

## Minnesota Conference Annual Meeting

Keynote – Friday, June 9, 2017

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Good evening, Minnesota Conference! I'm so very grateful to be here with all of you this evening.

As Shari said, I serve in the national setting in the Center for Analytics, Research and Data, or CARD. You may know us formerly as the "Yearbook" office; but what you may not know is that we have done, and continue to do, much more than collect annual data on churches and ministers; and some of that "other work" around research and analysis is part of the reason I was invited to be here with you this evening. But before I get to all of that, I first want to share with you a story. I believe that researchers and statisticians—and might I add ministers—are, above all else, storytellers. Brené Brown, noted author and researcher, once said, "Maybe stories are just data with a soul, and maybe I'm just a storyteller."

This particular story comes from Arnold Lobel's book of tales called *Frog and Toad Together* and was actually shared with me by a UCC colleague, Courtney Stange-Tregear, who serves as the minister for church vitality in the Pacific Northwest Conference. She has three school-age children, and this is a story that she has read many times to them. It's called "The Garden."

Frog was in his garden.

Toad came walking by.

"What a fine garden you have, Frog," he said.

"Yes," said Frog. "It is very nice, but it was hard work."

"I wish I had a garden," said Toad.

"Here are some flower seeds. Plant them in the ground," said Frog, "and soon you will have a garden."

"How soon?" asked Toad.

"Quite soon," said Frog.

Toad ran home.

He planted the flower seeds.

"Now seeds," said Toad, "start growing."

Toad walked up and down a few times. The seeds did not start to grow.

Toad put his head close to the ground and said loudly, "Now seeds, start growing!"

The seeds did not start to grow.

Toad put his head very close to the ground and shouted,

"NOW SEEDS, START GROWING!"

Frog came running up the path.

"What is all this noise?" he asked.

"My seeds will not grow," said Toad.

"You are shouting too much," said Frog. "These poor seeds are afraid to grow."

“My seeds are afraid to grow?” asked Toad.

“Of course,” said Frog. “Leave them alone for a few days. Let the sun shine on them, let the rain fall on them. Soon your seeds will start to grow.”

That night Toad looked out of his window.

“Drat!” said Toad. “My seeds have not started to grow. They must be afraid of the dark.”

Toad went out to his garden with some candles.

“I will read the seeds a story,” said Toad. “Then they will not be afraid.”

Toad read a long story to his seeds.

All the next day Toad sang songs to his seeds.

And all the next day Toad read poems to his seeds.

And all the next day Toad played music for his seeds.

Toad looked at the ground.

The seeds still did not start to grow.

“What shall I do?” cried Toad.

“These must be the most frightened seeds in the whole world!”

Then Toad felt very tired, and he fell asleep.

“Toad, Toad, wake up,” said Frog. “Look at your garden!”

Toad looked at his garden.

Little green plants were coming up out of the ground.

“At last,” shouted Toad, “my seeds have stopped being afraid to grow!”

“And now you will have a nice garden too,” said Frog.

“Yes,” said Toad, but you were right, Frog. It was a very hard work.”

When we think of the concept of vitality, many of us probably have certain ideas in our minds about what vitality means, what it looks like, and what we need to do in order to make our congregations more vital. Toad certainly had some ideas about what he needed to do in order to make the seeds grow, but this was based on his faulty assumption about the seeds themselves and how they were to become flowers.

So, let’s begin by talking through the first question: What is vitality? What does being vital mean? Before sharing with you some of what I think vitality *is*, however, I first want to name what it *is not*. Had Toad known that shouting and singing at the seeds wouldn’t help them to grow, he would have expended a lot less energy and stress in the long run.

First, vitality is not about size. Research that the UCC and other denominations have conducted through the Faith Communities Today (or FACT) Survey Project demonstrated that churches *of any size* can be—and, in fact, are—vital congregations. But the competing narrative—the story we often tell ourselves about ourselves—is that if we are not a large congregation or a large denomination, then we must not be very vital. This could not be farther from the truth! In fact, in the FACT 2015 Survey of nearly 1,000 UCC congregations representing churches of every size,

78% described themselves, in at least one area and sometimes in many areas, to be “spiritually vital and alive.”

