

Vortrag von Rev. Beth Long Higgins, Ohio,
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God is Still Speaking, What are We Hearing?

I had shared last evening about the “God is Still Speaking,” campaign from the national UCC staff. This morning I am going to begin by sharing a bit of the larger cultural context in which our church finds itself to give you a picture of how it is that my local congregation has come to use and appreciate the “Still Speaking” Initiative, as the campaign has also come to be called.

The Context of the larger Dominant Culture:

Two weeks before the last presidential election in 2004, I arrived at the church early on Sunday morning to prepare myself for the service. There was a bag hanging on the handle of the back door with a small note telling us to pass out the fliers that were enclosed. There was no indication who had printed the fliers, but as I read the pamphlet, I quickly knew that I was not going to hand them to anyone. The information contained on the pages reported the voting records of all the politicians running for office on issues that were identified as being “Christian”. Opposition to Abortion, opposition to same sex Marriage, support of the Death Penalty, Prayer in schools....these were the issues that were being lifted up. The pamphlets ended up in the recycle bin and I changed my sermon that day to include a list of some of the things that I thought we should consider as Christians before going to the polls. I told them that the assumption that the list in the flier were “Christian” issues while never mentioning anything about environmental issues, rights of the poor, fair funding of our public education system, opposition to tax breaks for the wealthy or the war in Iraq, to name a few, were an affront to my understanding of the Christian faith.

The assumption that there is one Christian voice and the arrogance of those upholding that voice’s agenda has provided much religious “noise”. This “noise”, once far off and distant, has grown to large decibels over the course of the last twenty years. Instead of finding ways to break through, it could be said that the mainline denominations in the U.S. just continued to try to make the same music with the same instruments that they had used for several generations.

In the meantime, the dominant culture also changed bringing new technologies and new instruments and the once quiet marginal Christian voice more readily adopted those new things. They plugged into the circuits and employed the use of airwaves and cable channels and over time they were reaching a large number of ears who were eager to receive simple easy answer to life’s increasing complexities.

They more quickly understood branding as a powerful tool. “Family Values” and “the inerrant word of God” were important catch phrases. They would remind people of eras gone by and help to explain the evils of this world by suggesting that if only our kids would be able to pray in school, like their grandparents had, then things would be okay. Or if only we could post the Ten Commandments in public buildings to remind people of God’s law, then our society would be a more peaceful place. When the world is simplified into two types of people, those who are “for” us or “against” us, when we are told that there are only right answers and anyone who disagrees is wrong, when evidence and scientific discoveries are ignored or denied in order to uphold a specific view, we are

quieting God's still speaking voice. When these tactics are used, the message to the people is that they are not to trust their own experience or their own encounters with the Holy Spirit.

The God is Still Speaking Initiative introduced in 2004 began as an effort initiated from our national staff to begin to find ways to break through such competing voices. Since then it has been claimed and owned by a majority of the membership of the United Church of Christ. It has provided us with the building blocks to be able to communicate who we are and what we believe in the midst of a cultural climate that has become less and less tolerant of people who think and act differently. The dominant social climate in which I live increasingly tries to pressure the legal system, the medical system, religious systems and any other regularly system to keep as status quo a particular point of view. The current context in the U.S. gives the picture that Christianity is made up of one voice and anyone who disagrees with the voice is not true to the faith.

In the past three years I know of two cases in which the activities of a church have been brought up before the Internal Revenue System. One case alleged that a congregation was no longer acting as a church, but as a political organization because the pastor had encouraged his mainline congregation to consider issues of peace when they voted in the last presidential election. The other case involves a mega-church close to where I live, again suggesting that the church over stepped its boundaries as a religious organization. These allegations were in large part centered on that church's endorsement, support and close ties to a candidate for governor. That candidate lost and I don't know where the outcome of that investigation lies.

It is a difficult time to be a church community. From the legal boundaries which give some shape to our activities, to the suspicions that if you are not in concert with the most vocal of the Christian voices being heard in the current dominant culture there has been the attempt to build an air of fear and suspicion.

