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HOLY FUN: A PATH TO CHURCH CONSOLIDATION

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An Abstract of “Holy Fun: A Path to Church Consolidation”

Holy Fun is a playful, lighthearted, not-take-yourself-too-seriously approach to ministry that expresses itself in a rainbow of experiences which bring people together and closer to God. Drawing from Johan Huizinga, James Evans, Henri Nouwen, and Harvey Cox, the element of play is defined and placed firmly within the soul of the church and its people. Hugo Rahner, Edwin Friedman, Martin Marty and Michael Koppel laid the groundwork for the element, to ‘not-take-yourself-too-seriously’. This embodied theology is further elucidated by Plato, Jurgen Moltmann, Julia Cameron and Mary Hess. The term *Holy Fun* seems oxymoronic. How can one have fun in the pursuit of the Holy or conversely, How can one be holy while having fun. But the idea of *Holy Fun* is counterintuitive for most folks. *Holy Fun* does include a Theology of Fun.

Although Holy Fun can be applied to all aspects of ministry including conflict management, educational approaches, outreach ministry, staffing, leadership training, mission life, and worship, its potential employment is only limited by the imagination. I have helped to consolidate four United Church of Christ congregations with *Holy Fun* as the vehicle of change. This path to church consolidation is presented as a case study in *Holy Fun*. This is not a “how to” program that can be completed step by step, but a philosophy of playful and lighthearted approach to all aspects of ministry that can be learned by pastors, church leaders and pew sitters and will aide congregations in their futuring together. For current information, please visit my website: www.holyfun.org.

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“Churches are dying from terminal seriousness” (Rendel). This astute observation by Gil Rendel gives voice to the perception I have observed for years. Taking ourselves (and our churches) too seriously, and believing that holiness is equated with a sedate and somber God, is only part of the dilemma. Churches are dying. The irony is that when churches find themselves “walking through the valley of the shadow” they become even more intent in their seriousness; they become grave and somber, or sometimes intense and passionate about survival. Survival however, is not an end in itself. We do not want to just survive, we want to live and grow in faith. The continued existence of the Body of Christ is a serious topic, but with churches borrowing from their Endowment Funds, or cashing in their Certificates of Deposits to pay their regular expenses, it is as if they are already on life-support. Churches on *a downward spiral* tend to garner numbers for statistical scrutiny. These studies conclude along the lines that, “there are fewer people attending churches, the median age of these members has risen significantly, and the income from these few members is less than sufficient to sustain the church”. This leads to a bottom line supposition, almost a desperate plea. They cry out, “We must keep our doors open at any *costs*.” Ironically, all of these numeric deductions cause folks to get even more intense about survival as a congregation. However, it is my experience that congregations are dying from terminal seriousness and what we really need to do is loosen up,

not take ourselves so seriously, and have some *Holy Fun*. This is counterintuitive and requires for some folks a paradigm shift in thinking about the church's ministry.

The future of the church as an instrument of God's orchestrated presence in the world is a very serious, significant, earnest and genuine concern. It is a strong motivating factor to "do something" often substantiated by statistics. However the attitude, the manner, or the overt seriousness with which we approach church life in general and all of its challenges in particular is the problem. *Holy Fun* is a solution. *Holy Fun* is a term devised to describe a philosophy of ministry, an outlook of playfulness and mirth that undergirds all aspects of the communal life of a congregation.

***Holy Fun* is defined as a way of going about church life that opens one to a rainbow of experiences that bring people closer to each other and to God.** *Holy fun* is an attitude, a demeanor, a disposition, and a mood that informs a plethora of activities and experiences. *Holy Fun* is an outlook of play, playfulness and mirth. It is not taking one's self or one's church too seriously. The rainbow of experiences are both the planned activities, worshipful moments, and *sharing's*, as well as the unplanned occasions, encounters and impromptu conversations in the parking lot or the pews that bring people closer together and closer to God. I am hesitant to name these specific experiences up front because, like faith, *Holy Fun* is something upon which one needs to take action and it is a paradigm shift in one's philosophical outlook. *Holy Fun* is not any single specific activity, episode or strategy; it is rather a rainbow of experiences.

I am presenting *Holy Fun* here as a path towards Church Consolidation, because this is the specific phenomenon in which I have experienced the positive results of its use. But *Holy Fun* has much broader and far reaching implications and applications. It is not just useful for

congregations looking to their future, but living the present realities as well. I can envision its use in the everyday practices of an emotionally healthy congregation, seminary, nursing home, Sunday school, church committee/tasks force, day care, music ministry, and all of their ministries. It can be used in mission life, educational approaches, outreach ministries, pastoral care opportunities, stewardship life, communications, study groups, fellowship ministries, musical life, staffing options, long range planning, and worship. It can be utilized in the secular world for problem solving, planning retreats, conflict management, office moral, staff meetings, and corporate consolidations as well. The potential application of this lighthearted and playful approach to ministry is limited only by the imagination.

This paper will define *Holy Fun* and describe how this can be (and has been) used as a pathway leading to successful church consolidation. It is important to note that church consolidation is only one possible solution to futuring the church and the growth of the institutional church. It is not the only solution. There have been many viable and creative pathways into the future and church consolidation is just one. In fact, *Holy Fun* can be used in any of the other solutions for the continued presence of the Body of Christ in the world. This is presented here as a story to be told from which others may benefit, and not a thesis to be proven. It is my hope that this case study will demonstrate the value of *Holy Fun* as a tool for other congregations.

In this first chapter I will paint a word picture of how it is that I arrived at this conclusion, and also color in the above pencil sketch of how some congregations have arrived at this *Kairos* moment in history, of becoming terminally serious. Chapter Two will address the skeptics by giving voice to questions that may have arisen in the readers' thinking even at this very

moment. This chapter is presented up front to playfully engage all of the readers with this counterintuitive change within the church and its members. Chapter Three will sculpt a definition and theology of Holy Fun. By placing *Holy Fun* within the broader scope of theological and philosophical reflections, its definition and significance will be further refined. Chapter Three will also form the elements of Holy Fun from the clay of experience. Chapter Four will conclude with a reflective analysis of how Holy Fun was used by Faith United Church of Christ, Hazleton, PA to consolidate four congregations by building relationships, trust and hope. All of this will be sprinkled with **Faith Voices** which are comments and insights gathered from the people at Faith U.C.C. Hazleton, and can be found in text boxes along the margins. (Reference Appendix A)

Chapter One: How did we get here?

The first part of this chapter will discern how this notion of *Holy Fun* was formed. The second section of this chapter will point to a few possible reasons why the corporate church has a tendency to be somber, humorless, and gravely serious. These contributing factors begin to set the scene for the cure – *Holy Fun*.

