



Pacific Northwest CONFERENCE NEWS

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April-May 2010

UCC President listens to dreams, hopes

Geoffrey Black shares overview of denomination.

In March, the United Church of Christ President and General Minister traveled to Spokane and Seattle to listen to members of UCC churches. The Rev. Geoffrey Black came to hear the hopes, dreams and visions of the church and to express appreciation for all who make churches vibrant and alive.

He framed sessions by giving the statistics on the UCC, which has 1.5 million members in 5,000 congregations in 38 conferences with 400 associations that authorize and oversee ministers and churches. He recognized that the Pacific Northwest Conference is multi-state—Washington, Alaska and North Idaho—and serves as an association.

New York state, where he was con-
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First Congregational United Church of Christ in Colville with 20 drew one of largest delegations to visit with the Rev. Geoffrey Black in Spokane, center front.

'Compassion, Communication, Community' is theme

"Compassion, Communication, Community" is the theme for worship, workshops and speakers at the Pacific Northwest Conference's Annual Meeting 2010 from 1:30 p.m., Friday through Sunday, April 23 to 25, at the Wenatchee Convention Center.

Edie Lackland, Stewardship Committee chair, said congregations should plan in advance to bring cards with pledges for their members' time and their church's treasure for the ministry of the Pacific Northwest Conference. They will place them on the communion table during the closing worship service.

Rodger Nishioka, associate professor of Christian education at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Ga., will preach at the opening worship. Nishioka promotes educational ministries, because many youth and young adult baptized and confirmed into churches consider themselves post-denominational but still are looking for ways to engage in mission and ministry.

He earned a bachelor's degree at Seattle Pacific University in education and taught school in Tacoma. His master's in theology is from McCormick Theo-

**Annual
Meeting 2010
is April 23 to 25
in Wenatchee.**

logical Seminary, his doctor of divinity degree from Austin College and his PhD from Georgia State University.

The 15 workshops scheduled include supporting "members in discernment" as they explore their call to ministry; political advocacy; reporting requirements for church treasurers and exploring activities of the national and regional United Church of Christ.

Others are Celtic spirituality; gracious space for families, congregations and communities; InterPlay as a life and spiritual practice; a new praise book, "Sing! Pray and Praise," "From War Front to Home Front: Helping Veterans Heal"; discussion with keynote speaker; ending homelessness; clergy

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Churches need to be adept in technology

Conference Comments



By
Jim CastroLang
Pastor at Colville
First Congregational
United Church
of Christ, and
PNC yahoo groups
and facebook
coordinator

First of a series of columns on effective use of emerging communication technologies in the church today.

Once we had to have a computer. Then we had to be on the Web. Now the buzz is about social media and social networking. Experts say that the “business world”—whatever that means—has made the transition from a Web 1.0 world to a Web 2.0 world. Now the Web 3.0 world is emerging and we are supposed to grab it. My goal with this column is to offer some perspective, some tips, some humor and some help for effective use of the Web and social media to make connections, build relationships and do the work of the church.

Many of us feel overwhelmed. In the early 1970s, the first technology I remember holding was a calculator. By 1984, I had my first computer at home. Last year, I celebrated my 25th anniversary of owning a personal computer. It has been quite a journey!

Was the calculator the first technology I touched? No. I am sketching out this article with pen and paper that look and function much like these instruments did before the electronic calculator was invented. What level of effort from many people does it take to craft a pen and shape trees into paper? Before the current pen technology, there were ink wells.

On Facebook today, one of my “friends” was musing that she had 99 FB (acronym for Facebook) friends and wanted to find number 100. In the FB world, 100 friends is a sign of being serious about Facebooking. I suggested, it would be wonderful to take a few minutes every day and give each of her friends one minute of her undivided attention. During the minute, I suggested that she consider that person—their gifts, their goodness, their pains and their needs. She might hold them up in her prayer time. She might look at that friend’s FB page and become more aware of how they communicate and connect.

Facebook is a tool that helps us be part of communities that are not in our geographic areas. Whenever we travel, we may stay with friends or acquaintances who become friends. With the cost and time of travel, we can’t nurture many relationships that way. Facebook allows us to have a dynamic insight into the up and the downs, the interests and the causes, the humor and the touching moments of many people.

I look forward to the Conference Annual Meeting this year, because I feel more connection to people around the Conference through sharing on Facebook. My UCC connections are important in my life.