Another interesting legal issue that has affected the way in which the church has to act has to do with protecting the institution from being held legally responsible for the actions of its staff and all volunteers. The climate of litigation is overwhelming and in order for the church to be insured against liability claims, the insurance industry is now mandating that churches take necessary steps to insure the safety of its members. This includes the fact that everyone in our congregation who now works with children must participate in a finger-printing screen to be sure that they have not been accused or found guilty of sexually or physically harming children. This is a tough issue, particularly as the media continues to make sure that all arrests around such issues that involve someone who was either employed or a volunteer at a church is broadcast wide and far. Within the last two weeks, the arrest of a church's camp counselor in the next county was the headline on all of our local stations. These are serious crimes and very serious problems in my culture, and it has directly affected the way we function in church.

When Dave and I first begin our ministry almost twenty years ago, we were aware of the competition which the church faced with all of the other activities that occupy people's lives, from their children's sports events—which increasingly take place on Sunday mornings—to television programming, from weekend homes to sporting events, we had to constantly find ways to lift up how is it that the message of the Gospel is one that is relates to our lives and how it is that faithfulness to God matters in the world. We were also very aware that we had to do so knowing that every person who comes to our church passes by at least one other church along the way. Fifty years ago, people would

go to the church that their parents had attended. Since then it has become increasingly common that people choose their church, much like they choose any other service or thing that they buy.

And so, what we have is a lot of religious “noise” in the culture. There are competing voices claiming to be “The” Christian point of view. There is use and abuse of Christian language and symbols to support and argue everything from political actions to the selling of consumer items. There is an atmosphere of suspicion of anyone who disagrees with the powers that be. There is distrust of people and things that are different. There is fear about the personal and national safety for our families. In the midst of all of this, as our denomination continued to act in the same way as it had for several generations, people left our churches and listened to the voices claiming simple answers to life’s complex problems.

As a way of trying to communicate who we are in the United Church of Christ, the Still Speaking Initiative has helped us to share with others things like:

When there is no word but Chaos, God whispers, “Let there be.”
When the world says, “Slavery,” God says, “I don’t think so.”
When the people say, “There is no more to learn about God,”
God says, “This is my Son.”
When people say, “God has spoken, there is no more to learn about God,”
God takes a deep, patient breath, and says....
When the Disciples said, “We can’t go on without you!”
Jesus said, “I will be with you always.”
When the Church said, “There is only one way,” the Reformers said, “Maybe not...”

We are challenged to find ways to break through the constant images and sound bites and seductive consumerism and allow people to find the space to safely ask questions and know they are not alone.

A colleague of mine who lives on the northern plains recently asked me, “Don’t you feel like you are the only one?” There is a national religious movement of hard lines, “go our way, or no way”, and it makes many of us very nervous and feeling very much alone. We struggle to keep the hope alive that there are others who share the concern and disdain for easy answers and the abuse of religious idolatry to support the power of a few. As I listen to what God says to the world, I hear something very different from what they claim to hear. “God is Still Speaking,” has become a way for many of us in the United Church of Christ to dare to claim that there are alternative observations of God’s will at work in the world. It is a small but powerful ray of hope which is helping us to frame the hard work of being noticed amongst all of the other religious voices that populate our culture. Into this larger context came the Still Speaking Initiative which has been “an effort at systemic change, beginning with a congregation’s sense of purpose and identity”.

Closer to Home: Canal Winchester, Ohio

Let me turn now to share some personal examples from our own congregation, our own town. After traveling to the Hebridis Islands in Scotland, an acquaintance asked about our trip. I shared that it was awe-inspiring to be on those islands, a million years old! The woman looked at me and merely said, “Oh, I don’t believe that”, meaning she is

¹ “The Stillspeaking Effect”, Draft Summary by Marilyn Dubasak, August 2007.

a creationist or believes in Intelligent Design and nothing in the world could possibly be older than 6,000 years. And I am glad that in the United Church of Christ we say...
“God is still speaking through the life and teachings of Jesus today. Our faith is over 2,000 years old, but our thinking is not.”

In November, 2001, following the September 11th tragedy, the ministers in our town decided that our community Thanksgiving Service should be different. Canal Winchester was changing and we knew that there were an increasing number of immigrants moving into new government subsidized apartments and many of them were Islamic. The group decided to hold the service in the Fellowship Hall of one of our churches. The service was less formal than usual and the speakers were a panel of three persons sharing about their faith. One was a leader of the Islamic community in Columbus, the second, a Jewish rabbi and the third was the lay deacon of the newly opened Catholic parish in Canal Winchester. We wanted to promote dialogue and education between the Abrahamic faiths.