I was called to Interim Ministry at Grace United Church of Christ, Hazleton, PA in August, 1994. As fortuitous as this may sound, this congregation was sitting down for the first time to discuss the possibility of *doing something together* with the other three United Churches of Christ congregations in the Hazleton/West Hazleton area.¹ The first meeting of the newly

¹There is quite a history to this meeting, and can be read in an article I wrote for the spring 2000 “Growing Plans” a United Church Board for Homeland Ministries publication which is re-printed with permission in Appendix B.

appointed Inter-Church Board was held on August 4, 1994. This Board consisted of three representatives from each of the four congregations and their pastors, of which two were Interims, and two were Stated Supply Pastors (part-time pastors serving the basic needs of these congregations). Looking around the table that night, I was thinking that these folks were resigned, reluctantly so, to the foregone conclusion that they 'had to' consolidate. It reminded me of an arranged marriage, or even that old donut commercial in which the bakers get up at



three in the morning and trudge to work, slowly chanting, "We have to make the donuts. We have to make the donuts." This struck a chord deep within me that sang out, "If these folks come together out of 'need', it will be

a co-dependent union." In the next measure I was asking myself, "How could I help these folks *want* to come together and not just *need* to come together?" Keeping in mind that my Bachelor degree was in Health and Physical Education (I tell folks I majored in games in college), I concluded that evening we could try to get to know each other (a kind of dating?), to enjoy each other's company, and to develop a trust relationship with each other individually and corporately as congregations.

This original insight was influenced by the Rev. Dr. Horace Sills, a national United Church of Christ consultant, who was invited to help the four United Church of Christ congregations in Hazleton/West Hazleton. He preached at one of our joint worship services, and at the benediction proclaimed, "This is a congregation that knows how to have fun." Bingo! The term *Holy Fun* came to me. This is what we were doing together. It sounds oxymoronic, but that in itself is fun. *Holy Fun* is a mirthful and fun approach to ministry that opens us to a rainbow of

experiences that bring us closer to God and closer to others. From the inception, *Holy Fun* was not a prescribed program, or even a set of goals and objectives, but more of an attitude, or openness to *something different*. Since the consolidation of this newly minted congregation we have been asked to talk with other congregations about the possibilities that may exist for their futures. In each of these conversations emphasis has been placed on the playful, not-take-yourself too seriously attitudes, and finding the mirthful in the mundane and sacred. There is a bit of creative thinking involved in most of the Holy Fun experiences, but not all of the ideas we have generated together would be applicable to other congregations. Each person, each congregation needs to adopt a *Holy Fun* way of looking at themselves and the ways to do ministry together in order to forge a path to church consolidation. Turning the focus towards the corporate church we ask....



How did our churches become somber and terminally serious?

In order to establish that our congregations are less playful and more somber these days, we must first establish that they were “once upon a time” more lighthearted and good-humored. And then we will turn to the possible contributing factors that have landed our churches in the Intensive Care Unit, on life support, with a diagnosis of Terminal Seriousness. This will begin to qualify the illness of which *Holy Fun* is a cure.

In his book, *The Feast of Fools*, Harvey Cox does an engaging and spirited analysis of the demise of feasts and festivals. His conclusion is strong;

“The truth may very well be that we have inherited a recently perverted form of Christianity, that its terrible

sobriety is a distortion of its real genius, and that a kind of playfulness lies much closer to its heart than solemnity does.” (Cox 32)

Although there is not any one phenomenon that can be the definitive reason why churches are less playful in nature, the disappearance of the Feast of Fools, or festivals, can be considered as a contributing factor. Cox maintains that the Feast of Fools is a “symbol” of a socially and individually valued (and in my opinion needed) characteristic of a healthy person, religion and society (Cox 4). This characteristic involves celebrating, eating, singing, telling stories, dancing and laughing together. I would like to submit that festivals can be the manifestation of *Holy Fun*, and by their very nature bring us closer to God and each other. Without festivals, without

“I remember in one of our joint worship services, before we became one, Jane was illustrating how God called Abraham to uproot his whole family , the animals and the servants to a new land. She had all of us get up out of our pews and move to another one. Oh my, what grumbling, moaning, and laughter we heard that day!” **Faith Voices**

Holy Fun, we have tendency to be a very somber, sedate and humorless church. Cox understands the value of keeping the life of the church positive, upbeat, playful and lighthearted. His analysis of the Feast of Fools reflects this core belief, one with which the author of

this paper resonates.

Max Harris in a rather intriguing and engaging study of how the church’s judgment and condemnation of the Feast of Fools was actually a digression of misread and misunderstood reactions over the years, unearths and studies the original documents in a kind of *Lies My History Teacher Taught Me* way. He discloses “a tolerance of playfulness in early medieval churches” that suggests playfulness in the sacred setting has indeed been around for a long while (6). The Feasts of Fools was originally a liturgical celebration seen as an alternative to the secular New Year’s celebration, and as a way to celebrate Christ’s Circumcision (Harris 6). The

playful surprises, the metaphors, and the priest's part within the Feasts of Fools liturgy itself offer a much needed model for a more *Holy Fun* approach to worship. Harris, with his tongue firmly in his cheek, aptly names his study, *Sacred Folly* as he excavates the archives of church history. Perhaps *Holy Fun* has been around for a very long time.

Now that it is possible to suggest that the early church may have been more playful than previously thought, we can look at potential contributing factors into its demise within the church. From a sociological and psychological perspective, Edwin Friedman writes about systems (families, institutions, and societies) that are chronically anxious, and regress emotionally, disabling any forward movement or healthy living, in his book, *The Failure of Nerve*. He suggests that one of the indicators or symptoms of an unhealthy system is the lack of playfulness:

"...the relationship between anxiety and seriousness is so predictable that the absence of Playfulness in any institution is almost always a clue to the degree of its emotional regression." (Friedman 85)

Friedman has conducted intensive scientific studies on which he has based his opinions. "A

Faith Voices

major criterion for judging the anxiety level of any society, institution or family is the loss of its capacity to be playful" (Friedman 256). He further suggests that people and systems digress into the reptilian functioning part of the brain and are unable to relate to people who do not agree with them, unceasingly trying to convert another to one's own point of view (using coercion if necessary) and

cannot help but interfere in the relationship of others (Friedman 188). This unhealthy behavior makes for very serious encounters and loud arguments. An extreme example comes from my capacity as a member of the Penn Northeast Conference Conflict Resource Team. We had an incident where a member of a church consistory in his need to control the outcome of an argument concerning the church property, brought a hand gun to the consistory meeting and placed it on the table before the meeting. The obvious unhealthy behaviors are not as much of a problem though as the more subtle ones: Parking lot meetings after the official meetings to voice disagreements, putting the person down rather than just disagreeing with their opinions, talking in the third person to disassociate one's self from the process, talking in absolutes (we never, you always), triangulating, and other such behaviors. Not only is unhealthy behavior noticeable in church systems, but it is an evident, and (sadly so) predominant behavior within our political structure as well. Another contributing factor to the increase of seriousness, or terminal seriousness within the churches today, is the unhealthy system itself. The result is a depletion or complete lack of laughter and playfulness within the Body of Christ. *Holy Fun* can help to heal our congregational systems.