The Conference has a Facebook Fan Page

and a Facebook Group, which can be found by using the FB search box and typing in, “Pacific Northwest Conference United Church of Christ.” We become a fan of a page and a member of a group. What is the difference? I encourage the “Page” for now, but we may use the “Group” in the future. There are two main differences:

- Pages are public. Anyone who wants to view the page can, and everything is indexed by the Web search engines. Groups allow you to control access only to group members and to approve who can be members. Search engines can not index FB groups.

- Push vs. Pull: Contributions made by other people on FB pages are “pushed out” and show up on FB members’ main (home) news feed status updates. We don’t need to go to the Conference page to see the updates. New contributions to Groups are not pushed out. Instead, those interested need to go to the Conference FB group to see anything new that has been added.

Users might consider how they like to receive information: pushed out to them so it crosses the path of their day and consciousness, or pulled in to them by knowing where information is and going to it when they want it. In conversations with friends and across the Conference on this subject, I find we have many strong opinions. Managing information and relationship flow is a major concern for many people today with access so easy.

We can use technology as a tool to serve our human and sacred endeavors. It can focus us, making us more effective and enabling us to be just a little more responsive.

This column hopes to offer some ideas for us as individuals and for the work of our churches. Remember, as we say in the UCC, “No matter who you are or where you are in your relationship with technology and your journey from Web 0.0 to Web 3.0 you are welcome here.”

The church is a place to build relationships in love and then together venture out into the community to do some important things—sometimes we call it our mission. There is no way we can be the church we are called to be without skillful use of the tools of communication and resource sharing available to us today. These are tools for making the connections and building the relationship we need.

Rev. Jim CastroLang, pastor of First Congregational United Church of Christ in Colville and moderator for the PNC yahoo email group and Facebook page, welcomes ideas and questions from spiritual directors to techies as he looks ahead to plan future columns. He is on Facebook, LinkedIn, Skype, ooVoo and Twitter. Or try these: jimcl@icehouse.net and 509-998-7203.



Efforts
to improve
communication
continue.



At PNC Annual Meeting

Affinity groups add opportunities for discussion

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tax questions; unified national UCC governance; the spiritual tasks of aging; beyond the progressive church; “Experiencing Faith Practices” curricula, and “Money Doesn’t Grow on Trees, but...”

Carol Scott Kassner is planning the Saturday morning worship and Conference Minister Mike Denton will preach for the closing worship on Sunday.

Following last year’s vote to be a Global Ministries Conference, there are plans to connect online with UCC mission

personnel to learn about their lives and ministries.

In business, delegates will vote on a 2011 budget, a resolution from General Synod on constitution and bylaws changes related to different roads to authorized ministry, bylaws changes related to the PNC Board and Council makeup, said Dennis Hollinger-Lant, chair of the board. Delegates will be assigned to hearings to review the items of business.

During Annual Meeting 2010, at least affinity groups will be offered.

- Caring For Creation Network, led by the Christian Life, Service and Action Committee, will help people find how to reduce their personal and church carbon footprint.

- The Rev. Jake Pomeroy of the Cornerstone Fund will offer practical steps for developing a narrative church budget.

- The PNW Chapter of the UCC Coalition for LGBT Concerns will explore what it means to say, “No matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, you’re welcome here.” How about welcom-

ing the addict, the homeless, conservatives, liberals, those of differing opinions, lesbians, gays, bisexual, straight, transsexual, professional blue-collar workers, mentally ill, disabled, young and old?

- Dayton High School’s Drama Club will present warning signs of abusive relationships, especially among teens.

- Bing Tso will lead discussion on UCC governance.

- Pacific School of Religion grads will meet.

For information, call 206-824-1770.

Registrations underway for 2010 camp season

The 2010 camp program booklets have been mailed, announcing the 2010 outdoor ministries camps and retreats at Pilgrim Firs and N-Sid-Sen.

The theme for the summer season is “Be a Hero: Living Like Jesus.”

Capping off the end of the season will be a celebration of the 75th anniversary of N-Sid-Sen with a Labor Day weekend retreat and a picnic on Sunday, Sept. 6.

Pilgrim Firs spring retreats include the Confirmation Retreat, April 16 to 18; Work Camp, May 28 to 30; LGBTQ Family and Friends, May 29 to 31, and Young Adults, June 26 to 28.

