

“Imagine – The Message of UCC at The Villages”

The Rev Drew Willard
UCC@The Villages, FL
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Isaiah 41:1-13;17-20

John 9:1-41

‘Each one helps the other, saying to one another,
‘Take courage!’

The artisan encourages the goldsmith,
and the one who smooths with the hammer encourages
the one who strikes the anvil, saying of the soldering,
‘It is good’; and they fasten it with nails so that it cannot be moved.’

Isaiah 41:6-7

Let us pray... O God,

May there always be a worthy vision set before us to strive for.

May we always choose to band together to be this church –
a congregation of the United Church of Christ.

Amen

In recent weeks, our national church leaders have challenged UCC churches
to tell the story of how they imagined a goal and achieved it.

We had a vision to become a church and have our own building right here,
we labored for it on a journey that began in 2004,
and we achieved it with a lot of help – mostly thanks to God
who continues to guide and provide for us.

And we now have a video document for our response –
though it is by no means the whole story.

I am proud to say we have always been ‘open and affirming’,
but we have not always been openly agreeing.

There has been a lot of pain for this congregation –
and that is true for many churches in these uncertain times.

As you look at this film – which will follow shortly,
consider what message we bring to our wider community,
consider how we are part of the Good News of God’s kingdom...

“In the Beginning...” that’s how stories in the Bible start

In the Gospel of John it says, “In the Beginning was the Word...”

And that’s how The United Church of Christ at The Villages
got its start – with a word.

Actually it began with a question asking if people would be interested
in forming a congregation of the United Church of Christ
in this region of north central Florida called The Villages.

Willard, p.2

About 30 people gathered to respond to that question
and almost 7 years later to the day –

many of our congregation of 137 members
walked a mile in the summer's heat to enter our new building
for our first service of worship in our own church.

We had been meeting in our community's synagogue, Temple Shalom
for three years before we made our pilgrimage, our "kadimah"
to our own place to worship God,

just as our Jewish friends had done and – think of it,
it is the same way Christianity had its start.

And from our beginning, we were Open and Affirming –
though not always open and agreeing.

But we had a common vision to be this church and worked to achieve it –
we imagined what was possible and with the grace of God,
the example of Jesus Christ,
and the Holy Spirit of love to hold it all together,
our hopes are still unfolding...

"When we get into our new church building..."

All of us here, said this at one point or another.

Our congregation envisioned something significant
and worked to make it happen.

In 2003, a call went out from

*The Rev. Dr. Ben New and The Rev. Dr. C. William Wealand
to see if there was interest in forming a congregation
of the United Church of Christ in The Villages, Florida.*

*About 30 people responded to that first meeting and on December 11, 2005,
a charter was signed by 94 people to become*

The United Church of Christ at The Villages.

Rev. Wealand was the founding pastor and

The Rev. Drew M. Willard is currently the installed pastor.

Meeting at various locations –

*benefitting notably by stays at Hope Lutheran Church
and the Seventh Day Adventist Church of Lady Lake,
The UCC at The Villages found a warm welcome
at The New Jewish Congregation of Temple Shalom
from 2007 to 2010.*

Construction began in the summer of 2009 on land provided

with financial help from the Florida Conference UCC

and a loan through the UCC Building & Loan Fund.

Willard, p.3

*Our members had cheered Temple Shalom members
as they walked the two miles from Oxford to their new synagogue
as a “kadimah”, or pilgrimage to carry their Torah (Bible)
to their present house of worship.*

*They never forgot how supportive we were of them
and just as our Jewish friends had done,
we carried the Cross, the Bible, and the Chalice
to our new building just a mile down the street
on a hot Sunday morning, August 15, 2010
for our first service of worship in our new building – at last!*

*As we continue to grow as a congregation,
we will continue to enjoy the harvest of many who labored to bring
about the successful completion of our church home.*

“Just a little bit different...”

*That’s what The Rev. Dr. Bernice Powell Jackson said
about our congregation on the occasion of her visit here.*

Yes we are and proudly so.

*There have been some challenges, perceived and real,
that were overcome by being Open and Affirming –
especially ‘the affirming’ part that God is with everyone.*

*We are a church that is a blend of people from a variety of backgrounds,
experiences and political persuasions that are passionate about
being this church – a congregation of the United Church of Christ
at The Villages.*

*We are ‘at’ The Villages because our property lies just outside
those developments associated with that specific community –
inclusive of three counties in north central Florida.*

*Traditionally, this area has been a rural economy supported by pastureland
and ranches and a culture that is conservatively Christian.*

*Now, this region draws retiring seniors from all
over the continental United States and Europe,
many of whom are college-educated,
religious and politically conservative professionals.*

*Our ‘progressive’ approach to Christianity has made us especially appealing
to those who are looking for diversity –
and we happen to be located next door
to a neighborhood development with families,
many of whom work in The Villages.*

*Our commitment to be ‘Open and Affirming’ was a shared value
of the founders of this congregation.*

Willard, p.4

Though most of the charter members were heterosexual couples, they wanted a congregation that would welcome family members and loved ones who were gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender persons.

Our experience is teaching us new ways to think of traditional concepts, such as being “born again” – that Christ calls us out of inauthentic lives to become who we truly (and already) are; and that together, we are striving to become a “beloved community” – the kingdom of God as a social reality, “on earth as it is in heaven”.

“We’re the biggest, small church in Central Florida...”

This is how our moderator, Phil Pierkowski, describes us for the ways our achievements have affected our church and community.

