having deep spiritual and theological conversations with each other within the congregation? Are we having conversations about meaning of life kinds of questions with members of our larger community and with strangers? Are we listening to the soft voices in our community that are often ignored and overlooked? Are our friendships developing and deepening? Is our friendship with Jesus growing? Are we making friends with strangers? Are our friendships open? Who do we need to reach out to with a hand of friendship? Is our hospitality more than saying welcome on Sunday morning – as important as that is? Does our hospitality and welcome of strangers move beyond small talk and offer the possibility of Christian friendship? Are our practices of conversation, friendship, and hospitality grounded in and informed by our Christian

faith? If not, we have nothing distinctive to offer that could not be found in other social and service groups. Questions like these help us to evaluate and reflect on programs and practices of the church in ways that are theologically and spiritually grounded in our vision of the church; they can also guide us in faithful directions when we are exploring new programs.

#### E. Summary

The preceding sketch of our contemporary context and of a new vision for the Church provides parameters that need to be filled in with specifics by communities doing the hard work of building communities of faith for a new age. It is easy to be distracted by peripheral issues and to avoid the difficult work of building foundations for new communities by jumping ahead too soon. It is also easy to look backwards with sadness and grief for what has been lost rather than to look forward with hope to the new pathways God is calling us to walk, a way of relationships rather than propositions and of faith rather than belief, a way of spiritual exploration and questioning, a way of new and renewed communities of faith characterized by conversation, friendship, and hospitality.

### V. Recommendations and Resources

#### A. Key Concepts

Several key concepts from the preceding analysis need to be kept in mind as we move to recommendations for the congregation. They provide parameters within which we must to work if we are to have a chance of success.

*Post-Christendom*/end of Christendom and *postmodernism*/end of modernism describe the massive social and cultural changes we are going through, the wilderness around us, if you will. The distinction between *faith* and belief, and

the growing emphasis on faith experience over belief (propositions), is a sign pointing us toward a fruitful path. Another sign pointing the same direction reads *relationships*. Relationships in the church, and from the church reaching out into the world, are characterized by *conversation*, *friendship*, and *hospitality*. These seven words give us guideposts for the way ahead. (It's a nice coincidence that seven has sometimes been considered a holy number.)

#### B. Recommendations

I have grouped my recommendations into five categories: five primary recommendations; spiritual and theological grounding; relationships, both internal to the congregation and external relationships; nuts and bolts issues; and several things related to Mark as pastor. These recommendations are intentionally written in a rather directive way, rather than with the qualifications an academic approach would require. They are meant to be a stimulant and to provide a starting place, to be adapted and modified through discussions, conversations, and additional perspectives.

##### 1. Primary Recommendations

The first two recommendations flow out of the changed context of post-Christendom and postmodernism.

###### a. Faith Conversations

We need to develop, and help our people develop, skills and comfort in speaking about our faith in personal, experiential ways. This may mean some of us need to develop our skills in listening to God's voice. (See section 2 below.) We talk about God as "still speaking" in the UCC, but we haven't talked much about how we listen to the still-speaking God. A prerequisite of sharing our faith is being able to identify and name the ways God is

present in our lives. I think many people in the Waterville church can do this already, but we are reticent to talk about God acting in our lives and our world lest we appear pushy about faith. We need to learn to have genuine, open-ended conversations about faith and issues of finding personal meaning in our lives.

b. Invitation

We must learn how to invite people into conversations about faith, which of course means we must be able to talk about our own faith and how it gives meaning and direction to our lives; thus the first recommendation. Because social forces and expectations in Christendom pushed people into our churches, we have not needed to issue invitations to participate in church life. We have a 1700-year gap in our traditions, the era of Christendom, and invitation has not been a skill we have needed in congregational life. Because so many of our members, especially in the Waterville church, are highly educated in good schools, we have drunk deeply of modern rationalist skepticism about traditional expressions of faith. We are reluctant to speak publicly, and often even privately, about our personal faith, because we fear being put in the camp of people whose approach to faith is closed and rigid rather open and growing.

We need to develop skills and experience inviting members of the community, some of whom are family, to participate in the life of our congregation. (A corollary: We must have events that appeal to and meet spiritual needs of spiritually hungry people in our community. See later recommendations on listening for spiritual needs and initiating appropriate programs.) Both invitation and personal faith-sharing are skills that can be learned. As a congregation and as individuals, we need to make a

commitment to learn these skills, yes for the sake of the survival of our congregation but more importantly for the communication and sharing of the Good News to a spiritually hungry world.