Directors for the summer program at Pilgrim Firs are Stephen Hadden for Intermediate, July 5 to 10; Rachel Teigen-Brackett and Sean Brackett for Senior High, July 11 to 17; Mark Boyd for Junior High, July 18 to 24; Kaila Russell and Katie Lloyd for Kids, July 25 to 28, and Emily Tanis-Likkel for Family, August 22 to 26.

Upcoming events at N-Sid-Sen are the Women’s Retreat, May 14 to 16 and Work Camp, June 6 to 12.

Camp directors at N-Sid-Sen’s summer program are Trudy Lambert and Doris Northrup for Kids Camp, June 27 to 30; Bob Watrous and Kim Schulz for Intermediate, July 5 to 11; Lyn Stultz for Senior High Aqua, July 11 to 17; Meredith and Ryan Lambert for Family Camp #1, July 25 to 31; Dana Sprenkle and John Hubbe for Junior High Aqua, Aug. 1 to 7, and Family Camp #2, Aug. 8 to 14.

Each camp includes time for relaxation, recreation, discussion, fellowship, worship, crafts, singing, campfires, water sports and hikes. Volunteers are still needed.

For information, call 360-876-2031 for Pilgrim Firs or 208-689-3489 for N-Sid-Sen or visit pilgrimfirs.org or n-sid-sen.org.

Transitions announced

Joan Sulser is interim minister at Cheney UCC.

NW Women’s Retreat will be Nov. 5 to 7

The Northwest Regional Women’s Retreat #9 will be held Nov. 5 to 7 at Kah-Nee-Ta resort in Warm Springs, Ore., on the theme, “Come to the Oasis, Our Affirmation of Spirit, Inspiration and Soul,” with keynote speaker Carolyn Kortge.

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every race, every age, every religion—to call for humane and just immigration policies,” she said.

The WAC has joined with the Washington Immigration Reform Coalition (WIRC), planning a rally at noon, Saturday, April 10, at Occidental Park in Seattle. The WIRC has reserved more than 90 busses to help bring 10,000 people from around the state.

For information, call 206-625-9790.

WAC promotes immigration reform

Alice Woldt, transitional executive director of the Washington Association of Churches (WAC), recently joined 1,000 others in Washington, D.C. for Ecumenical Advocacy Days. They joined about 200,000 faith community leaders on the mall calling for comprehensive immigration reform.

“Now it’s our turn in Washington State and in communities throughout the nation to stand in solidarity on April 10 with those who were on the mall—

Youth attend WRYE

About 30 youth have signed up so far to be part of the PNC delegation to the Western Regional Youth Event July 6 to 10, hosted by the Montana-Northern Wyoming Conference at Montana State University in Billings.

They will join participants from eight conferences attending workshops, hearing national UCC speakers, doing an in-service project, joining in worship and visiting area sights,

For information, call Tara Barber at 425-822-8293 or Susan Andresen 206-265-2987.

Work teams restore homes five years after Hurricane Katrina

Helping with finishing work on houses in New Orleans and seeing them nearly ready to move back into gave participants in the 2010 week-long work teams from the Pacific Northwest Conference a sense of accomplishment.

Feb. 7 to 13, Randy Crowe, managing director of N-Sid-Sen, took a team of 16—aged 17 to 74. March 21 to 27, Bobbi Virta, pastor of Ferndale UCC, led a team with 13 from her church, Ruth Anne Hill from Richmond Beach UCC in Shoreline, and a man from San Francisco. April 10 to 17, Sharry Nyberg of Bellingham First Congregational UCC is taking a team from her church.

Crowe, Virta and Hill plan to lead teams next year.

On their first day, the February team shared in the Sunday Super Bowl victory of the New Orleans Saints, going into the street beating church kitchen pots and pans with utensils, watching fireworks and enjoying people out and happy after so much sadness, said Tim Devine, pastor of St. Paul's UCC in Seattle, recalling his first evening there.

It was his first time, so he appreciated orientation to post-Katrina history, what the UCC and others have done, what remains to be done with 55,000



Linda Crowe, pastor of Veradale UCC in Spokane Valley, meets some neighborhood children.

housing units vacant, waiting to be worked on or torn down.

The team worked on two homes in the upper ninth ward, where some homes are lived in, some are in transition and some lots are empty.

Devine installed subflooring with glue and screws, then made mud for tiling and mortar to fill cracks in the foundation. While working, he thought about what to preach at St. Paul's the next Sunday with the lectionary linking Jesus' transfiguration and Moses on Mt. Sinai.