In addition to the health of the church system is the influence of the Puritan work ethic on both churches and society as an additional factor which may have landed our churches in the intensive care unit having contracted terminal seriousness. Jurgen Moltmann refers to the "detrimental American Puritan influence" on the church in his critique of his *Theology of Play* book reviews (epilog). Moltmann argues that play is not something we do, but it is who we are (112). However, playfulness under the influence of the Puritans became a kind of *evil*, or at the very least a *waste of time*. The Puritans were very intense about their work and likewise

twenty-first century Americans have continued the tradition and lived out this principle. For some folks, work has become almost a sacred rite, and everything else is “foolishness” or a waste of time. The idea of having *Holy Fun* is counterintuitive. The Puritan work ethic has influenced American’s view of what is valued, and what is foolish, and therefore our churches have become humorless and somber.

Sometimes it is the interpretation of the scriptures that has dampened the laughter and mirth within our congregations. James Martin in his enchanting and insightful book, *Between Heaven and Mirth*, lifts up joy, humor and laughter as the heart of a spiritual life. In his chapter, “Why so gloomy?” he suggests that we tend to interpret scriptures in a somber and humorless fashion because: 1) Humor is a cultural phenomenon. We do not understand first century culture and therefore we miss the humor. This is true in any century and supports my supposition that we do not know what tone of voice Jesus uses when he makes announcements, or tells a parable, or even performs a miracle. 2) The Greek culture in which these stories were written presented Jesus according to the standards of the day which emphasized a person with virtue and accomplishments. The gospel writers were trying to prove his validity, and therefore used the staid arguments that emphasized his valued qualities in which humor and lightheartedness were overlooked. 3) He lifts up Elton Trueblood’s thinking that we have heard these stories too many times, like an old joke, and can no longer find the humor. 4) The emphasis of all four Gospels on the Passion narratives highlights the suffering and death of Jesus (Martin 31-62). I agree Martin that we all need the freshness of Spirit to interpret, understand and enjoy the

humor of the scriptures. This humorless interpretation of our faith stories is a possible contributing factor to the overall dismal and funereal outlook or nature of our congregations. “Our sacred stories are serious and somber; therefore we too must be serious and somber.”

The denominational interpretation of the Biblical stories, in particular the German Reformed tradition of the United Church of Christ, has also contributed to the decline of *Holy Fun*. Paul condemned the early church gatherings for not taking the Eucharist seriously. In Paul’s first letter to the church at Corinth he writes about his concerns when coming together around the table for the Lord’s Supper. “For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk” (New Revised Standard Bible I Cor. 11.21). He pointed to the divisions in the church as counter to the unity of the Body. He concludes with, “Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink the cup, for all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves” (I Cor. 11.27-29). These parameters placed on the simple act of eating and drinking by Paul have been interpreted and used down through church history to limit or restrict access to the body and blood. These verses have been used in the German Reformed tradition to exclude children from the table. And yet communion can also be experienced as a coming together with God and one another with the freedom to choose the level of participation in a playful reenactment and remembering. Communion can be *Holy Fun*. This element of Communion as the “Joyful Feast of the People of God” can be lost or suppressed in the somber and exclusive state of congregational righteousness. I can still remember the dour expression on the minister’s face of

the United Methodist Church in which I grew up as he intoned the invitation with all solemnity,

“This is the joyful feast of the people of God. All who confess Jesus as the Christ are

welcome to come, having diligently prepared themselves

to receive the sacrament.” Granted, there are numerous

ways to come to the table, but the loss of joy at receiving

this sacred gift has depleted the experience. To add this

“Not everyone was thrilled with the talks of consolidation. Some didn’t like what they perceived to be a frivolous attempt at ‘getting to know you’ activities. They thought it was a waste of time. But the good part was that there were always options for everyone to participate or not. Rev. Hess emphasized the choices as the U.C.C. way. **Faith Voices**

quality of *Holy Fun* back into the equation of Communion, not in place of all the others but in

addition to, will only broaden and deepen the spiritual renewal of communion within the Body

of Christ. Denominational church interpretations and traditions have often provided an

ecclesiastical “red tape” to the sacraments, and have, in my opinion, dampened the joyful and

spontaneous demeanor of the meaning of holiness.

Another possible contributing factor to the depletion of playfulness and lighthearted mirth in our congregations is the design of our worship services and the making of our church traditions into idols. In the worship of the Living God, often the same words are used over and over. For some, the sameness of the liturgy creates a comfortable fit, especially in times of duress or grief; “Our worlds have been turned upside down because Uncle Joe died, but at least God is the same (as is reflected in the liturgy)”. I am not saying that we do not need sameness; however, the question can be asked, has this constant repetition in church liturgies moved churches toward a less playful, less *Holy Fun* approach to God, and into a stagnant, staid and solemn worship? Are children welcomed and valued in worship or are they told to *sit down and be quiet*? Do people laugh in church or are they *strained* and *constrained* within their uncomfortable silence? Are the people more worried about the stranger sitting in *my pew* or

the extravagant welcome of the stranger in the worship of the Loving God? Are all of the hymns dirge-like or are there upbeat *head and heart* hymns? Do we celebrate communion as *the joyful feast of all God's people*, or do we worry that little Joshua just snuck a piece of bread, or there were *regular people* serving the elements rather than just the elders? Yes, congregations can be

"After we had become one church, we were invited to some churches in Easton to talk about our journey. Rev. Hess had written a script "The Good, the Bad and the Ugly" that explained in a fun way what we had done. (see Appendix C) But in the discussion afterward one of the Consistory Presidents suggested the other three churches close their buildings and join with them because they had the largest building. There was a stunned silence. Then Rev. Hess, using the southern drawl we had just used in our skit said, "Well, that there isn't a consolidation, that there is what we call a hostile take-over." Everyone laughed.

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deadly serious about their church traditions, almost defensive in the protection thereof, feeling as though they are betraying their ancestors if they break with tradition and the proverbial, "we have always done it this way". I have found when our worship services and traditions are deadly serious, our churches are seriously dead.

In the midst of a spirit of "the survival of the

fittest" genre, there is a fierce competition between denominations. Ecumenism is at an all-time low. This competitive stance between churches and denominations has become an aggressive and ardent playing field, but this is not the lighthearted and mirthful *play* found within *Holy Fun*. The "winner takes all" theory is alive and well, as if our church's survival is dependent on the other church's losses. This philosophy of scarcity and competition is another contributing factor to the overly serious condition of our congregations.

Although this is not an all-inclusive study on the question – "Why are churches today so grave and somber in nature?" – the previous discussion has pointed to a few contributing factors: 1) For some, the church is an unhealthy system and this has contributed to the humorless and somber, serious nature of the church. 2) The influence of the Puritan work ethic on society and churches. This has garnered the false notion that playfulness, and lighthearted

play are a waste of time. 3) The manner or the way we approach the scriptures, coupled with the tendency to interpret scriptures with a seriousness that betrays the lighthearted playfulness of our faith stories may have added to the grey pall of terminal seriousness over our churches. 4) Others may point to the denominational interpretations of faith stories that have added layers of rules and regulations to the dispensations of grace as a partial factor in the terminal seriousness of the churches today. One example in German Reformed congregations is the misinterpreted Paul's passages on the Holy Eucharist and how this has been used to limit the access of children to the table. 5) Worship design and the making of idols out of our church traditions is also a possible contributing factor to our overly serious demeanor within congregations. 6) The fierce competition and philosophy of scarcity within our churches where there are winners and losers, has been a contributing factor to the demise of church playfulness, and the gloomy, morose nature of the church.