My first two recommendations are to develop ways of teaching and learning the skills of personal faith-sharing and invitation.

c. Discipleship and Commitment

My third recommendation is not as focused. We need to develop and encourage a congregational culture of discipleship and commitment. The Waterville church has a history of being very staff-dependent. There is no lack of good ideas, but there is a lack of people willing to work together on implementing them. The general expectation is that the church staff will do the implementation. This micro-cultural expectation must change. But this is not something that can be addressed by a discrete program. I know we have lots of good people who are involved in lots of activities outside the church for the betterment of our community; many of these activities could even be characterized as ministries. Our task is to challenge a few of our people to put the same energy into their church. Church leaders need to lead by example here because positive examples are contagious. Negative approaches, “You aren’t committed enough to ...,” are self-defeating. People must be enticed, even seduced, into commitment and participation in joyful, fun, and meaningful ministries, activities, and experiences. Once again, social and cultural changes around us make this difficult. Economic and social factors have led to more two-earner households, and life just seems to be busier than years ago. In spite of these factors, we have some very committed leaders. But we need to

draw more people into leadership circles, making sure they are open rather than closed, and that new ideas are taken seriously. “We’ve never done it that way before” is no excuse. In fact, if we have done it that way before, we probably need to change.

Involvement of lay people in the ministries of the church is grounded in the Reformation concept of the priesthood of all believers. All Christians are called to ministries within and outside of the community of faith, not just ordained clergy. While the primary ministries of most Christians will be in their secular vocations, they also have places and responsibilities for ministry within the community of faith. A firm grounding within the faith community will become even more important in helping lay people understand and respond to their vocational callings in an increasing secular society and culture.

My third recommendation is for church leaders to exemplify and develop commitment and discipleship.

#### d. Identity, Vision, and Purpose

The next area for discussion centers around questions of identity, vision, and purpose. We need to own who we are and articulate our aspirations, what it is that pulls us forward toward God’s kin(g)dom. We center the life of our faith community around God as known through Jesus the Christ; we are unapologetically Christian. We are theologically liberal; some would use the word ‘progressive,’ but I worry about excluding people who would not describe themselves as politically progressive. We are committed to social justice, e.g. our Open and Affirming stance and our support of Kennebec Valley Organization, and to social service, e.g. the homeless shelter and the Evening Sandwich Program. We wish we were more diverse –

economically, socially, educationally racially, etc. We must be open and honest, and true to our deeper understanding of who we are as a community of faith. In other words, we must be authentic. The importance of authenticity cannot be overstated; people skeptical about churches seem to have a well-developed nose for artificiality, pretension, and inauthenticity.

My fourth recommendation is to find ways to develop and articulate our vision of who we are and where God is calling us to be and to act, culminating in a relatively short, succinct, concrete statement. This statement then would become the basis for a snappy, memorable one sentence or phrase summary of our identity, purpose, and mission.

#### e. Embody Hope

Based on our vision we can develop a positive narrative of hope for the future. No one wants to join a dying or self-serving institution. We are a congregation with a long and faithful history of ministry gradually finding our path into new ways of being the church and the body of Christ for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. With the new contexts of the end of Christendom and of modernism, the old ways of doing things have declined, as we all know, and we grieve the loss of what was once so successful. The temptation is to have a narrative of failure. A more constructive, and more faithful, course would be to use a Biblically-based narrative of loss and grief and even death. What once was is dying and almost gone. But as faithful people we know that death is not the end. With faith and trust in God’s promises, we can affirm in concrete, practical terms that we look forward to resurrection and new life. This is not easy. We have to ask ourselves deep questions about faith. Do we really believe in resurrection and new life? Can we as a

community of faith experience resurrection and new life? If we do not believe in resurrection, there is no point in looking for signs of new life.

I think the Waterville congregation is in a 'Holy Saturday' time. A few years ago, when people began to realize the extent of the decline in membership, finances, etc., we were at Good Friday. Maybe, to prepare ourselves to move on, we need formal ways of lamenting our losses, acknowledging our grief, and placing ourselves in God's hands. Then we may be more ready to discuss new life, new signs of God's kin(g)dom sprouting among us, new callings for faithful ministries of witness and service. When we identify signs of new life, we can incorporate them into a vision we will naturally share with joy and enthusiasm.

My fifth recommendation is twofold: hold a celebration of life/funeral service for the 'old' Waterville church, and develop a narrative vision of resurrection and Easter for the congregation.

My remaining recommendations are more concrete, less global. However, in order to have success in working on them, they must be tackled in the context of the larger issues of the previous recommendations.

## 2. Spiritual and Theological Grounding

Provide and make people aware of opportunities for hands-on mission work; the Honduras mission trips and Habitat for Humanity are both examples, as is the Evening Sandwich Program. This may seem like an odd way to begin discussing spiritual and theological grounding. However, for people who are not comfortable discussing faith issues directly, direct participation in mission

work, along with reflection on experiences of relationships with local people, provides a concrete way of beginning to articulate basic spiritual and faith commitments. For some, the spiritual and theological underpinnings of our ministries are best approached in concert with concrete, hands-on activities.