To our detriment, we in the U.S. have been trained to mirror the patterns of our surrounding culture—industrialization and capitalism constantly tell us that “bigger is better.” The U.S. has the largest vehicles, the largest houses, yards, malls, cuts of beef, etc. in the world. If it’s not big, not visible enough, not showy enough, then it doesn’t count. This is dangerous thinking, especially for churches who are striving to live in the way of Jesus. Bigger is not better; it’s just bigger.

Think of the story in scripture of the widow’s offering in Luke 21: “As Jesus looked up, he saw the rich putting their gifts into the temple treasury. He also saw a poor widow put in two very small copper coins. ‘Truly I tell you,’ he said, ‘this poor widow has put in more than all the others. All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on.’” Think of the words of Mother Teresa: “We can do no great things; only small things with great love.” Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said: “We must not be tempted to confuse spiritual power and large numbers. Jumboism, as someone has called it, is an utterly fallacious standard for measuring positive power.” Vitality is not a measure of size.

Secondly, and perhaps most importantly—and I cannot stress this enough—vitality is not the same as growth. Because when most people think about growth, they think about numerical growth. If a congregation is not growing in membership and worship attendance, they think they are dying—this is simply not true! There are a number of factors that affect numerical increases—many of which have to do with the population and demographics in the church’s surrounding community. Most often, churches that grow exponentially are the ones that tend to be in growing suburban or urban areas. More people in the community results in more growth in a church over and above anything else; and this is something that is really beyond the control of congregations. I’ve seen many churches beat themselves up over not being able to attract tons of new people—when in reality, there aren’t any new people to attract in the first place. Context matters.

Also, in thinking about the life cycles of congregations, there comes a point in congregational life where membership or attendance plateaus—and that’s ok. In fact, even if a congregation is declining in numbers, there is nothing “good” or “bad” about that—it’s just the phase of the life cycle that the church is in; and they can STILL be vital even in the face of numerical decreases. Congregations, like all living things in the natural world, are birthed in to being, experience growth, then maturity/plateauing, then age, and finally death—that’s the way of the universe. If we think even more cyclically, sometimes death leads to resurrection in nature. (Doesn’t that sound familiar...) So why would we expect that our churches would follow a pattern that is unnatural to all natural systems?

One reason is that we are saturated within a culture and economy of continual, unchecked growth. The “bigger is better” mentality of size is coupled with the notion that we must always be growing, always producing more, in order to have value and worth. Our whole economy is

based on a growth economy; and we are patterned to work as hard as possible, at the expense of our own and our planet's wellbeing, to ensure that constant growth. We are taught that all growth is good; but as Edward Abbey points out, this is not the case. (As an aside, this particular quote comes to me from a UCC minister colleague who has used this phrase in his email tagline for as long as I've known him.) Growth can be destructive when the processes and principles underlying that growth are corrupt—think of the movie *Wall Street*, or *The Big Short*, or the *Wolf of Wall Street*. Numerical growth should not be overemphasized.

On the other hand, not all numerical growth is bad...we know through our research that there is some relationship between vitality and growth; but they are still two very different things. Our own UCC research on congregations has showed that there is some sort of relationship between vitality and growth, albeit a pretty weak relationship, and has demonstrated that many of the same factors conducive to vitality are the same as those found in growing congregations. In addition, almost every vitality assessment tool in the market today tracks numerical growth. What we do know is that there is some level of relationship—just the strength and nature of that relationship remains unclear and has even sometimes demonstrated a negative relationship, with numerical growth actually creating a decrease in overall vitality in our research.

In the end, there is still a lot about the relationship between vitality and numerical growth that is an unsolved mystery. One example is the chicken and the egg scenario...researchers don't know whether vitality leads to growth, or whether growth leads to vitality. I think perhaps it could be a little bit of both.

Lastly in terms of what vitality is not: vitality is not ONLY about numbers! We just talked about this in relationship to growth, but it goes deeper than that. What I'm going to say next is very important: What we measure matters! Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." Many congregations have developed patterns that place the primacy of numerical measurements as the sole way that they should measure their vitality. This is not without denominations telling them what numbers they need to report each year—and I, more than anyone else in our denomination, am aware of this irony!