Fast forward 5 years later to November 2006. At our monthly ministerial meeting the new pastor at a local church announced that his congregation would not be participating in the annual Thanksgiving service. When asked why, he shared that members of his congregation told him about the service of dialogue in 2001 and they had decided that we were really not being true to the Christian faith. The collective blood pressure of my colleagues was alarmed around the table. The short version of that very painful conversation was that because we had invited the Islamic and Jewish leaders to share of their faith experience and had not tried to convert them to Christianity that we sinfully had ignored the mandate to make disciples of all. The pastor and that congregation will no longer have anything to do with the rest of us in the community. And we say, *“God speaks through other people, nature, music, art and the Bible.”*

(I might also add, given the picture for our focus during worship this morning that this same congregation published a stern warning to its members in their newsletter about four years ago when they found out that another of our partner congregations in town had just dedicated a new outdoor labyrinth. Labyrinths, the pastor told the congregation, were a pagan ritual and the members were told to beware of this practice and those who would engage in such activity.)

Dave serves as the president of our community’s ministerial group. We were introduced about six years ago to a new pastor in town. He had come to start a new independent congregation. This new pastor was invited to join us at our monthly gathering and at the first of about three meetings that he attended, he introduced himself by saying that his church was growing by leaps and bounds and was full of all the people who found the rest of our churches boring and irrelevant, stuffy and out-of-date. They have a rock band at all services, including weddings, they use computer generated images for worship—no bulletins or hymnals. You come as you are and are encouraged to bring your coffee mugs into their sanctuary which has no windows, stained glass or otherwise. They indeed have a very large congregation today and are unwilling to participate with any of the other congregations in town. The son of one of the leaders of that congregation is dating a friend of ours. He is constantly arguing with her about things like the role of the woman in marriage, the man must be the head of the household. Or that you must be saved and baptized by their pastor. Or there is a hell and anyone who disagrees with them will end up there. And we in the UCC say, *“We’re all on a journey*

that continues throughout our lives. God accepts us no matter where we are on that journey.”

The last contextual piece to lift up here is the mega-church which sits in the middle of a corn field nearby. This congregation has built up around the personality of the pastor, a local boy who grew up in the next town. The sanctuary seats thousands. There is a private Christian school for grades Kindergarten through High School and he also has his own 2 year bible college. I have only ever seen small sections of his services on his television show and just couldn't follow the logic of his message. I've heard people who have attended his services report odd and questionable practices. And yet people come from long distances to worship there. Many have moved to our town to be able to be more involved. When I travel, I am always amazed when I say where I come from that so many people automatically know that this is the “home” of this large church.

About five years ago a couple who are in their late 50s, moved from their home about two hours west of Columbus. They felt called to attend this Bible College and were convinced that God would find them a pastor position upon graduating. They had financially risked what they had to attend school. While still students, they found that they didn't always have enough money for food and other items. They approached the staff of their mega-church and inquired at the College for help. They soon discovered that their church would only provide assistance to members one time. Someone directed them to the city's Food Pantry which is located in our church building. A family in need can come once a month and receive food for three day's worth of meals.

They finished their bible college training and soon discovered that they couldn't find any jobs with the education they had received. They continued to come to the food pantry as they struggled to live off the small nurse's salary that she received. They decided to come and join us for worship. They were amazed at the warmth of the people in our church. They were impressed that our services which biblically based—we used the bible! They were astounded that they could talk with David and me (their former pastor has body guards and you can't get physically close, let alone have a conversation with him). Soon they were bringing information to us about how we could improve our evangelism program. They were offering to lead bible studies. They joined the church. Everyone said, “Isn't this wonderful? We've never had anyone join the church because they had been helped in the Food Pantry before! See, it is true about our church, *“that no matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, all are welcome here.”*