Father Hugo Rahner paints a delightful vision of the church as a people and God "engaged in marvelously and joyously graceful bit of play" and compares this to "the overtly serious and pedantic tomes of much past theology" (Rahner 86). *Holy Fun* can help churches to lighten up and open up to the possibilities and to God who invites us to come and play. It is essential that churches and church members not take themselves so seriously and to participate fully (or fool-y) in *Holy Fun*. *Holy Fun* is an answer to this Somber, Pedantic and Overly Serious Church Syndrome. Having diagnosed the corporate church's *terminal seriousness*, now we can turn to our individual perceptions that may prevent our participation in *Holy Fun*. This chapter will continue to diagnosis the malaise of terminal seriousness for which *Holy Fun* is a cure.

Chapter Two: Answering the Skeptics

Holy Fun is a term I devised to describe the lighthearted, playful approach to ministry that we at Faith U.C.C. utilized to consolidate four congregations. In this chapter we will playfully engage the people who have a “disconnect” with this term *Holy Fun* in order to more fully engage the readership. Just as we have painted the landscape of our churches, and where they are in the scheme of things, so now we focus on the individual’s initial impression of what *Holy Fun* is and people’s reluctance to laugh, smile and joyfully play in church.

Is *Holy Fun* holy and/or fun?

The term *Holy Fun* may seem oxymoronic, after all, how can one be holy in the pursuit of fun? Or conversely, it can be asked, how can one have fun approaching the Holy? But being oxymoronic makes the term itself fun (and the defining of it *Holy Fun* – at least for this author). The obstacles in defining *Holy Fun* are manifold but are complicated at a basic level because both *Holy* and *Fun* are subjective in their separate definitions. Not everyone experiences God or the holiness of God in the same manner, and everyone has a very different idea about what is fun. Some folks find it a seemingly preposterous idea that one can approach God in a fun and playful manner. Holy needs a solemn, reverent and humorless demeanor, they purport. They state, “Fun cannot possibly be holy.” The possibility that something holy may be lighthearted, mirthful and full of laughter is counterintuitive. These are all valid definitions or understandings of what is holy and fun because both descriptive terms are often defined and confined to one’s own experience. The way one approaches God or experiences holiness is also

subject to an individual's opinions, tastes and familial upbringing. Therefore some people are skeptical of the concept of *Holy Fun*.

Is the term Holy Fun valid or irreverent?

What comes to mind when hearing the term *Holy Fun*? The idea that there may be a theology of fun or that God is in the midst of our laughter and fun is incredulous to some folks.

There is sometimes a vast disconnect between what is holy and what is fun in some people's thinking. When these two words are married into one descriptive term, the term itself becomes objectionable even before one understands what it is about. Although I would like to say I had planned it this way, I cannot. However, because *Holy Fun* as a way of doing ministry is such a paradigm shift in people's thinking, it makes sense to use a term that reflects this shift as well.

"I realized early on in the talks with the other congregations that joining with the other churches was not going to be easy, even though we really needed to take this step or we wouldn't have a church. But when we had anything together, a meeting, a picnic, or a service, there was always such a good feeling and we laughed and argued, but it was all good, like we were doing something important." **Faith Voices**

A fellow doctoral student suggested that perhaps I rename my concept, not that he had any objections to this philosophy of ministry once he understood it, but more to the point that the term was offensive. *Holy Fun* seemed, in his estimation, irreverent and almost unholy in its initial presentation. And then when I explained that one of the elements of *Holy Fun* is *play*, he was incensed, and convinced that his own African American church would never pursue this possibility or even begin to embrace the concept. When I pointed to the wonderful jazz and blues musical tradition in African American worship, and how creative, playful and fun it is for both the musicians and the congregation, and that his church was already doing *Holy Fun*, he

began to understand. There is no denying that this music is both holy and fun. It is in fact a rainbow experience that brings us closer together and closer to God.

It is interesting to note at this point that when the four churches in Hazleton were using *Holy Fun* as a path towards church consolidation, we did not refer to these experiences as *Holy Fun*. For example we did not say, “Let’s go have some *Holy Fun* before our meeting gets underway.” Had we done so my intuition informs me that there would have been many objections. Remember we are discussing the German Reformed branch of the United Church of Christ. Church traditions are not officially sanctified, but it is close. It is not that I never used the term, but it was generally used in passing, after the *Holy Fun* experience had been employed. After a particularly lively problem solving meeting with the Sunday School Teachers in which we laughed and found creative answers, I would announce that “we had us some *Holy Fun* tonight, Ha Ha”. Some of the teachers would mumble and grumble, others proclaimed “that was not their idea of fun, holy or otherwise”. Or when the children took disposable cameras and were simply instructed to take pictures of Saints, we laughed at our collage of pictures on the wall they had created – Saint Janet, Saint Howard, Saint Alice. I would refer to this project as a *Holy Fun* experience for everyone. We had a good laugh together over me skipping the offering completely in a worship service. My husband had to wave his wallet at me from the front pew, and the choir shook their envelopes in the air to get my attention. When I finally figured out what the signal was all about, I stopped right then and there to apologize to the treasurer. We just laughed. And then right before the benediction I proclaimed that “a no-offering worship service seems like a *Holy Fun* thing to do but that God so loved the world that God gave.... It is

how we have been created, in God's image, we too must give.... Let us worship God with our gifts".

When I started using this term *Holy Fun* on a somewhat regular basis, some folks upon hearing it blurted out a laugh, and asked, "What?" Others smiled knowingly and knew exactly to what I was referring. The term *Holy Fun* can be off-putting, and seem almost irreverent.

Is *Holy Fun* a leisure time activity?

This question has arisen from the concept that *fun* is often viewed as the opposite of work, a leisure time pursuit and may even be given as a reward to oneself only after the work is completed. There is also a notion that one has to be free of worries to have fun, that fun is a leisure time or relaxing activity, or that fun is the opposite of work and therefore a waste of time. Although it can be said that most leisure time pursuits have a fun factor, it is also true that not all "fun activities" are leisure time. Why do folks have trouble with fun?