"It was a good message for us at the work camp: work, yes, but don't miss out on talk-

ing with the people who have stories to share," he said, telling about the group joining in the dedication of a house of two sisters who are grandmothers.

The house was renovated in a partnership of the UCC, Red Cross, Salvation Army and local Crescent Alliance Recovery Project, which supplied grants and volunteers. Devine also met a man from a UCC church in Des Plaines, Ill., who had worked on the house six months ago. His church comes twice a year for work camps and happened to be there for the dedication.

"After driving past hundreds of vacant houses, it was a gift to witness the dedication. It is only one family, but it means the world to them," he said.

Jim Spraker of Plymouth Congregational UCC in Seattle, went for his third work camp. He said that about a third of the houses damaged remain to be restored.

"It varies from neighborhood to neighborhood," he said. "Those of lower incomes receive grants for supplies, but need volunteer labor. UCC funding runs out next year. We've worked five years, but there is so still much to do."

He said one church closed, deciding to use funds it had to

restore a child-care center and sacrifice its building to merge with another church.

"**It's profound to know** the trauma people went through," he said. "Sometimes people can't do the work themselves, for lack of financial capacity or the mental ability to pull together what they need to do to rebuild their homes. We provide that resource, so they can move back into their homes."

Members of the February team met Brian, a 64-year-old African-American homeowner and retired newspaper photographer. He told them his house was the only home he had known. He has been living with different relatives, and expects to move back in this summer.

He also told them that like many other homeowners, his insurance money went to the bank to pay off the mortgage and he never received any of it to pay for repairs.

Ed Philyaw, a member of St. Paul's on his fifth work camp, said that "without the efforts of churches and individuals like Brad Pitt—who is building 150 eco-green houses—I believe nothing positive would have been accomplished," said Philyaw, whose wife went on one trip and oldest daughter went on the last trip. "I would say these were some of the most meaningful experiences of my life."

To those who wonder about the futility of rebuilding a city that lies below sea level in a hurricane-prone area, he asks where in this world is safe from disaster—given Mt. St. Helens' eruption near Seattle, earthquakes in California, floods in Rhode Island and Sept. 11 in New York.

"With so much work yet to be done and so many people in need it is quite simply the right thing to do," he asserted.

Crowe pointed out that fed- Continued on page 5



Bobbi Virta paints walls in one of the homes.

With much yet to do, plans begin for 2011 work camps

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 eral funding allocated for recovery and rebuilding in 2005 has been held up, but the current administration plans to release the funds to continue assistance.

Devine found it difficult “to hear someone’s story face-to-face or even to see the damaged houses and infrastructure years later. Our fast-paced media images hold the potential to keep us from feeling real pain or even empathy. The people fill my heart—members of Little Farms UCC who supply a potluck dinner Monday evenings, members of another work team, homeowners across the street, the sisters whose home was dedicated, and other work camp volunteers from Seattle, Tacoma, Spokane and Helena who became a community of aching knees, open hearts, sincerity and laughter.”

Virta, whose March trip was her fourth, still sees need to go and help people rebuild.

“I see hope and I see progress,” she said, adding that some federal stimulus funds will help rebuild the roads. “I continually hear stories and experience gratitude. A 50-member gospel choir that was rehearsing at a church gave us a standing ovation and had tears in their eyes. Our emotional connection is strong.



February team each has roles in laying tile flooring.

“To experience their hospitality and gratitude humbles and impassions me to live a life of hospitality and gratitude,” she said.

Virta has seen changes in church members who have gone. They are discerning how God wants them to live the rest of their lives.

In orientation, she tells participants, “You will be changed. I can’t say how, but I can guarantee you will be changed.”

For her it’s an honor to walk with the people.

Now she sees news of other floods and disasters, in North Dakota, New England, Haiti and Chile, and she holds real stories of people in New Or-

leans in her heart.

“We are now specializing in long-term recovery and may go

somewhere else eventually, too. We go to New Orleans now because we trust that the UCC has set up there and that there is a structure for us,” she said.

Hill told of the March team scraping metal porch posts and rails, painting, hanging cabinets and putting in countertops. They finished the kitchen for a family where the woman had been using her bathroom sink as a kitchen sink.

“We put her kitchen in working order,” she said.

In another house, the team was caulking and framing windows, texturing walls and ceilings, painting a carport and scrubbing the water line off the front door.

