

## **Visit to The Church of the Redeemer UCC, New Haven, CT**

### **Roger Samuelson**

On Saturday, June 12, I experienced a most enjoyable and meaningful visit to the Church of the Redeemer in New Haven, CT.

#### Background

The Church of the Redeemer was one of the churches featured in Diana Butler Bass' book entitled Christianity for the Rest of Us. It was founded in 1838 and moved to its present location, not too far from the Yale Divinity School, in 1920. Much of the original Parish House remains but the Main Sanctuary was added in 1951.

Rev. Lillian F. Daniel was in the final stages of her pastorate at the time Bass wrote her book. She was followed by an interim pastor. The current pastor, Rev. Rochelle A. Stackhouse, was called in 2006.

As described in Bass' book, the church offers a spiritual home for both displaced Roman Catholics and a large number of people from Mixwell Congregational Church, an historically African-American UCC church from across town. In the words of one parishioner, one of Redeemer's strengths is "its practice of hospitality—this is a church that has open doors. ... Redeemer is a church that could disagree and still hold each other in Christian fellowship".

Overall, the church is very similar to OCC: number of members, size of budget, average attendance, one pastor at the present time, love of music, proximity to a major university.

#### David Carter

Rev. Stackhouse was not available the day of my visit but she put me in touch with a long time church leader, David Carter. David graciously gave up much of his Saturday to give me a tour of the "campus" and share his and Redeemer's journey.

We met in the Main Sanctuary and had only been together for fifteen minutes or so when he told me of the impact testimonials had had on the transformation of Redeemer during Rev. Daniel's pastorate. I was not surprised since Bass' book recalled the testimony by a Darrell Carpenter, then the church's moderator, on the first Sunday of Lent in 2000. He recalled a church meeting in 1997 when each of the participants was asked to write about a transformation in his or her life. He wrote about coming out as a gay man at the age of thirty-four, first to himself and then his family, and about divorcing his wife and struggling to become a gay father to their five-year-old daughter.

What surprised me was what came next. David looked me in the eye and said "I am that moderator; the author used different names in quoting or referring to individuals in her book". That revelation moved the rest of our conversation to a different level,

highlighted by my sharing OCC's Open and Affirming experience, our having such a wonderful experience with Jeff serving as Interim Sabbatical Pastor, and having David's partner, Robert (Bob) Parker, join us for lunch to continue our dialog.

David and Bob met in the summer of 1986 at a dinner party. The host was "doing a little matchmaking," and thought he and Bob would get along because they were roughly the same age, were both recently divorced and were both fathers - Bob had a son and David a daughter, both 7 at the time. The couple was married in MA in 2005.

For his part, David continues to assume major leadership roles for the church and is currently on the Board of Deacons and heading the capital campaign committee. His work as chair of the Mission Committee even led him to give up his career as an architect, become active in an interdenominational group in New Haven that works for positive change, and pursue training as community organizer and "life coach". For his part, Bob is currently chair of the Board of Trustees. Pretty impressive, these two.

### Testimonials

In one of her final sermons, Rev. Daniels said "Our church's practice is giving testimony, having people talk about their experience of God ... People are changed by giving their testimonies, and we can see the Holy Spirit moving them along". Bass quotes one of the lay members of the church recalling Darrell's (David Carter's) testimony as follows: "I remember Darrell Carpenter talking about being gay. And he talked about how he was accepted. There wasn't a dry eye in the house".

David shared with me that testimonials actually started at the board and committee level and were used as a means of helping members become better acquainted.