Professor Michael Koppel is an Associate Professor of Theology and Congregational Care at Wesley Theological Seminary, in Washington, D.C. He wrote a book garnered from a course of study he teaches, *Open-Hearted Ministry:*

"We were discussing the pros and cons of sending a group of folks on a mission trip. Some thought we should just send the money, it would do the people we are helping more good. Others really wanted to experience the hands on helping. We turned to one of youth who had been on a trip and asked her what she thought. She said we should do both. Sending money changes their lives. Going and helping changes our lives. Such wonderful wisdom in our young people. **Faith Voices**

Play as Key to Pastoral Leadership. Right up front he broaches this same subject, "Play is not easy for many adults" (Koppel 5). Professor Koppel is insightful in his explanation of this statement. He maintains that most people enjoy work and find purpose, satisfaction and self-

esteem within the work arena. When work is not going well, there is disappointment and even anger with self. The result is that people usually “buckle down”, work harder, exacerbating stress and not allowing oneself to play and have fun. Play or fun then becomes the opposite of work, a leisure time activity or a luxury. Civil Rights Activist Ralph Abernathy agrees, “It is a misnomer to think that poor people have leisure time. Their total existence is for survival..... There is no leisure time for poor people” (qtd.in Evans 54). But both of these thinkers, Koppel and Abernathy, lead us to an understanding from where this misleading concept, that play and work are opposites and that play or fun is a leisure time pursuit, comes. This precludes the idea we cannot and in some people’s opinions should not have fun at work. To be playful and creative, to enjoy the work we get paid to do is all the more rewarding if it is also fun, or soul satisfying. In fact this author contends that although one’s work is often identified with “who we are”, it is difficult to retire if there is no self-identity outside of work. The misunderstanding that *Holy Fun* is a leisure activity, married to the misconception that *play is foolish* has given birth to the negative belief that *Holy Fun* in the church is counterintuitive.

“Play often tends to elicit one of two responses in people, either they join the play and affirm its validity or they reject the play and pronounce it inappropriate or foolish” (Evans 46). Koppel explains this phenomenon as the open-endedness of play. People like to be in control and because play has few explicit rules and lots of unknowns, it is a bit of a risk. One does not like to be incompetent or seem foolish (Koppel 6). Therefore some of the reluctance to engage in play and lightheartedness in general is the out of control feeling inherent in the act of play.

In preparation to answer this question, I informally asked friends, family, colleagues and church folks what they did to have fun. Some of the responses involved the pursuit of a leisure

activity or hobby. (See Appendix D) But when asked if after spending an afternoon engaged in this activity they indeed *had fun* the usual response was that they enjoyed it, or that it was relaxing, or even stress reducing, but they were not sure if they would call it fun. Fun, for some, was done with others; it seems it may be hard to have fun by oneself. Because fun is a subjective topic, it was challenging to find the common characteristics in this very informal survey. A couple of theories drawn from these answers include: 1) Fun activities usually involved a physical component: you actually have to do something. 2) In the act of having fun there is a coming together with others, even if it is the author of a book, or the comparing of results with other enthusiasts (fishing, playing video games). 3) There was a soul satisfaction after it was completed. It felt good and right to the individual.

The use of the word *fun* has raised the concepts of leisure time activity and its negative connotations, as well as the negative baggage some folks associate with the play and fun. For some skeptics, *Holy Fun* is confused with a leisure activity.

Can Holy Fun be an earnest pursuit?

When first hearing of this term *holy fun* there is a glib and derogatory “looking down one’s scholarly nose” at the subject. *Holy Fun* is a mirthful and lighthearted approach to ministry that opens us to a rainbow of experiences that bring us closer to others and to God, but is it significant in the larger scheme of things? One of the major components of *Holy Fun* is *play* and this often conjures scenes of children on the playground with chalk and jump ropes, or adults engaged in their favorite ball sport. Although this may seem worthy of a Health and Physical Education inquiry, how can it possibly be an earnest study in our seminaries or theological education. In our public schools, gym class is relegated to a low priority because it is

not cerebral. This same “judgment” is indicative of the question of “worthiness” of *Holy Fun* as a significant practice of ministry.

In an anthology of articles edited together under the title, *Play as a Learning Medium*, editor Doris Sponseller notes, “That even after this history of over one hundred years of the legitimate use of play in educational settings and curricula, we still have to contend with the questions: Is play really legitimate as a school activity? Does play serve a function in intellectual learnings?” (Sponseller 10). The skeptic’s question concerning *Holy Fun* reflects this conundrum; How can we ask people to consider *Holy Fun* to be an earnest pursuit?

Having diagnosed the terminal seriousness of congregations and voiced some concerns of individuals concerning this topic of *Holy Fun*, we can now discern the meaning of *Holy Fun*.

Chapter Three: What is Holy Fun?

Holy Fun is a term devised to describe a lighthearted, mirthful approach to ministry through which one can open to a rainbow of experiences that bring people closer to God and closer to each other. *Holy Fun* is a practice of ministry as well as a philosophy of ministry that underlies all aspects of church life. *Holy Fun* is a joy filled, playful and “not-take-yourself-too-seriously” style of ministry. It cannot be distilled into a progression of steps, nor written into a curriculum to be taught, but rather it is an opening to the possibilities, imaginings, and visions of faith futures through the playful, “not-take-yourself-too-seriously” approach to ministry. *Holy Fun*, because it is often a counterintuitive way of doing ministry, needs to become a therapeutic change that takes place within individual members of a congregation and within the corporate body at the soul level of the congregation. If this discomfiture or dis-ease of congregational life is “terminal seriousness” as diagnosed herein,

the therapy prescribed by this doctoral of ministry candidate, is to lighten up, not take ourselves or our churches so seriously, and tap into the play and creative DNA found within each of us.

In the process of gathering the **Faith Voices** (the marginal notes in this document that are quoted from Faith U.C.C. members, reference Appendix A), the question was asked, “What

“Ever since we’ve been one we have had Women’s Retreats. At first it was another way to get to know some people. But it has become a strong and spiritually mature group. We have traveled to Washington and Bucks County, to Lancaster and Stroudsburg. It’s been a real pleasure to come together.”

Faith Voices

do you think of when you hear the term *Holy Fun*?” In

one particular group discussion, a person blurted out,

“Dunkin Donuts”. After we laughed with her, she

explained that we do a lot of eating in the church.

Sometimes we gather around the fellowship table or the

communion table, the board table or the pool table, and

yes even the corner table at Dunkin Donuts (which has been dubbed unofficially as my second

office) all of it with laughter and openness. She “hit the nail” squarely on the head. Eating in

the church, whether it is a church supper (which we at Faith call a “Fun-raiser” as well as a

Fundraiser), or our *Holy Grounds* Coffee Fellowship after worship, or the *Holy Eucharist*, is a

time of storytelling, shared laughter or tears, and a coming together with each other and God.

It can be an example of the “rainbow of experiences that bring us closer to each other and to

God”. So, in fact, eating within the many and varied venues within church life can be a *Holy Fun*

experience within the church.

Holy Fun is not a “how to” process to be followed in the pursuit of Church Consolidation.

I was asked by the U.C.C. congregations in Allentown, Pennsylvania to share our experiences of

Church Consolidation. One gentleman asked for a step-by-step process. I was hard pressed to

convey the essence of *Holy Fun* as a progression of how-to steps. But I do firmly believe we can teach congregations, consistories, and pastors how to infuse *Holy Fun* experiences into the life of the church. These suggestions are included in the final chapter of this paper.