“It’s humbling to see how they are living while the rebuild-



Ruth Anne Hill scraped and painted metal porch railings.



Monday potlucks provided by Little Farms UCC, which hosts the teams, build community.

ing is going on around them,” said Hill, who plans to return next year and lead a group from the Richmond Beach UCC. “It was hard work each day and we felt fulfilled leaving the work-site each day. I knew our time counted for something.”

Markus Virta, 21, had heard stories about the work teams from his mother Bobbi.

“It was hard to realize that something as tragic as the hurricane had happened as I heard stories. People were so joyful and welcoming, and so persistent in overcoming day-to-day problems,” he said.

Earth Ministry involves 20 UCC congregations

Because one act of the state legislature can undo millions of acts of Christian caring for the environment, LeeAnne Beres, director of Earth Ministry/Washington Interfaith Power and Light in Seattle, involves 350 member congregations in advocacy, as well as education and “greening.”

“We need to speak up about where our energy comes from,” she said in a recent interview. “Christian faith calls us to care about the earth. As followers of Jesus, who spoke truth to power, we need to speak in the public forum.”

Beres, who is involved with Fauntleroy UCC in Seattle, showed a copy of *The Green Bible*, which highlights passages about care of creation in green.

“If we do not care for creation, our children will suffer,” she said.

So Earth Ministry is educating people in Washington so they will join efforts to make the state coal free, shifting from 17 percent of its energy coming from coal produced by a Canadian company in Centralia.

“Coal plants have major environmental and health impacts, increasing asthma, producing mercury.

“If we care for our neighbors as ourselves, we need to transition away from coal fired plants to renewable resources. We can change the coal jobs with good green, clean energy, family-wage jobs,” she said.

The organization is informing people of a bill in the state legislature to close the tax loophole that gives the plant a \$5 million/year state subsidy. It is also supporting a bill to exempt churches with farmers’ markets in their parking lots from having to pay taxes on that property.

“We have a responsibility to speak as Christians to be sure our values are heard in the public sphere.



LeeAnne Beres involves congregations in education, greening and advocacy.

In workshops and classes, she and Jesse Dye, program and outreach director since 2007, draw out from participants a list of basic reasons for Christians to be concerned about the environment: creation, stewardship, covenant, spirituality, justice and community.

Earth Ministry grew out of an earth and spirituality group at the Episcopal Cathedral in the 1980s and incorporated in 1992.

Beres joined the staff in 2005 with 20 years experience in the Seattle environmental community with Save Our Wild Salmon, the Northwest Energy Coalition and the Marine Fish Conservation Network. She worked two years as a fisheries biologist on commercial fishing boats in the Bering Sea and has a master’s in marine fisheries management.

Earth Ministry informs people to remind their congregations of the faith and environment connection. It works with congregations in the state—in Puget Sound, the Olympic Peninsula, Spokane and Yakima, and in 12 other states.

LeeAnne cited love of neighbor as self is also a motivator for churches being involved

with environmental sustainability, along with preferential treatment for the poor, caring for neighbors globally, and caring for plants and animals.

Some people are motivated by their connection to God when they are in nature, and others focus on generational justice—not stealing from children what was inherited.

Beyond lifting up the reasons for people of faith to make the world a better place, Beres suggested two barriers:

One is feeling overwhelmed because there is so much to do that people feel the little they can do would not make enough impact to change the climate.

Another is “environmental sainthood,” the feeling that unless someone does everything perfectly—drive a hybrid car, live in the woods, eat berries and twigs, give up refrigeration—they fail.

“Every little bit matters as individuals, congregations and communities do what we can on the middle road between apathy and sainthood,” Beres said.

Some ways to make a difference include recycling, composting, shifting from bottled water, turning down the thermostat, using a clothesline, a

push mower and green cleaners. Other ideas are eating organic, local and lower on the food chain, and planting a garden.

Along with individual commitments, she said congregations, as people who share values, can implement changes. Some use Earth Ministry’s 250-page *Greening Congregation Handbook* to make changes in their common life—sharing sustainability values in education and worship, in facilities and institutional life and in community outreach.

“We urge congregations to develop sustainability plans, writing down realistic goals, recording what they have done and then celebrating it,” said Beres. “An annual plan of achievable goals stretches us, for example, to implicit and explicit curricula in worship that talks about creation care. Clergy are busy with pastoral care, meetings, preaching and teaching, so we have a suite of resources they can easily use.”