Before The UCC at The Villages had its own sacred space for Sunday morning worship, mission, and administrative activities, it was actively involved in its community doing mission work.

Monthly potlucks at Hope Lutheran Church were very important in keeping us united in our purpose.

For providing tutors in the local community’s Sumter County Schools, we were recognized with the “Outstanding Service to Schools” award in 2010.

Our Prayer Shawl Ministry has been a tangible reminder for many people of God’s love.

We make monthly donations of food to the Wildwood Food Pantry and of School Kits and Health Kits for disaster relief – including over 850 kits assembled during the four hurricanes in Florida from August thru September, 2004.

We contributed significantly to Haiti earthquake relief and have provided support to Church World Service through CROP Walk, to Habitat for Humanity projects, and to the Martin Luther King Breakfast for student scholarships.

We, sell Free Exchange coffee, promote efforts to build green and live green in our church, and we give to all five of the special donations for the UCC .

Our unique connection with Temple Shalom has encouraged us to be active in Tri-County Interfaith Group events – including an adaptation of the book, Faith Club, by two of our church members who staged it as a readers theatre, dramatizing three women’s dialogue about their respective faiths after 9/11 (it will be performed during General Synod 28).

Willard, p.5

*We have hosted and sponsored over a dozen free public forums,
as well as a Justice and Peace documentary film series, discussing bold,
provocative topics.*

*In 2005, we were the first area church to host a program
on end of life issues.*

*Other topics have included hate crimes in Florida, immigration issues,
women in prison, Native American spirituality,
an evening of interfaith (Jewish, Christian, and Muslim)
storytelling, and two “Sacred Conversation on Race” events.*

*We are currently planning to host a class on parenting
which will be open to the public.*

*As pastor, Rev. Willard brings a commitment
to enhance worship and Christian education through art
as faith expression (especially Biblical storytelling).*

*We have an active Called to Care “Shepherds” program
that assists in pastoral ministry.*

*We are very proud of our choir
under the direction of Monica Peidl and organist Joyce Brooks
for their high performance week after week
and for our first public concert as a holiday fundraiser.*

*In these ways, we seek to help people visualize Christ still at work
in our world – and how God is still speaking in our time.*

*Perhaps the greatest achievement so far has been the visible presence of our
wonderful building as it sits in the middle of this
gently rolling countryside with its tall spire
on beautiful, blue sky Sunday mornings.*

*This was accomplished in the midst of the worst recession in decades
and stands as a beacon of hope that churches can make it and survive,
even when the climate is conservative in more ways than one.*

*That was our vision, our journey, and our accomplishment,
but it was not easy getting there.*

*It should be no surprise that conflict arises in churches –
sadly and far too often, it happens between well-meaning people.*

*And we are not out of the wilderness yet,
as we face the fiscal responsibilities of our new building.*

*But take heart in the midst of whatever challenges you and your church
may find yourselves in and hold fast to your dream.*

*For we are here to say what we imagined was possible
and that being the Church these days is more than what happens
under a roof or within walls.*

Willard, p.6

We are an Open and Affirming congregation that believes
‘God is still speaking’ and calling us to radically welcome everyone
just as Jesus had done.

And that ‘no matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey’,
you are invited to be who you are with us on our journey together
towards that ‘beloved community’ of God’s Kingdom
that is possible ‘on earth as it is in heaven’...

Isaiah 41:1-13;17-20

*Today, our Jewish scripture lesson comes from Isaiah 41:1-13;17-20
and describes God's promise for a future of peace.*

*Leaving behind the conflicts of the past,
God's people are to be a community that helps others
while acknowledging God as the source of that help...*

41:1 Listen to me in silence, O coastlands; let the peoples renew their strength;
let them approach, then let them speak; let us together draw near for judgement.

2 Who has roused a victor from the east, summoned him to his service?
He delivers up nations to him, and tramples kings under foot;
he makes them like dust with his sword, like driven stubble with his bow.

3 He pursues them and passes on safely,
scarcely touching the path with his feet.

4 Who has performed and done this,
calling the generations from the beginning?
I, the LORD, am first, and will be with the last.

5 The coastlands have seen and are afraid, the ends of the earth tremble;
they have drawn near and come.

6 Each one helps the other, saying to one another,
'Take courage!'

7 The artisan encourages the goldsmith,
and the one who smooths with the hammer encourages
the one who strikes the anvil, saying of the soldering,
'It is good';
and they fasten it with nails so that it cannot be moved.

8 But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen,
the offspring of Abraham, my friend;

9 you whom I took from the ends of the earth,
and called from its farthest corners, saying to you,

'You are my servant, I have chosen you and not cast you off';

10 do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God;

I will strengthen you, I will help you,

I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.

11 Yes, all who are incensed against you shall be ashamed and disgraced;
those who strive against you shall be as nothing and shall perish.

12 You shall seek those who contend with you, but you shall not find them;
those who war against you shall be as nothing at all.

13 For I, the LORD your God, hold your right hand;
it is I who say to you, 'Do not fear, I will help you.'

17 When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none,
and their tongue is parched with thirst,

I the LORD will answer them, I the God of Israel will not forsake them.

18 I will open rivers on the bare heights, and fountains in the midst of the valleys;
I will make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water.

19 I will put in the wilderness the cedar, the acacia, the myrtle, and the olive;
I will set in the desert the cypress, the plane and the pine together,

20 so that all may see and know, all may consider and understand,
that the hand of the LORD has done this, the Holy One of Israel has created it.