Within four months of their joining the church, they had had significant arguments with leadership in our congregation. During a Sunday that Dave and I were away, they decided that the ordained woman who we had asked to preach was a lesbian. After the service they demanded that the church leaders spiritually cleanse the sanctuary. Letters were written by them to our Association Minister, to the Conference staff and to the President of the United Church of Christ, cursing them all for not ridding the church of homosexuals. They left the church and have since returned to the mega-church. We see them about once a month as they continue to have need and come for food. It was a tough lesson for us to learn: *All may be welcome here, but not all will be at home.*

How to Be a Church that Listens for God's Leading

We can't take for granted that people know anything about the history of our denomination—in spite of the fact that in the UCC we can trace our roots to the Pilgrims who are some of the main characters for our national holiday, Thanksgiving! We can't take for granted that visitors understand how to use the hymnal or even that they can read the verses of a hymn. We can't take for granted that new members have ever heard of the liturgical seasons of Lent or Pentecost. We can't assume that when we read the scripture in worship, the people would even know how to look up the passage in the Bible. Although painful, perhaps this realization is a good thing.

As we continually come to recognize that the previous church experiences of the members of our congregation are as diverse as those who went to Catholic schools to those who had never gone to church until adulthood, we have to define things and be clearer in all of our communications. At a gathering last fall which included biblical study we were looking at the family of Joseph and Mary. One of the visitors who had joined the group was stunned by the observation that Jesus had siblings. She had never entertained that idea. She confessed that she did not hear anything else the rest of the night because she was processing the information that Jesus' family was probably very similar to her own. On the one hand we have to deal with the basics. On the other hand, people are yearning for a community that will take their questions seriously and not just hand them short rote answers that don't really fit into their life experiences.

I am told that in both business and the educational worlds, much energy and emphasis has been spent in the past five years getting companies and schools to articulate the mission of their organizations. They are using a variety of methods of processing the vision that their group has in mind for the next five years. They have to define who they are by claiming core values. In every business plan, it is expected that the management knows the market, is aware of the competition and has a thorough understanding of the clients or customers. What is interesting is that the very words that are being used, "mission", "vision", "values" are all words that we have been using in the church for centuries! Perhaps, it is good that the church it is being encouraged to reclaim these words and similarly engages in exercises which will help to shape and define who we are.

A retired member of our congregation consults with all sorts of organizations, from the Army Reserves to the Columbus Public library, and helps them to develop a strategic plan. We spent a weekend in January under his leadership with the new members of our Consistory, writing our Vision and Mission Statements and identifying our Core Values. I have to confess that I was not excited about spending my weekend shut away in a room with these 14 people—and I love them, they are great people! I just usually don't find these exercises invigorating. However, I also have to confess that now I am very excited about the process and the statements that were written.

"Our Vision is of a Community Growing in Christ that Welcomes All and Serves All with Love and Joy." Can you see the influence of the Still Speaking Initiative? This congregation really works on welcoming everyone—even knowing that not everyone will decide that our congregation is to be their spiritual home. Just in working on that first statement, the group worked at listening to what each other was saying about what they thought "Church" should be. We used bible study to discern how God was speaking to us and how we are to help communicate that message in the larger community.

The Mission Statement in part was reworked from a previous statement that we had used for over 15 years. It begins, "Our Mission is to Seek, Celebrate and Share the Love of God through....". The seven statements which follow reflect the structure of the

congregation's committee work and are reflective of the things that are important: Worship, Spiritual Growth, Stewardship, Invitation, Mission, Fellowship and Partnership. The conclusion claims a commitment to "open ourselves to the future, providing adequate resources for a growing church."

The Core Values were tough as there are so many things that we see as being definitive attributes of our congregation. As you read through the list of the six, they are also themes that you can easily connect to the history and identity of the United Church of Christ.

The accompanying Strategic Plan is rooted in these three pieces and is the frame for our work in this year. We just spent our last board meeting updating and reviewing how we are doing with the various tasks that we outlined. At year's end we will remove and celebrate those things that have been completed and revise and reassign those things that will continue to be a part of our work for the coming year. In order to tackle this job, we had to identify statistics about the larger community and our membership. We had to talk about needs and structures. In the end, at least our leadership has a better picture of what makes our congregation unique. In the end, as we use these documents in worship and alongside publications and communications with the congregation, we are giving helpful tools to them to articulate how it is that God is speaking to us. We are hopefully giving images that can be used to share with others how and what God wants us to be and do. Through these tools we are helping to concentrate and unite the work of all the groups and committees in the congregation toward the same vision.