Earth Ministry has a “Caring for All Creation” curricula series with resources for planning worship, hymns, sermons, prayers and studies. It suggests a local-foods potluck with food from a farmer’s market or community supported agriculture.

The resources suggest using china or paper, bringing reusable bottles for water, using green cleaners and serving fair-trade coffee as beginning points for congregations.

Beres believes people today are drawn to churches involved in issues relevant for these times.

While Earth Ministry does not have policy experts, it works with partners who do research on policies based on common values.

Twenty of 66 congregation members in Washington are UCC churches.

For information, call 206-632-2426 or visit earthministry.org.

Digital technology opens publishing to pastor

Able to reach a wider audience than congregation with theological reflections

Tom Sorenson, pastor at Monroe Congregational UCC, found that digital communication technology opened a means for him to reach a wider audience with the message he has preached and taught for eight years there.

After submitting his book, *Liberating Christianity: Overcoming Obstacles to Faith in the New Millennium* to several publishers, he found his publisher, Wift & Stock, in Eugene, Ore., where he grew up.

Wift & Stock does publishing on demand, printing copies of the paperback, 208-page book as they are ordered online or by bookstores.

Sees hunger for faith

As pastor of the only progressive church in the community of 16,000 just west of Everett, Sorenson knows from nearly 20 years of practicing law in Seattle that many people hunger for a spirituality of living lives of faith connected with God, but reject Christianity because of the attention media give to rigid, intolerant, narrow churches.

Sorenson said that contrary to the popular assumption that those churches are successful, only 25 percent of people in the Northwest attend any church.

He considers rigid, intolerant, narrow beliefs that condemn people or faiths that differ are counterproductive to spreading Christianity in this century.

In his book, he seeks to articulate "an intellectually responsible faith" that speaks to the many people in or outside

churches who reject Christianity, because the only Christianity they know is what he calls "Biblicism" or fundamentalist, judgmental Christianity.

From his study of history, earning a bachelor's at the University of Oregon in 1970, a doctoral degree in 1977 from the University of Washington, and his work as an attorney after graduating from the University of Oregon Law School in 1981, he is comfortable with "the reality of relativity."

Offers alternative

Monroe UCC, which is an open and affirming congregation of people on spiritual journeys, open to sharing thoughts and welcoming people of different traditions, is a clear alternative to more than 20 other "socially conservative" churches in town, Sorenson said.

He does not assume those churches are successful or popular, because in the Northwest only a small minority of people are drawn to any church.

"There's also hunger for a spirituality that also moves beyond Marcus Borg's historical metaphorical approach to reading the Bible and deciding what is historically true," he said.

Sorenson, who attended University Congregational UCC in Seattle, studied theology at Seattle University's School of Theology and Ministry after he decided to enter ministry.

He believes that the U.S. culture of materialism reinforces literalism in its assumption that only the physical is real. Despite that context, he



Tom Sorenson responds to a spiritual hunger that challenges people to move even beyond Marcus Borg's historical metaphorical approach

is not afraid to affirm that faith is grounded in experience and perception.

"Human experience is subjective and so is religious truth. Everything is relative," he said. "Truth is only true if a person experiences it.

"That makes literal understanding of scripture and religious claims of absolute universal truth impossible," he asserts. "I can say what is true for me and I can be willing to respect what is true for others.

"Symbol and myth are the language necessary to communicate the spiritual dimension of reality," said Sorenson.

Explores obstacles

His book explores obstacles to faith and offers different understanding of the issues they raise.

He replaces the classical theory of atonement with a theology of the cross.

He redefines salvation as having to do with this life, not afterlife.

He replaces the dominant

social conservatism of popular Christianity with Jesus' teachings of nonviolence, economic justice and radical inclusivity.

In contrast to the message that illness or suffering comes from not enough faith or prayer, Sorenson said that God does not cause illness, suffering or death, but that God's sustaining caring is "present in all that happens in our lives."

Book for study groups

In addition to some groups in his church reading it together and his theology informing his preaching, he said that groups in Eagle Harbor UCC at Bainbridge Island and at Prospect UCC in Seattle have used it as a study book.

He appreciates the publish-on-demand option, because the publisher prints only the books that are sold, books that in the mass publishing industry would have no chance to reach print because they might not be big sellers.

For information, call 425-268-0649.

Gatherings share visions for future of UCC

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conference minister before becoming the national leader, has nine associations.

