

Stewards: In Our Own Words

Why is my faith important to me? What does my church and the United Church of Christ mean to me? What does being a steward mean in my life?

Every pastor of a local church knows people whose lives would not be the same without the church. The organized community of faith is home to some from birth and becomes home to others at any time of life. A person's "home church" is an anchor in the world, a place to be accepted and find meaning, to join with others in sharing and giving, sometimes to stumble upon insights that transform life. In these ways, people become stewards--of their families, their resources, their lives.

Here are three stories of United Church of Christ members--stewards talking about faith, life, giving, and the church.

BUD THOMPSON Prophetstown, Illinois

"I am still a member of the same church that I was baptized in 63 years ago. The First Congregational Church of Prophetstown has been a big part of my life: as a church school student, becoming a member, teaching church school, leading a youth group; and as church school superintendent, deacon, trustee, church council president, choir member, and chair of our centennial committee. My wife and I were married in this church, my father's and two sisters' funerals were held in this church, and our two children were baptized in and joined this church.

"Since this church became a part of the United Church of Christ, there have been times I questioned the wisdom of some statements and policies coming from UCC leadership. As a former Republican County Chairman with a conservative belief, I often differed with 'Cleveland,' A few times, 'Continuing Congregational' seemed to be a viable option to pursue.

"But then I became involved in 'Make a Difference!' The mission study portion of this campaign opened my eyes to the rich history of our denomination in outreach and social services--namely, in education and health services. I had been unaware of our wider church's positive impact here and abroad. We indeed have a 'big tent' that is open to all. This experience has certainly helped me better understand our role and responsibility--to do the things God has directed--for ourselves and others.

"My late father often said: "Life is like farming a good piece of ground . . . you have to put more into it than you take out.' That does make a difference."

RICHARD N. JOHNSON Powder Springs, Georgia

"I've been a part of my church, Amistad United Church of Christ, in Marietta, Georgia, since the very beginning about three years ago, when we were a small Bible study group that grew as neighbors and friends joined. Last May we celebrated our first anniversary in our new building, and we now have 140 members.

"At Amistad, tithing is heavily emphasized. When there's a need to be met, we simply believe we need to meet it. At Amistad, you won't find us doing fund-raisers--we just go and do.

"In the past, I was not a tither. But when I was asked to be a trustee, I went to God in prayer and was challenged, and I can't begin to count the blessings I've experienced since I began tithing. I let go of some of my faithless ways, always allowing budgets to limit my giving. In turn I've learned to ask if there is a need, then I simply give of my time, talents, or tithes to meet that need.

"My belief in tithing is based on Malachi 3:10--try God, trust in God. Even if you are fearful about the future, and even if it might make things a little tight this month--just try it. In fact, when things are a little tight, that can be an even better time to give, because it's not giving from your excess.

"And don't be afraid to give the best. Amistad Church sponsors a refugee family from Zaire, and everything the church has provided--from a nice apartment to clothing and other necessities--has been new and of good quality, nothing second-hand or discarded.

"For me, tithing is a starting point. God asks for *at least* this much from us--our time and talent as well as our money--God asks us to just give ourselves. When people ask about whether that ten percent should come from gross or net income, I think: why am I going to shortchange God? It's God's money, so I'm going to immediately go for the larger amount. If we trust God with our money, and learn to let go of it, that's showing a *true* trust in God."

JOHN W. MYERS, JR.
Karns City, PA

"I am 36 years old and have been self-employed for almost 20 years, doing construction work. Several years ago, my excavating company was in trouble--I borrowed a lot, started to lose track, didn't get paid for a large job, lost and lost--to the point where I had nothing of material value left.

"Then my wife got pregnant with twins, and there were complications. After the birth of our twin boys, an evaluation showed that one of our twins has cerebral palsy. I realized then that material things are not needed. They do help, but they are not needed. My son with CP needs little things. He likes nothing more than to spend time with me running a machine.

"My wife and I decided that we needed to talk to someone. We chose the minister of the UCC church which I've belonged to all my life. He made me think of the past and all my mistakes over

the years and what people really value. My family and I started to go to church for the most part every Sunday, and the message made me believe in myself. I started a new business, it grew and is still growing; but I hope I never forget where I came from.

"So when the minister asked for volunteers to help clean up the '93 flood in Missouri, I thought this could be a chance to give back a little of my profession. We spent a week there--myself, two employees, two machines and some hand tools, working from sun up to sun down. Even today I think about those people.

"In today's world it is dog eat dog, just look out for yourself. So it brings a good warm feeling to me in many ways when I can help someone in need or give time to my son with cerebral palsy.

"I know inside that I would not be what I am or have what I have without God."

LUCY SAMARA
Burlington, Vermont

"Joining the First Congregational Church of Burlington in 1985 was an enormous step for me. I was raised in a family that considered anything beyond an Easter interest in religion to be unusual and perhaps even a bit embarrassing. At this church, I found an atmosphere that welcomed open discussion about doubt. For me, this openness was license for spiritual exploration.

"Shortly after joining the church I was invited to serve on our Christian Action Committee, and since 1991 I have been on the church staff as Director of Outreach Ministries.

"I got involved in outreach ministries because I saw many unmet needs in my community and because I feel that Christianity is not ambiguous at all about our call to help those who are suffering. Organized religion will probably always be vulnerable to hypocrisy at some level. I believe that the church should provide organized avenues for members to act out what they either believe or are trying to understand about faith.

"By creating an environment open to spiritual exploration and supportive of outreach ministry, my church has provided me with an opportunity to grow as a Christian. I know that the work I have been encouraged to do has had a positive impact on my community and on my church and family. Over time, the work of outreach ministry has expanded my vision of what can happen through faith. The work has also deepened my understanding of what I see as our mutual call . . . not to judge, not to fear, but to trust and give, and to let go of our gifts with grace."

LILY LUE STEARNS
Pastor, Kapolei United Church of Christ
Kapolei, Hawaii

When my father, Bon Yung Lee, built our home in Burma, he also dug a well, which would sustain his family for a long time. It so happened that the well was deep enough to accommodate the needs of his family, and more. Always on the lookout for ways to share his wealth, Bon Yung opened the well up to the whole community. For the first time, people would no longer have to walk long distances for water. Bon Yung understood that taking care of the world was to take care of the people around him, strangers and friends.

In my parent's home, life was organized around a commitment to being 'in' life in the church. We believed we were called to be models for the community because we had the ability, both in physical wealth and spiritual wealth. Every Friday night, at the end of the long week and day, the family gathered for devotions. Sunday was spent in worship and service to the church.

Tithing was practiced, as it still is in most Chinese Christian people's lives. Even giving beyond the tithe is only the beginning. Both individuals and the community understand that giving is actually based on the principal 'whatever the circumstances require.' It was not unusual for our family to provide dinner for the entire congregation in our restaurant on Sunday. This custom was started early in my father's life.

Persistence, commitment, and faith are the things which sustained life. The witness of my parents taught me powerful lessons of stewardship.

The United Church of Christ has a wealth of points of view and experiences among its members. Many congregations are experiencing growing cultural and racial diversity among their members. And in many communities, the local United Church of Christ congregation is the one that attracts the most previously "unchurched" people or people from other religious backgrounds.

Are there people in your congregation--life-long members or newcomers--who would like to tell the story of how their faith and their church have affected their lives? They may be people who have been long-time stewards of life and resources, or they may have recently developed a new understanding. We would be interested in hearing from them. Ask them to send their stories to CONNECTIONS, Stewardship Council, United Church of Christ, 700 Prospect Ave., Cleveland, OH 44115. Thanks.

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