Holy Fun will be defined next within the broader philosophical, psychological, sociological and theological context. This is in an attempt to clarify *Holy Fun* and to let it stand in congruence and contrast with those who have come before. The elements of *Holy Fun* are **play**, and a **‘not-take-yourself-too-seriously’ demeanor**. The fundamental element in the implementation of *Holy Fun* is the **freedom of each person to choose to participate**. The collective resultant elements are a **“coming together”** of people to people, a covenanting between people and God and the element of increased **creativity** within the congregation. All of these elements, play, not-take-yourself-too-seriously, voluntary participation, a consolidation, covenant and resultant creativity are defined in this chapter.

Part One: The Element of Play in Holy Fun

The first and foremost element of *Holy Fun* is *play*. The element of *play* is mentioned here because it is essential to *Holy Fun*, in fact it is the *vehicle of change*. Play is a subject that has been studied by philosophers and play scholars, used and evaluated by educators, therapists and theologians for centuries. It has been and continues to be a significant area of discipline and concern. Johan Huizinga, an historical philosopher writing in the early 1940’s (not a very playful time in history) defines persons not only as “homo sapiens” or human beings, not only as “homo fabers” or humans as productive beings, but also as “homo ludens”,

or humans as players. He contends in his book, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, that *play* is an essential part of every human, whether it is recognized or not. Play is both functional and purposeful. People play with words and ideas in the pursuit of knowledge. Problem solving becomes a creative play of ideas as the brain storms through to a solution or two (Huizinga 127). *Play* infuses all of human life just as *Holy Fun* needs to pervade all of church life. Although Huizinga does not attend much to the mirth and fun of play, it seems to reference “a playfulness” inherent in the act of playing. There is a lightheartedness that is essential to its existence.

Huizinga puts forward eight criteria in the defining of play. 1) “Play takes place on a playground, a specific space.” Universities and churches can become playgrounds. Although one could argue that the act of playing is always going to

occur in a specific place, a spatial context, the conclusion can be made that where ever play happens is the playground. This criterion does not cover virtual play, or even thoughts in one’s head. Or perhaps cyber space and the “right lobe” are then the grounds upon which we play.

2) “Play has a beginning time and an ending time, a specific time frame”, like Sunday morning from 10:00 to 11:00 AM. Sometimes, it could be reasoned, there is no formal starting gun or alarm bell sounding the last quarter of play. However, having a specific time for play does suggest that not all time is play time. 3) “Play has a tension that needs resolution, a purpose.”

Huizinga references play in sports, and solving problems in most any field of study. The “tension” to be resolved would therefore be a ball that needs to pass through the hoop or goal posts, as well as a creative defense for the prosecution. There is however, a freedom or

“Do you remember “Everyone’s Birthday Party?” We decorated each of the tables for a month of the year and then sat at our Birth month table. Then we had to sing for our supper coming up with a song about our month. We had contest and lots of fun was had.”

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openness to play that stretches this boundary. Sometimes our most creative ideas or solutions to problems come when we are not trying to resolve the tension, or playing, but when we are doing the dishes or driving. These rote activities, something Huizinga would term the opposite of play, are interconnected to this “tension that needs resolution.” 4) Play has rules. In *Holy Fun* there is a fundamental rule of respect for each other. This respect creates a place of trust in *Holy Fun* that allows people to choose to participate, or not, without ridicule, as well as to share of themselves in the act of playing. When people step outside of these rules, mocking another, the play ends. The game is over. It is important to note at this time, that in my experience I have found that not all of the rules are formalized, or even spoken out loud. Imagine girls playing jump rope at recess on the real playground. The rules vary accordingly, depending on which game or rhythm/rhyme they are using. However, there is an understood rule that “no boys” will be allowed to participate. These unspoken rules or understandings can be problematic in any *play time*, including *Holy Fun*. 5) “The play community continues even after the play time has ended. There is a sense of being part of ‘something’.” As Christians, we are the Body of Christ wherever we are. This happens in a *Holy Fun* experience that may have only occurred for five minutes around the coffee pot or for fifty five minutes in worship. The amount of *play time* is not conversely proportioned to this sense of connectedness. 6) “Play is completely voluntary; there is an inherent freedom in play.” This criterion is the freedom to choose the level of participation in *Holy Fun*. It is God given and one of the essential elements of *Holy Fun* which will be expanded upon later in this chapter. 7) “Play stands outside the boundaries of *ordinary life*.” Ordinary life includes things we do every day either at work or home. The argument could be suggested that even though *play* takes place outside the

ordinary, the potential is always there to make the ordinary an act of *play*. The simple act of washing hands could be a time of *play* or even *Holy Fun* by suggesting that everyone covenant together to pray the Lord's Prayer while washing their hands. This not only gives the person an important time constraint, the thirty seconds necessary to sanitize the hands, it also becomes a unifying play time with others, knowing they too are participating in this play time. 8) "Play creates order." Huizinga does allow for a re-ordering, or even a disordered chaos in play, that can be rejoined into a semblance of order (Huizinga 24-39). This criterion allows for the creative element in *play*, without making creativity a necessary goal in *play*. Where work involves goals and objectives, *play* involves an openness to other ways of ordering. For example, a colleague from Penn Southeast Conference of the United Church of Christ shared her church's budget

"I really don't like games. When Rev. Hess first started with those "getting to know you" times, I just avoided the situation. It took a little doing on my wife's part, but after a while I would stay in the background and observe. When I realized it wasn't games so much as talking I was able to relax and enjoy it. Games and play are not the same."

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process (not usually a *Holy Fun* experience). They came up with the "Bob Did It" budget presentation. For weeks before the Congregational Meeting where the budget would be discussed, they had blurbs during announcements in worship pointing to different financial needs they had had this past year (janitorial supplies, Sunday School curriculum, etc.) and then

pronounced simply, "We'd like to thank Bob, because Bob Did It!" After weeks of these announcements, everyone wanted to know who this 'Bob' was that so generously gave all of this financial support. It turned out that Bob was an acronym for their **Basic Operating Budget** and everyone making weekly contributions was a part of it. In essence there was a re-ordering of the way folks were looking at the budget. It was playful, and *Holy Fun*.