For others, the more traditional formats of Bible studies, book studies, meditation and prayer groups, etc. will help them form and articulate their faith. Yet we cannot just do them in the same old way. If these traditional avenues of faith formation and development are done with self-conscious awareness of our changed cultural and social contexts, they will be transformed in ways we might not imagine. Traditional Bible studies in many congregations have a well-deserved reputation for being conservative in the worst sense of the word – closed, dogmatic, not really open to questioning, etc. Luckily, the Waterville congregation has a head start with the existing Bible study group. The congregation needs more groups through which both members and non-members can discover, uncover, and construct the foundations of their faith.

In addition, every meeting of a committee, task force, or group within the congregation needs to work, in a small way, on spiritual and theological grounding in every meeting, speaking out loud how what the group is doing responds to God's calling and of how its work fits in with the larger vision of the congregation. This will involve more than pious platitudes and a prayer. Genuine spiritual sharing will build relationships within the groups and with God. Gradually, small and regular steps will result in a better understanding of how the church is more than a service club as it listens to the still-speaking God.

### 3. Relationships

Provide places and times for conversations, friendships, and hospitality.

#### a. Internal Relationships

Incorporate a time of relationship-building in every meeting, along with the spiritual component just mentioned. This could be done through a brief time of checking in with everyone present about what is going on in their lives. A second round might offer opportunities to share where people experience God at work in their lives or to share a spiritual issue they are wrestling with. Some small groups and Bible/book studies might have these as their primary purposes.

The micro-culture changes discussed above are a difficult challenge, one which cannot always be tackled directly. Becoming less staff dependent, invitational, committed, enthusiastic, and affirming of personal gifts will not happen because of a specific workshop or program. These changes in how we operate and how we relate to each other will happen as the cumulative effect of thousands of small decisions to act in new ways. They need to be identified, named, and celebrated.

Relationships are developed through informal encounters, not just in formal settings. Times need to be provided for informal conversations to allow the possibility of new relationships among people associated with the congregation. Coffee hours can be one setting, as can informal meals together. The danger of these informal times is that newcomers and strangers can be unintentionally left out of conversations. I lost count of how many times I was warmly welcomed as a visitor during the Passing of the Peace in worship and then completely ignored at the coffee hour. Informal times are great ways of initiating relationships, but those familiar with the congregation need to be

sure to take the initiative with strangers. This is hospitality at its most basic level.

#### b. External Relationships

Another recommendation, alluded to earlier, is to listen in a systematic way to members of the larger community of the Waterville area. What are the greatest needs – both spiritual and other needs? How can the congregation help meet those needs? This is an Easter ministry of new life, service and witness, not survival a little longer on the cross.

As we move further into the post-Christendom, postmodern age of faith, new possibilities for prophetic ministry will open up. Some specific local possibilities may arise out of listening to and for the needs of the community. Others may involve larger issues, such as pursuing designation as an Economic Justice Congregation. In this new era, there is a greater interest in personal participation in programs of service, justice, and witness. The church of the future will be more focused on outreach than on its own survival, more critical than supportive of the status quo, because we have caught a vision of God's kin(g)dom and know how we fall short.

We can learn from others beyond the UCC. We should explore affiliating with the Convergence movement, which has UCC and other mainline participation in addition to progressive evangelicals, i.e. evangelicals whose theology is open and inclusive and congruent with ours, progressive Roman Catholics, some people from Anabaptist traditions, and progressive ethnic churches. We can learn from Evangelicals, Anabaptists, and ethnic churches who have invitation and faith-sharing as strong parts of their traditions and who have developed skills for survival in indifferent and even hostile environments.

We can enroll in programs from the UCC-affiliated Center for Progressive Renewal to be in contact with and learn from other congregations similar to ours who are wrestling with similar issues.

We need to explore closer relationships with nearby UCC congregations. The Waterville church has historically been looked to as a leader in the area. Perhaps the time will soon come for more formal, closer relationships. This could take the form of a 'larger parish' with shared ministerial and other staff along with coordinated staff hiring, with some staff responsibilities across the cooperating churches. Or it could take the form of one congregation in multiple locations. However, we should not let other congregations, if they are stuck in modern and Christendom models for church life, keep us from moving ahead.

#### 4. Nuts and Bolts

We need to know the assets of the congregation: human resources: skills, interests, passions; financial resources: current giving, trust funds, estimate of potential giving (recognizing that most of the models for estimating giving were developed in the Christendom, modern era and during a time when income inequity was not squeezing the middle class, the source of most funding for local churches). Lastly, the building is an asset, a place that can be used for housing ministries consistent with the overall vision of the church. A growing trend seems to be two or more congregations sharing the use and expenses of one building – as happened on a temporary basis here with St. Mark's Episcopal church. One UCC congregation has partnered with a synagogue and a mosque to build a common campus as an interfaith witness. I know the building is also a liability because it is not the building that would be best suited for the

needs of the congregation at the current time, but it is still an asset that could be put to creative use for the good of the community. When assessing assets, whether building or financial or human, it is important to consider their uses for ministry and not be in a survival mode, which is why the previous recommendations are important.