Bass describes the impact of these testimonials as follows:

*Testimony led Redeemer away from the old minister-centered congregation into a new expression of the ancient tradition of New England democratic faith. By sharing the pilgrimage in community, they changed both themselves and the church*

### Relationships

The current church newsletter includes this "From the Pastor's Desk":

*Church is not about a street address or a building or an institution; church is about nurturing relationships with God and God's children. While I think most of us might affirm this as true, the reality of how we live our life together often reflects something different. I know this is true for me. It is easy to fall into prioritizing the focus of my time on institutional matters rather than relational ones. It can be easy for the leadership of the church to do the same, what with all the things we need to attend to concerning our building and finances and the structure that keeps our institution running. This summer, I would like to move toward re-orienting my time priorities toward*

*relationships, with God and with you. As part of that effort, I would like to begin a project this summer to have a one-on-one meeting with each active member of this church. We can meet at your home, out somewhere for tea or lunch, at the church, for a walk in the park, or wherever works best for both of us. These meetings need not be long (no more than an hour), and I have no specific agenda for them except to explore the state of our spirits, to paraphrase an old hymn — is it well with your soul? The one rule is that we may do NO CHURCH BUSINESS in these conversations.*

*Given vacations, yours and mine, I am under no illusion that I will complete this project in the next three months, but I hope you will respond positively to my request for a conversation. I am very much looking forward to these times with you!*

I shared this with Frank before he departed on his sabbatical and he is very receptive to undertaking a similar initiative, time and other commitments permitting.

### Mission

As described in Bass' book, Redeemer continues to pursue "public ministry" in the greater New Haven area, e.g. be part of reconciliation groups, serving the poor, and seeking justice.

In the springs of 2008, 2009 and 2010, a group from Redeemer traveled to Mississippi to help with the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

Both an Alcoholics Anonymous and an Al-Anon group were using the church the day of my visit. These groups have a key to the premises and "open access". The church was also hosting a recital that day for young musicians in its Sanctuary. It was a busy place!

### Music

As at OCC, music is obviously a wonderful part of Redeemer's worship services. David Carter joined the Senior Choir years before he joined the church and assumed leadership roles. In her book, Bass commented as follows:

*... at Redeemer music, liturgy, and word were completely one, as were the choir minister, and congregation. Indeed, the congregation appeared to be inside the music, not just watching a performance. It was a kind of grace-filled dance. And it was doing something spiritual to them. Together, they enacted the music, transforming their plain room with auditory beauty. In every sense, music at Redeemer is, as Kurt Mounsmas told me, a Christian practice – they work on making beautiful sound in community.*

### Organization

Redeemer currently has the following boards and committees:

Church Council

Board of Deacons  
Board of Trustees  
Missions Committee  
Christian Education Committee  
Music Committee  
Nominating Committee  
Financial Development Committee  
Pastoral Relations Committee  
Personnel Committee  
Safe-church Committee  
Ad hoc Capital Campaign Committee

There are also some less formal "ad hoc" groups: Friends in Faith interest groups, a welcoming committee.

There is currently a by-law revision committee working on streamlining the by-laws to more accurately reflect current practices and anticipated needs.

The Church Council, chaired by the Moderator, consists of a representative from each of the boards and committees, as well as church delegates. It meets monthly, and is the plenary body which allows the work of the boards and committees to be coordinated, and to respond to church-wide and community concerns. Recently, an executive committee structure was created to make timely decisions when it is impossible to convene a quorum of the Church Council.

The main priority for the board of deacons is to maintain and enhance the "spiritual life" of the church. The deacons work with the ministers and other church leaders in determining the basic form of worship, or liturgy. The deacons also play supporting roles in worship, for example, as readers and special speakers, in setting up and serving on communion days and in assuring the sanctuary is appropriately accoutred, such as at Easter and Christmas. Outside of worship, the deacons coordinate and sponsor adult education events that bear on issues of faith. The Diaconate also ministers to members of the church who are not able to come to worship--primarily the elderly and shut-ins. Each week, for instance, a deacon brings flowers to a member of the congregation and uses that opportunity for visitation. In addition, the deacons have established a lay ministry program that, among other things, enables them to serve communion to members in their homes.

The Board of Trustees is responsible for buildings and grounds and for the fiscal side of the ledger.

The Missions Committee coordinates church outreach projects, identifies volunteer opportunities in the community, decides how to spend the church's outreach budget, and coordinates collection of UCC special offerings.