Huizinga's succinct boundaries for play incorporate a clear criterion for examining activity and determining the validity of it as play. Because one of the vital elements of *Holy Fun* is *play*, these same criteria Huizinga proposes can be utilized to evaluate an experience to determine if it is *Holy Fun*. Please note: *Play* is just one element of *Holy Fun* and therefore this evaluation is pursuant of the authentic value of *play* within the experience and not the entire *Holy Fun* event. For example, is Bible Study a *Holy Fun* experience, or at the very least, does it satisfy this play element of *Holy Fun*? First, it does have a specific time frame and place or playground. It is usually a person's home, or classroom in the Sunday School wing, and it is a scheduled event perhaps for Sunday morning, or Wednesday at noon. But, as previously mentioned, it could also be at the beach or boardwalk during the sunrise just as easily. It would not however be an act of *play* if a person was just referencing the word *manna* on their smart phone in the car at a stop light (which may soon be an illegal act in Pennsylvania), even though it may be in preparation for a Bible Study. Secondly, there is a tension or purpose in Bible Study. In the United Church of Christ we believe God is still speaking, and focus on the question, What is God saying through this passage of scripture? In some denominations the tension in Bible Study may also include the historical interpretation of this passage and how this speaks to the current interpretation. Consequently Bible Study would not meet this criterion if the historical interpretation was simply memorized, and accepted. This is just one of the tensions to be resolved in the act of *play* within a Bible Study. Others might include the designing of a sidewalk chalk drawing of the passage, or the creation of a power point slide show. Or perhaps the tension may be the resolution of some psychological baggage which *playing* with this passage may evoke. There are certain rules in Bible Study, and some churches have more rules in this

area than others. The United Church of Christ believes that we are all called to interpret the Bible, however some churches believe only “those who have seminary training” may do so. As mentioned above, the unspoken or understood rules can be problematic as well as helpful. There is a sense of being a part of something, and it is voluntary. The case could be made that Confirmation Class students may not feel as though they have a choice on whether or not to study the Ten Commandments and re-write them. It’s just an assignment. But then one could rebut that although it is Bible Study, there is no play and therefore cannot be *Holy Fun*.

Because *play* is voluntary, it should be noted that no one can make another *play*. But

“I always appreciated the different ideas everyone seemed to be coming out with. Do you remember when we were moving into our new facility and decided to have a “clean out your closets” sale of all the stuff we had collected in our former church buildings. We had it at Emmanuels and even had an auctioneer. It was our first annual Yard Sale. Now we have them in our parking lot for anyone to sell their own stuff. We had 35 folks last month. It’s been helpful and fun.”

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sometimes, as in Confirmation Class, when the non-playing person looks back on this assignment, after observing the interaction between students, and students and teacher, they realize a *play time* has taken place and that just by observing, they have been a part of it and are gifted with this sense of “being a part of something” even though they did not participate directly. *Bible Study* does stand outside the ordinary boundaries of much we call life and it does

create order as new understandings emerge from muddied waters. Therefore, having met the criteria of play as discussed here, some Bible Studies have the potential of being a *Holy Fun* endeavor.

James H. Evans wrote an insightful and creative book entitled simply, *Playing*, for a series on “Christian Exploration of Daily Living.” Professor Evans winds his way through a weave of delightfully colorful threads of play literature, African-American literature, personal

experiences, and theological doctrines like a shuttle cock on a weaver's loom to create a breathtaking tapestry of *Playing*. This work attests to his playful, creative and thoughtful insights that he has applied so aptly to this assignment.

In his own Preface to *Playing*, Evans gently steps into a serious discussion on *play* with his musings about his encounter with his grandson Christian. Evans draws several insightful hypotheses from this encounter. His postulations include such gems as, "Play is not given. Play is what we have. Play is what we are" (xiv). "Faith gives us the confidence to play" (xv). "I wonder whether we have been taught from an early age not to play with Jesus.... I have a hunch that it was precisely the ability to play with Jesus that allowed our faith to grow and adapt to the ever-changing challenges of living in a hostile culture" (xix).

Evans understands the difficulty of playing when he states, "The whole idea that the church should be at play flows counter to the ecclesial consciousness of most Christian traditions, especially those that have been influenced by puritanical strains" (75). He writes in his conclusion, "Heaven is a place where games have ended but the play never does" (83). For Evans, play is an essential technique in the weaving of each one's faith fabric; If one does not use this life-giving force, play, there will be rips and tears in the fabric of life. This is true of the church as well. *Play* is how one adds their individual thread to the communal cloth that is the church. Evans believes "play is more than what we occasionally do. It is essentially who we are" (6). Play is necessary to Christian daily living and to the life of the church.

Professor Annabel Proffitt from Lancaster Theological seminary and Dr. Chuck Melchert wrote a paper entitled, "Playing in the Presence of God: Wonder, Wisdom and Education". Based on S. Terrein's Hebrew word study of *shahket* (interpreted as *play* in several passages of

scripture) they conclude that play and wonder are necessary elements in the relationships between the divine and humans, between teachers and learners, and in all pedagogical endeavors. Proffitt and Melchert conclude that the Proverbs 8:31-32² passage intimates a relationship with God based on playing, rather than the traditional schema of sin and redemption. Interestingly this play aspect of the relationship is on the part of both humanity and divinity. In the beginning, God *played*. *Playing together becomes the glue in this beautiful relationship.*

“We had four joint worship services a year and our Sunday Schools would join together for the day too. They were asked to come up with a way to express forgiveness to us. We had spoken our confession together in worship and then with all the seriousness of the ‘important task’ they were performing, they came to each of us, took one of our hands and swiped a sponge over our palms. She looked me in the eyes and said simply, ‘God loves you. And you are forgiven.’ And then she smiled at me.”
Faith Voices

Play scholars have studied the element of play, predictably through games and toys. In a very thorough and scholarly review, play scholars Nikki Baddo-Fralicka and Rebecca Sachs Norris analyze the cross-cultural use of religious games, dolls and toys in their book, *Toying with God: The World of Religious Games and Dolls*. They observe that play or playfulness is an attitude which enables any activity to become play (Baddo-Fralicka, Norris 133). They suggest that the intrinsic modality of play has not been studied, or is just in the beginning stages of study (141). This is an interesting statement because they are more concerned with the intrinsic understanding of play in different cultures even though they are using games, toys and dolls as the instrument of study. Play is not just an element in American culture; it is a vital component in cultures around the world.

² Proverbs 8:31-32 (Sophia, Wisdom speaks about the beginning of creation) when God created, “then I was beside God, like a master worker, and I was daily His delight, playing before God always, playing in His inhabited world and delighting in the human race. And now my children, happy are those who keep my ways.”

Using play as a metaphor for ministry, Henri Nouwen embarks on a playful remembrance of his journey to Rome, Italy in the seventies in his book, *"Clowning in Rome"*. His lifelong fascination with the circus and the circus clown gives him an even stronger metaphor for pastoral ministry. He comments, "...behind the black, purple and red of Roman churches and behind the suits and ties of the Roman offices there is enough clownishness left to give us hope" (Nouwen 4). Knowing that Nouwen appreciated the clown-ministry was he complimenting the papacy or clowning around? Perhaps it was both. Nouwen uses the clown's character and acting abilities to connect on a deeper level with everyone.

**"The clowns don't have it together, they do not succeed
in what they think they must try to do, they are awkward
out of balance, and left-handed, but... they are on our side."
(Nouwen 3)**

Now, for some *Holy Fun* just for the reader of this paper, re-read this description with your own ministry (or your favorite pastor) as the clown in mind.