The current committee structure of the congregation will need to be revised for a new day. The By-Laws will need to reflect the new emphasis on relationships and take account of the ways people are willing and able to participate. The new Maine Conference structure is one attempt to do this; the Yarmouth congregation has also restructured itself in a creative way. I would see, for example, more task forces with specific projects and a limited lifespan. While it may be tempting to jump in and tackle revising the By-Laws, it would be better to do this after some of the other recommendations have been worked on. New possibilities should not be foreclosed prematurely. The vision work is especially important because the vision will shape what kind of institutional structure will be most appropriate.

Style issues: We have been operating mostly in 20<sup>th</sup> century mode. With the electronic distribution of the newsletter and more use of the congregation's Facebook page things are improving. Are there further improvements that can be made with electronic communications and social media?

We need more diversity in worship music. I know some have strong objections to most praise music, objections I share. There is a wealth of other contemporary music, some in a classical vein (which we have done some of), some from communities like Taize and Iona, and other contemporary religious songwriters,

many of them progressive evangelicals. It is important that the music be consistent with the congregation's vision, theological commitments, and style, or in other words authenticity applies to music too.

#### 5. For the Pastor

Leading a congregation and giving pastoral care through a time of change is a particularly difficult time for pastors. Here are some things the congregation could do for Mark. Some will renew and deepen his professional skills; some will help him keep his sanity.

Since I have become Scholar in Residence without regular Sunday responsibilities, I have worshipped in a number of different congregations. I have learned something from all of them, and visiting them has helped me gain perspective on what is happening in Waterville. Mark, and the congregation, would benefit if he had opportunities to visit and worship with, particularly but not limited to, forward looking congregations. Perhaps once a quarter might be appropriate. This would be work time for Mark, not time off, and that would need to be communicated to the congregation.

Mark needs time to develop and nurture relationships with visitors to worship and with potential visitors in the community. This necessarily means less time spent with church members. Lay leaders need to be united in explaining to the congregation the importance of the pastor's work with individuals outside the church.

Whether or not the congregation becomes part of a Center for Progressive Renewal program, they have training programs Mark could benefit from. CPR is one of the few organizations that has an understanding of the current crisis of the larger church. Thus their programs are

more directly relevant to and more easily usable in our situation.

Find ways to affirm Mark and his ministry. One way is to celebrate important lifemarker events such as anniversaries of ordination and anniversaries of service to this congregation. Congregations that are known for a succession of successful pastors help their pastor grow into great pastors. There is no reason the Waterville church cannot be one of them.

One more recommendation related to Mark: A weekend off, maybe twice a year, not to be counted against vacation time. One of the joys of this year has been having the opportunity for weekend visits with family. Upon reflection, I realized that I was not able to attend Parents' Weekends when my children were in college because that would have meant taking a whole week's vacation. (This was before I was serving in Waterville.) Parish ministry is a demanding and stressful occupation with long hours, often when most of the rest of the world has time off. An occasional weekend off would come at small cost for the church and would be a great benefit for Mark and his family life.

#### C. Selected Resources

Center for Progressive Renewal  
Convergence movement – Brian  
McClaren, Doug Paget, & others  
Post-Vatican II discussions revitalized  
with Pope Francis  
Contemporary faith statements  
Convergence  
Phoenix Declaration

#### Books:

Molly Baskette, Real Good Church: How  
our church came back from the dead,  
and yours can, too  
Norman Bendroth, Transitional Ministry  
Today

Laurene Beth Bowers, Invitational  
Ministry: Move Your Church from  
Membership to Discipleship  
Lillian Daniel, Tell It Like It Is:  
Reclaiming the Practice of  
Testimony

Others are widely and easily available.

## VI. Conclusion

This is not the first time the Waterville church has experienced a time of great loss. When the old building and property were taken for the development of the concourse downtown, it was a time of tremendous change and loss for the congregation. The difference is that then there was an obvious Easter to look forward to with the construction of a new building. The use of the stained glass

windows, the pictures of the old building hanging in the current building, and the use of old pews in the chapel are ways of carrying parts of the past into the future. We don't know what would be an equivalent now. But we move forward in faith, trusting in God's goodness.

Tennessee Williams put it well: "There is a time for departure, even when there's no certain place to go."

Although we do not have a destination we can program into an ecclesiological GPS, we are not left without signs along the Way pointing the directions we should go. As we read the signs of the times and the signs of God's presence and leading, signs pointing in the direction of God's kin(g)dom, this congregation can be a pioneer of new forms of faithful community.