Our larger societal pattern has once again mirrored this focus; and the church universal has emphasized this in terms of caring way too much about two things in particular: people in the pews and dollars in the bank. Now don't get me wrong; *tracking these things is important*. They help us to understand trends over time and can be used as partial measures for things like vitality; but they are not the sole measure. They are not the treasure, the end goal of what we should be striving to increase. Ultimately, people and dollars are either INPUTS—resources that help us to become vital and live out God's purpose and mission for our congregations—or they are BYPRODUCTS of what comes when a congregation lives into God's mission and purpose for them.

Other types of measurements are needed in order for us to really understand vitality; but before I start talking about how to measure vitality, let me tell you what vitality IS.

Just like anything else, there is no one definitive definition of vitality; but here are a few of my favorites. Linda Bobbitt, the congregational vitality researcher for the ELCA, says that vitality is the strength of a congregation's connection to these three things: God, each other, and the world; and she has developed measurement tools to help gauge the strength of these connections. Gil Rendle, a Methodist church leader and author, articulates that vitality is the potential of the congregation for accomplishing the real outcome of ministry, which is making disciples and changing the world. This one resonates with me in particular because it places the purpose of one's congregation not on achieving vitality, but on fulfilling the church's God-given purpose and mission in the world. Vitality is only one way of measuring the presence of certain factors toward the fulfillment of the church's mission.

But the definition that I love the most is probably a familiar one to you, from Micah 6:8: "And what does the Creator require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" How a congregation engages in each of these actions can often signal the degree of, and potential for, vitality within that congregation. And interestingly, it aligns with the first definition around connecting with God, one another, and the world—except the order is inverted.

If you were really ambitious, you could also say that a definition of vitality would be how well a congregation actualizes the new Purpose, Vision, and/or Mission of the United Church of Christ: To love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength and our neighbor as ourselves; united in Christ's love, a just world for all; and united in Spirit and inspired by God's grace, we welcome all, love all, and seek justice for all. So as you can see, defining both what vitality is and is not matters because it frames for us the work that churches are called to do and who churches are called to be.

Now, we move into our second main question regarding what vitality looks like. In the story of Frog and Toad, Toad had some pretty interesting ideas about what "gardening" looked like and entailed. He probably should have asked his friend Frog how to garden before planting the seeds; at the very least, he could have consulted a book or even YouTube. With vitality, there is no shortage of resources out there telling us what vitality looks like! This is where researchers and practitioners really go wild—just do a Google search on "congregational vitality" and there are hundreds of articles and books written on the subject. Two years ago, our office published a research report called "Congregational Vitality and Ministerial Excellence: Intersections and Possibilities for Change"; and in that report, we summarized some of the different vitality characteristics and factors named by leading scholars. Over and above that, our own research on vitality characteristics in UCC congregations resulted in ten different factors that we found to be most conducive to a church's vitality. Since that time, however, we have been able to narrow it down to five major factors. And while these are not all-encompassing, how congregations lived into each of these factors was found to be highly predictive of their overall vitality.

The first item in describing what vitality looks like: There is excitement about the future here. (I wonder if that has anything to do with the theme of this annual meeting about a future with hope...) This mark of vitality asks the following question: Are people looking forward in their ministry, engaging in planning and visioning rather than spending their energy focused on the past or how things used to be? A church's ability to have this forward-looking mindset enables them to see possibilities and opportunities instead of barriers and roadblocks. Is the congregation focused on the past; or, is it stuck measuring the present to the yardstick of the past? How might the church—as it is *here and now*—be transformed in order meet the challenges we are, and will be, facing?

This congregation is always ready to try something new. This mark of vitality speaks directly to a church's flexibility and openness to change. This doesn't mean that new endeavors will always be successful—and what success looks like now may also be very different than what it looked like in the past. But approaching new endeavors—or old endeavors in new ways—requires a spirit of experimentation. Any scientist will tell you that every experiment is a learning opportunity, regardless of whether it succeeds or fails. What if we approached ministry in this way, with a holy curiosity, seeing these experiments as doing the work of ministry?

This place seeks out and uses the gifts of members of all ages. What if churches didn't just seek out volunteers to fill slots on committees, but engaged the congregation in a process that helped to identify—and then deploy—their inherent and learned gifts in ways so that people could truly flourish? What if this process really extended to all ages? What would it look like to utilize the gifts of children and youth as *they* themselves have identified, not as adults have directed *for* them? What if a young person sat on the church council? How would that transform the council and the church? Using fully the gifts and contributions of all the people means that the church might actually be transformed, and is the living expression of the second vitality factor regarding openness to change.

