

## Telling Our Stories

**November 27, 2011**

I was asked to share with you this morning a little about “ways that I have experienced God at work in my life and in this church.” In addition, I was asked to share how this contributes to our family’s approach to pledging, to making the commitment to contribute to the work of this church throughout the year. All in two minutes! Here we go!

I grew up going to church every Sunday, as my parents were loyal choir members in Congregational churches wherever we lived. From Sunday school to the Children’s Choir and Vacation Bible School, my sister and brother and I were “regulars.” Confirmation was an interesting and challenging year, as I struggled with some of the contradictions in the Biblical texts and stories, and with the “leap of faith” which seemed called for, but my concerns were eased by my ministers’ reassurance that “faith” was really more aptly described as a lifelong journey, and that confirmation was a personal “re-commitment” to strive to follow that path which my parents had launched with my baptism years earlier. In high school, I continued active in church, joining my parents as a youth member of the Chancel Choir, where I started as a tenor and left as a bass! More importantly, though, I went on to be an active member and youth leader in “PF” (Pilgrim Fellowship), where I came to understand that our fundamental charge as Christians is to strive to be **instruments of God’s will**, putting the **Word** into **action**. I came to know from experience that doing so with others is particularly powerful, echoing the text from Matthew in which Jesus states “... *where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst.*”

Similar to part of the reminiscence that Dick Wilde shared last week, while in college, I was blessed to be able to continue with music. I had the opportunity to sing many of the major, sacred choral music works by the master composers. I had several profoundly moving and spiritual experiences, including what I can best refer to as an “out-of-body” experience while singing the final movement of the Bach B-minor Mass.

I pursued a career in Family Medicine because I came to the realization that it was a way to blend my interests in biology and problem-solving with my strong desire to minister to people in need. Deb and I were active members of a vibrant church in Atlanta, Georgia during our time in graduate and medical school, but unfortunately never did have a “home church” during my residency training years in Rochester, NY. However, when we arrived in Simsbury in 1987, with our two young children (Dan was 2 years old, Elly 6 months), we arrived just as Bob Naylor was beginning as senior minister. We found this church community to be very dynamic, with lots of activity by many “circles,” and we felt at home here very quickly. I was warmly welcomed to the Chancel Choir, with which I sang regularly for over ten years, but only intermittently since my work and call schedules swelled to the point that I can not reliably make it to rehearsals. (I do look forward to getting back “upstairs & in-blue” again before too long!) We particularly resonated with what we learned had been a longtime policy of this church, a commitment to contribute annually an amount equal to 25% of First Church’s annual budget to OCWM, that is, Our Church’s Wider Mission, the national and international mission arm of our UCC national conference. This was not always easy, but it was a commitment, and it felt right.

Sometime around the year 1999, with our kids active in PF and JF, and feeling very fortunate, I remember being moved significantly by something I heard during the Stewardship campaign in the fall. I cannot even recall anymore the specific detail that triggered it, but after some reflection and discussion, Deb and I decided to commit to striving toward our own version of a “modern tithe,” a “giving back” of 10% of our earnings to God. However, in this “tithe”, First Church is not the sole recipient of our giving. In the modern era, there are many worthy causes to which we feel called to support, all of which represent some aspects of God’s work, particularly initiatives in support of social justice or the protection of our strong-yet-fragile, natural environment. Therefore, our goal has been to pledge 50% of our planned, annual, charitable giving to First Church, as the body closest to home which is dedicated to serving God’s will and mission, and to distribute the other 50% amongst those other, worthy causes. It’s not always been easy, but it was a commitment, and it felt, and feels, right.

Several years ago, First Church made a decision to change its OCWM contribution formula when we concluded that we truly needed an additional, third minister, and Alison Patton was recruited to be our Associate Minister for Parish Life and Outreach. While I was initially concerned about this “stepping back” from our financial commitment to OCWM, I was willing to “give the church a chance” and see whether the overall mission and outreach activity of the church membership would in fact be increased by this change. This is part of why I happily agreed to serve on Alison Patton’s Pastoral Relations Committee two years ago, in order to support her in her leadership toward our collective “stepping up” to serve God’s mission, through our TIME and RESOURCES. And, I’m glad to say that my impression to-date is that it DOES appear that **ALL** of our

ministers have been able to increase their mission-related activities over the past several years, with many First Church members following suit. The fundamental “truth” that I had learned back in high school, about putting God’s word into action, and doing so with others, in his name, is clearly echoing for others here at First Church. And it doesn’t get any better than that.

On this “lifelong journey toward faith,” it feels like we’re at least near the path....

Rob Cushman