

“THE RENEWAL OF WIND AND FIRE”

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Acts tells of power descending from God to form the church as we know it today. It is the Pentecost story of wind and fire setting new dynamics into motion. It's the Holy Spirit blowing against the inertia of everything always staying as it already is.

A fierce wind filled the house where the disciples gathered. A diverse group of people spoke and heard each other as they never had before. Unlettered men, like Peter, suddenly held vast numbers in rapt attention with their message. God finally did what God promised to do since the time of the prophet Joel: to deliver God's word through all kinds of people in a way so as to shake up everything familiar. God revealed God's startling ways to the world in a totally new fashion. And the first disciples became so energized that onlookers took them to be drunk.

What does Pentecost mean today? Are we ripe for new directions? Is God doing anything new in the church today? Let me respond to these queries with a basic distinction. It is too easy to become what is called an *inward-focused church*. Most mainline churches do that as naturally as breathing. It would be a stretch for many mainline churches to become what we might call a *thriving congregation*.

We mainline churches are the oldest and most respected churches, the ones on the town greens. But churches like Presbyterian, UCC, Methodist, and Episcopal are *not* growing. In truth, we are dying. Steve Stager, of the UCC Board of Local Ministries says 30-40% of UCC churches will disappear within a couple decades.

As the name implies, the target group of an inward-focused congregation is its own members. Here ministry is all about meeting needs of the existing members. On the surface that sounds acceptable, even helpful. But when you think about it, that is what consumer groups do, not churches. Peter and the disciples didn't look first to themselves. They looked to feed the spiritually hungry, whether they were part of their daily circle, or outsiders looking in, not completely getting the gospel yet. That's what thriving churches do: look outward before looking inward.

The goal of a thriving church, whatever denomination, is to transform lives. It is to venture outward, beyond our familiar circle. It is to resist the natural temptation toward clubbishness. Most of all, thriving churches create servant leaders, and keep the mission impulse of outreach at the front and center of everything we do.

Of course, at First Congregational, Darien, we do a lot in outreach, pointing us outward, toward others. So that is already moving us toward becoming a more outwardly-focused, thriving church. Of course, we still have a long way to go. For example, in an inward-focused church, the goals are all about creating success—as measured with numbers around giving and attendance—and ensuring the survival of the core church as we know it. Does any of that sound at all familiar?

Of course, giving and attendance do matter. They can't be ignored. Seeing the participation of existing members and receiving new members are indicators. But are they the ministry itself? Or are they the fruits of ministry as we are on the move in ways like Peter and the twelve? It is all about feeding spiritual hunger, all about transformation, all about following Jesus. It's like Jesus said, seek then the kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added to you. There is a better way to take our spiritual pulse rather than looking toward outward signs of success.

Essentially, more than how full our seating capacity is, what about our *sending capacity*? We ask ourselves how many people are we serving in the name of Christ, whether they are already in this faith community or outside of it? We ask ourselves--not how many members we have, like shareholders--but how many of our people are doing face-to-face ministry in the name of our church. We ask ourselves, how many servant leaders are we generating as a body? We ask about the groups where the lessons can be learned and the stories can be told. We ask about morphing boards and committees into ministry teams where we can do more than administer an institution, but grow afresh as the body of Christ.

Of course, part of that sounds scary, because it's a different way of doing church. But the outlook also describes a vibrant, dynamic, living, attractive community.

What are our next steps? We already mentioned the passion for outreach here. That momentum puts us in a great position. We have also agreed on small group ministries as a new way of being together in a day when people don't get fed the same way as they used to by holding down a church office or committee position.

Sally Bassler, Mandy Teare, and Mariann Bigelow spent most of last autumn going up to First Congregational, Ridgefield to learn about their use of small groups. We have all been in conversation to apply what that church does to our setting. We have been rolling out what we are calling small group Connections where we can be together, where we might also invite many who don't already attend here.

Maybe you've heard of groups in areas like men's fellowship, gardening, movies, novels, sharing faith journeys, local mission, young mother support, and others. We hope this is just a start in creating places for us to know and be known by each other, and to invite newcomers into accessible and appealing groups where they might become caught up in the energy of our church by knowing its people.

The truth is our church lives in a forever changed world. The mainline church has been slower to come around and respond to a new era. Simply stomping our feet and wondering why others aren't coming into church the way most of us came is not good enough. If our people found our way into these Connections groups--some explicitly about the faith, others not so much—it would truly energize us.

Like this, we start where we are to move deliberately toward where God calls into the future. The beauty of Jesus is how he accepts each of us wherever we are on life's journey. He accepts us just as we are, but he doesn't leave us there either. If we have been wondering about and praying for a vision for our church, it might begin in ways as humble as this. The thing is, always be careful what you pray for because it is usually differs from what we expect. Anyway, the mainline church in North America is most certainly at a crossroads moment like Pentecost.

We can find new models for gathering, allow ourselves to be energized and pitch in. Or we can stand there scratching our heads at what God is doing in the world and assume that everybody who is energized and not status quo must be drunk.

The gospel has continually taken on new forms over the past 2,000 years. Think of it, as the church of Jesus Christ moved from an era of martyrdom to monastic retreat to reformation to migration and to Great Awakening here in New England.

It is not an easy time to be the church. But God is clearly not done with us yet. Today is the time most fraught with opportunity since the Protestant Reformation 500 years ago. Let's see where the Holy Spirit takes us instead of resisting it by insisting we must do exactly what we did before. Jesus said that the coming of God's new order is like putting yeast into dough until the whole lump is rises into newness. He said you can't put new wine into old wineskins. He also said, "Behold, I make all things new." I can only trust that the places God takes us will be as good as where God took Peter and the first disciples on the first Pentecost. Amen.