The other significant piece of David's United Church of Christ is that it is a congregation that has a history of taking risks and looking beyond itself. From supporting missionaries to Japan immediately following World War II, to having a thirty year relationship with a UCC doctor in Honduras, this congregation has had the continual reminder that we are connected to the wider circle of Christ's presence throughout the world. From the building of the first apartment building for low income senior adults in 1986 in our city to the hosting of homeless families in our building during the 1990's to the start of a daycare program for school age children, our congregation has been willing to act on needs that they have seen in their own community. Each of these three programs encountered significant resistance from the larger community and the members of the church were willing to stand up to the city officials and make them happen.

In the last ten years the two significant things that continue to define and help to shape us as a congregation include the purchase of a warehouse next to our property. We envision that this will be used for Mission and Worship for the future. This was a \$500,000 risk just to purchase the building and land. It will be another million dollars before we can convert the building to useable space.

The other most exciting aspect of this congregation has to do with our two international partnerships. The first is with Noah here in Dortmund. The second partnership is with a Pentecostal denomination in Nicaragua. These partnerships represent the contemporary vehicles for the members of our congregation to be interpersonally connected to the presence of Christ throughout the world. It is important for us to see ourselves through the eyes of friends who are not so closely tied to the same cultural and political assumptions that consume our day to day vision. We look forward to seeing how God will continue to work through us as we grow in these relationships.

God is Still Speaking

This is actually my second time to attend the UCC Forum. The first time was in 2004 when Dave and I were a part of a larger tour of folk from the Ohio Conference. David and I had been asked to facilitate a workshop on Saturday afternoon on the new UCC campaign. This was the fall of 2004 and the *God is Still Speaking* campaign was just being launched. There had not been any commercials yet and quite frankly, David and I were sharing just from the limited resources of the campaign that we had received.

We were thrilled and surprised when the gathered group on that Saturday afternoon spent so much time and had so much excitement with the translation of the words *God is Still Speaking!* In trying to translate this phrase into the German language, the group was engaging in a wonderful theological conversation. That has been a very helpful point of reference for me in the intervening three years. Let me briefly suggest a summarization of what this phrase has come to mean.

In order for God to still be speaking, there is the acknowledgement that God has spoken in the past. Our understanding of the experiences of people being aware of God's communication is rooted in the fabric of the biblical text. It is grounded in our faith and understanding of the embodiment of God's word in Jesus. The witness of others who have wrestled with the discernment of God's speech is documented throughout the history of the Christian church. Whether we are talking about actual words, or we are metaphorically using God's speaking to represent all of the ways in which each one of us has encountered the nudging, the leading, the pulling, the guidance, the visions of God's Spirit working in our own lives, I am going to assume that we all can agree with the assumption that God has spoken, has communicated with all of Creation in every age, leading up to this moment in time.

I believe that it is the word *still* in conjunction with the ending *-ing* at the end of the word *speak* that is the problematic portion for translation into the German language. In English, this verb tense links the past with the present moment. God spoke. God speaks, now. It is an active verb and signifies that that action is taking place right now. Whether we are listening or not, God is speaking, now, even while we are all thinking about verb tenses or we are taking care of everyday tasks.

The last point about this phrase is the punctuation, the comma. For all of the language teachers in our congregations, this drives them crazy for it is incorrect from the technical point of view. However, the very thing that makes it an incorrect use of the English language also makes it a powerful theological statement. Whenever there is a comma, it means that there is more yet to come in the sentence. "Never place a period where God has placed a comma," is the quote attributed to Gracie Allen. Don't assume that something is finished, as God may have more yet to say, more to do, more to show. John Robinson, the pastor who preached the 2 hour long sermon to the Pilgrims as they set sail from Holland reminded them: "God hath yet more light and truth to break forth from God's Holy Word." That anticipation of the future is represented in the comma.

In the compact phrase of four words and a punctuation mark, we have the coming together of past, present and future. In this one phrase we see what it is that God does and are challenged with the task of our role and responsibility that follows. It is not only a matter of discerning *what* God is saying, but *how* God is communicating and the possibilities that then lay in store for us.