The UCC's 10,000 ministers include local church pastors, pastoral counselors, military chaplains, campus ministers, hospital chaplains and specialized ministers. The UCC has seven seminaries and 12 UCC-related colleges.

"We are a small denomination compared to 11 million United Methodists and 9 million Presbyterians," Black said. "We are a small, but vocal people and assertive in the public realm. Our voice exceeds our numbers. We are a leadership denomination, because our program stances help the whole church take stands.

"We were one of the first to deal with clergy sexual misconduct, providing discipline and training on boundary issues," he said. "Other churches resisted it at first and now have taken it seriously and are proactive."

The 5,000 congregations are large, medium and small—with about 60 percent considered small, defined as having fewer than 100 members.

"Our churches cannot be stereotyped," Black said. "We have the image of being a progressive church, but our members cover the theological and political spectrum.

"We aspire to be a multi-cultural-multiracial, just-peace, open and affirming church, accessible to all," he said, describing the UCC as he elicited

hopes, dreams and visions for the UCC as it moves forward.

Black interjected that the UCC effort to build its identity through the Stillspeaking initiative was expensive, with an initial investment of \$300,000 that the UCC could not sustain. Now it seeks to spread the message in other ways, such as sending out an ad to UCC members April 16 for them to spread virally—spreading from one person to another and another and another—through the internet and emails. The UCC also plans to launch its new Stillspeaking magazine and will launch "Stillspeaking Voices" as a web resource to help UCC people learn to talk about the church and invite people in ways that are authentic to who we are. It's difficult for some to talk about church, so this is a way to help more become better ambassadors on the church and Christ.

Don Hill, who traveled with Black, took notes and photos to compile ideas, look at trends and share results with the Leadership Council.

"What I heard today in Spokane is in keeping with what I have heard from people in other parts of the country," he said.

"I hear a general concern about the absence of young adults and about envisioning a church that is visible in the public sphere and more forthright in its commitments to justice," he said.

Black knows some are anxious that the next generation be brought into the church and that the church does not abdicate its commitment to active engagement in justice concerns about the environment, prisons, poverty, unemployment, racism, homophobia and violence. "I hear real concern for advancing civil rights, especially for gays and lesbians.

"The UCC has responsibility to advance that, but not to the exclusion of others," he said.

Black added his concern that the rising cost of health care are a burden for congregations as it is for all institutions.

"We have come out strong in support of national health care," he said. "Anything short of that will undermine the viability of the institutions of this country, including the churches. That's why we have pressed hard on that issue. Justice and Witness has worked the most intensively I have seen on that issue, because it is critical to our long term survival."

The national setting offers a solid program to employees and clergy, but it's expensive even with cost savings through the Pension Board. Black said that like most others, the UCC does not offer open enrollment to people with pre-existing conditions. That would increase health insurance costs 15 percent.

He says he struggles with that inconsistency in UCC policies while working for change in the broader society. He clarified, too, that the Pension Boards does not invest in health insurance companies.

"Most major employers are behind health care reform," he said.

"People want to see us continue our justice concerns and are impressed with our consistency around the issues. Many would like to see the UCC reflect a deeper theological and spiritual connection to our justice witness, to make it clear why we do what we do and why followers of Jesus are concerned about conditions," he reported.

Black added that the ecumenical movement is alive and moving forward to closer relationships among the mainline Protestant family. While there is less engagement with Evangelical Protestants, the UCC is in open dialogue with Catholics and Orthodox through the National Council of Churches.

Some visions for UCC churches

- Attain a size so there is not concern about having enough people to do the jobs and enough money to do ministry.
- Draw more young families.
- Establish a more precise denominational identity.
- Lighten up while respecting tradition.
- See the bigger picture of trends.
- State steps to attract the generation who have not been to church.
- Develop web pages and use computers effectively.
- Invite children of families not involved in church.
- Support pastors to become bivocational because they cannot make a living wage serving a congregation of 22 members. (Black said that is part of future continuing education plans and there is a grant already available for bi-vocational ministers through Parish Life and Leadership.)
- Try things new to us, learning from what other UCC congregations are doing.
- Offer a place for single young professionals to gather.
- Be creative and respectful of different generations, backgrounds and races.
- Use ingenuity to find what is relevant to young and old—not just on Sundays—like providing a place for people to come for coffee or tea and talk about what is meaningful.
- Offer high school students classes so more than two in three can graduate from high school in Spokane.
- Work outside the church with people in the community.