This congregation is a positive force in the community. Being a positive force implies that the church has vested relationships and partnerships with people and organizations in the community, so that the church's wellbeing is tied to the community's wellbeing—and it contributes to that wellbeing in meaningful ways. Two other factors underlie this mark of vitality—that vital churches address both social concerns (help those in need) in the community *and* work for social justice and advocacy (change the systems that cause that need in the first place). Congregations that are vital understand that their ministry must include both charity and justice, working alongside those in need and those who are being affected by unjust systems.

This place helps members live out their faith in daily life. As Gil Rendle articulated in his definition of vitality, the true purpose of the church is to make disciples and change the world. Discipleship is a core function of the church. How is the church nurturing and empowering people to live lives modeled in the ways and words of Jesus? How are people different in the world as a result of being a part of a faith community? Are we trying to be salt and light, as

Jesus said—or at least *trying* to try to be salt and light—in our work, school, community relationships, amidst our struggles, joys, and sorrows?

Now, underlying all of this is a core understanding that the church has a clear sense of its mission and purpose and *actively* seeks to live out that mission and purpose. This is essential for any vital congregation—purpose and missions statements should be universal enough that they can speak to others beyond the congregation, yet specific enough that they create some focus and clarity regarding the unique context in which your church is located. And most importantly, mission and purpose must be turned into lived action in intentional ways. Otherwise, a congregation can often become paralyzed either by trying to be and do everything or nothing at all.

I offer these five marks as a framework to get you thinking about what vitality looks like in each of your congregations. In which of these areas are you thriving? In which items are you challenged? In what areas is there potential to place more energy and intention? In the items where you are challenged, which ones can be set aside at this time in order to focus on nurturing other challenges in the church? In what areas is there the potential for developing new partnerships or nurturing existing partnerships?

As you can see from this list, there is a lot of ambiguity and room for interpretation here. They're not based on numbers in the traditional sense, though we measured them using particular scales based on strength of connection with God, each other, and the world. But, if a congregation is *actively* living into these things, the real outcome of ministry—making disciples and changing the world—is likely happening.

Finally, the last question before us is this: What do we need to do? What is our call as congregations of the United Church of Christ in cultivating vitality? Well, working to embody Micah 6:8 or the UCC Purpose, Vision, and Mission might be good places to begin or to continue nurturing in different ways. But given that a great majority of our congregations already display at least some of the common characteristics of vital congregations, if not all characteristics, this is good news that we need to hear and celebrate!

I believe that some of the most important work we can do is to liberate “vitality” from the confines in which we have placed this concept—to remove our assumptions about size and vitality, equating vitality with numerical growth, and how we measure being vital; and to see that as what and who we are—in this moment as a church—we can experience a deepening of our faith, our practices, and how we live in right relationship. Not all growth is bad—it can and should happen in many different directions and ways—whether connectional, organic, incarnational, maturational, spiritual, or otherwise; and I have a feeling that, in the end, if we're doing it right, vitality doesn't really look or feel much like our broader society's values, patterns, or institutions.

Last Sunday, we celebrated the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Followers of Jesus were unsure of what was to come—Jesus was gone, and they were seeking guidance by being

together, eating, and praying. In their holy uncertainty, they remained open to the Spirit; and boy, did the Spirit make an entrance! In their wildest dreams, Jesus' followers would have never guessed that they would be transformed in the ways that they were to speak in different languages. In the end, maybe vitality is simply the active presence of the Spirit, empowering God's people to do things they would have never imagined but that would end up changing the world.

Like Toad, the lesson for us is that our work is to plant the seeds, provide water and shade while the sun shines and the roots take hold, and enjoy the flowers when they bloom. We simply remain open—to the future, to new things, to change, to our neighbors, to the gifts within us, and to the Spirit. Sometimes, though, we do need to take a look at the work we're doing that isn't really helping those seeds to grow, what is not contributing to our purpose and mission. Most importantly, just because Toad didn't see the growth right away didn't mean that growth wasn't taking place underneath the surface—Toad just couldn't see it because he was looking for the more visible, immediate results. We must remember that vitality is not the end in and of itself; it's the way in which we become more fully the body of Christ in the world. My prayer is that we all seek to live into that call each day—doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God. Amen!