In the 2004 materials introducing The Still Speaking Initiative, we were told that there are some marks of a growing church. Ron Buford, the original staff coordinator of the Campaign notes that churches that are growing are willing to take risks, because it is in the risk that there is possibility of change. Growing churches are ones that have a

vision for the future and can articulate that vision. They are engaged in exciting and joyful ministry that is relevant to people's lives. Growing congregations also affirm and welcome everyone, daily. He asks some questions for churches to consider:

Does your congregation have a vision for the future?

Are you prepared to demonstrate amazing generosity in support of a church embodying resistance and daring in our generation?

Who are the lost and needful people in your community?

How do they know your church offers a spiritual home of hope and healing?

In what ways does your worship and ministry welcome people to God's party, God's table, God's extravagant welcome?

What is distinctive about your church? ²

Why do these things matter? Is this just another scheme of denominational executives that will result in continual decline? The good news is that "there is evidence of a 'Stillspeaking Effect,' a change in a long-standing pattern of decline with committed participation in the Initiative." [3] ³From the national staff in a recent report to the Conference Ministers, the statistical evidence shows that those congregations who are participating in the Still Speaking Initiative show either growth or a slight decline that is less than UCC churches who are not participating in the Initiative.

In our own congregation, we received 48 new members last year, the largest yearly increase in our congregation's history. We've received about 23 new members in the first six months of 2007 and again, anticipate a year total close to 50. People who join do so usually because they know someone else in the congregation or they have been a part of the United Church of Christ in some other community. Even 18 months after the last commercial aired, I am surprised when new members share how much those commercial messages impressed them and encouraged them in their journey to our church.

There was one point which hit me when I was visiting a small group discussion with Christa here in Bielefeld last March. The group on this night was exploring some EKD documents about some possible configurations for the future of the German church. The group really did not like one of the possibilities that identified specialized ministries for designated congregations in a larger metropolitan area. I tried to suggest that such ministries might be welcomed by folk and help bring to church who are not otherwise connected. The women felt that to support such specialized centers would only drain resources from the parish congregations rooted closer to where the people lived. It hit me! One of the trappings in my context is that there is an underlying assumption that whenever we start a new program or offer a new service, we will welcome new potential members. And, along with new members comes additional resources, money being a big one. The challenge for us is being sure that we are aware that any efforts in reaching out to others and expanding programs is done first as a way of being faithful to the vision that God has for our ministry in sharing the good news of Christ. The possibility of additional income must not be the primary reason for anything we do.

I have also become aware of how much we do to market ourselves in the midst of the competing voices that I mentioned earlier. As much as I do not like this, it is a

² "Ron in a Box", video, chapter 2.

³ "The Stillspeaking Effect", Draft Summary by Marilyn Dubasak, August 2007.

cultural reality that our image, our brand, is a necessary step in helping to communicate and be heard through the other religious noise in the larger culture. It has also become a gift, a blessing, in that through our communicating who we are called to be, we have had to articulate a clearer picture and identify a common vision. Our Strategic Plan with the Vision and Mission Statements are helping us navigate through some significant changes that are taking place in our congregation. Our structures are to be the framework through which God can work, not the walls that keep others from participating.

In spite of the fact that we love it when people ask questions and we don't respond with easy answers; In spite of the fact that the items on our list of political concerns would include such things as the stewardship of creation and issues of justice for the poor, peace that is rooted in justice and honoring the integrity of life; In spite of the fact that love is the central focal point of our theological grounding and we value and honor such things as education and tradition and the movement of the Spirit; In spite of the fact that all of these things are contrary to so much in our culture, the Still Speaking Initiative is helping us to find a variety of ways of sharing with others who we are and what we believe.

“God is Still Speaking,” implies that we are still listening. It necessitates that we are open to change. It roots us in history and tradition. It reminds us that God is the giver. It calls us to humility that what we might know now, may not be all that there is to know on any given subject. It provides us with hope that there are other ways of receiving and interpreting God's good news in the world. It calls us to pay attention to the present. It points to God's future.

The question is, “God is Still Speaking,” what do you hear?