The writing of this book was a *Holy Fun* experience for Nouwen. There is a *play* element and a "don't-take-yourself-too-seriously" element in his demeanor, as well as freedom to read his book on the public's part, a definite creative response and the coming together of the readers with the author in a ponderous "Ah Ha" moment. At one point Nouwen juxtaposes the almost regal tenants of Rome (read papacy), with the desire to "live out the other side of our being, the side that wants to play, dance and smile" (4). Is he trying to get us to see the seriousness with which the high church takes itself, and others, or the playfulness of ministry? It seems to be a bit of both for it is readily evident he does not want Christians to take

‘ourselves’ too seriously. He invites us to play, to dance and to smile as a means of ministry to and with others. Perhaps this is what ministry is all about; It really is about the Hokey Pokey!

A current professor of ethics at Andover Newton Theological seminary, Kirk Byron Jones presents a playful approach to creating one’s vocation in his book, *Holy Play: The Joyful Adventure of Unleashing Your Divine Purpose*. Springing from a traditional mindset of having to discern the will of God in called vocation, and contrast the *Purpose Driven...* (whatever) by Rick Warren, Jones suggests that what is needed is to join with God in a creative process of playing with ideas and “what if” questions. Jones makes a wonderful paradigm shift in his theology. Instead of God as “the Holy Other” , God becomes an intimate player in the process. He invites the reader to imagine the possibilities with God. Although this book is geared toward the person discerning a call, it could very well be used (with very little adjustment) for the

“I loved Senior Sundays. Once a month we would gather at one of the four church halls and play cards, bingo, make crafts or just sit, crochet and chat . The younger folks would make us a simple supper (they were delicious) and we would share a meal together around those tables. H-mmm, maybe we should do this again!?!” **Faith Voices**

congregation looking for a future. Come, let us play!

Professor Koppel invites religious leaders to find the vitality of faith in creative, playful and lively

experiences. He defines play as “embodied theology”

and contends that everyone has a capacity for play and creativity within the soul (4). He uses the playground as a metaphor for ministry and develops an extensive theology around this theme. Professor Koppel and Professor Jones have both used play as the key element of ministry.

Hugo Rahner defines play quite simply as “the expression of the soul” (7). The author of this paper particularly appreciates this definition of play because a person who is capable of play is sometimes described as “free spirited”. When we play, our spirits are free to express the

playful nature of our souls. This definition of play reflects Huizinga's concept of humans as players, created to play. It also concurs with Evan's observation that "play is more than what we occasionally do....it is essentially who we are" (Evans 6). Melchert and Proffitt support all of these definitions with their observations and convincing conclusion about playing in the presence of God and indeed with God. Healthy relationships between people, and people with God, are created to be playful. Play Scholars Baddo-Fralick and Norris submit that playfulness is an attitude that enables any activity to become play. This is true of people from other cultures as well. Although Nouwen uses play as metaphor, his lighthearted playfulness in using this metaphor is an example of *play* itself, and *Holy Fun* as well. And finally Professors Jones and Koppel have used *play as a* central component in both of their ministry models.

Evans quotes Brian Suttan-Smith saying, "Most people know what play is when they

"When we were still just thinking about coming together, Pastor Hess invited our previous minister Richard Abernethy, to preach just at our church for Reformation Sunday. At the beginning of worship she had The Rev stand next to her (he's 6' 2" and she is 5'2") and then proceeded to do a little introduction. "See Dick. See Jane. Preach Dick. Preach Jane. See Dick and Jane Preach." Well, we laughed and laughed! It was good." **Faith Voices**

encounter it, but describing it in a concise way is another matter" (qtd. In Evans 9).

Play as defined and encountered above is an element of *Holy Fun*. When *play* is discovered within a *Holy Fun* experience there is in essence a

paradigm shift within the individual person, as well as the church as a system. This shifting in one's thinking and doing allows *play* to be an instrument of de-construction and then partially to re-create or re-order the way we do church. *Play* is the primary ingredient in *Holy Fun* which prompts this shifting. *Play* becomes the Vehicle which makes *Holy Fun* possible.

Part Two: The Element of 'don't-take-yourself-too-seriously' in Holy Fun

The second element of *Holy Fun* is the ability to “not-take-yourself-too-seriously”. This is vital to the proper performance in this vehicle of change, in fact it is the fuel upon which the *play element* runs. In the second chapter of Father Hugo Rahner’s book, *Man at Play*, he describes the “grave-merry” of people. This aspect of humanity involves the “inward gaiety” of a person who openly plays amidst the attitudes of people who “genuinely despise the world” and those who have an “hedonistic appetite” for it (Rahner 35). The grave-merry person has an “easy gaiety of spirit”, a sort of “spiritual elegance” (27). This person evokes an “invincible security” within, but is not aloof from tragedy, or laughter and tears. They are described as persons of gentle irony, for they see “through the ridiculous masks of the game of life and have taken the measure of the cramping boundaries of our earthly existence, and laughs” (27). This capacity to “not-take- yourself-too-seriously” is vital to the health and well-being of a spiritually mature person. Rahner references P. Leach:

“The inner essence of humor lies, no matter how heretical this may seem, in the strength of the religious disposition; for what humor does to note how far all earthly and human things fall short of the measure of God.” (qtd. In Rahner 35)

When individuals realize, or experience the presence of God, it is not uncommon to look at one’s feeble attempts at life and living (and ministry) realizing the absurdity of our self-important attitudes in the presence of the Holy. Although laughter is not a required element of *Holy Fun*, this capacity to “laugh at one’s self”, to be light hearted in demeanor, and to know that God is God and humans are humans, is an important indicator of *Holy Fun*.

Martin Marty in a lecture to clergy tells this delightful story about a little boy who

overhears his Dad's enthusiastic praise for fishing with spoons, a type of fishing lure. He wants to get Dad a present, so he saves his money and buys a teaspoon. He carefully wraps it and presents it to his Dad on Fathers' Day. When Dad unwraps the teaspoon, he smiles, holds it ever so carefully, and asks gently, "Son, this is really nice. Ah, what is it?" The child responds proudly, "It's to go fishing with Daddy!" So, Dad places it prominently in his fishing tackle box and takes it with him every time he goes fishing. Now, the listeners to Marty think that is the end of the story. But he continues.... "So, I'm not too sure about meeting God in heaven. I imagine me dressed in my clerical robes, feeling pretty smug about all the lives I have been able to affect here on earth (oh yea, and don't forget to buy my books in the lobby when we're done here)! Anyway, God will greet me personally with all the warmth of a heavenly Father. Then we will look at all the chapters in my life, reviewing them carefully. At the conclusion, I imagine God putting His hand on my shoulder, smiling and asking gently, 'Son, this is really nice. Ah, what is it?' My response, 'Why it's ministry Lord!' So, our Father God places it prominently in His book of life and takes it with Him" (Marty). Hmmm.

Edwin Friedman suggests that a healthy system needs differentiated leaders (and followers). Differentiation is the capacity "to know where one ends and another begins" (236). It is a conscious effort not to take everything someone else says into one's self allowing the other's hurt or anger (judgment, anxiety, etc.) to become one's own hurt and anger. It is more of a direction or process of the *self* becoming integral, and making decisions based on self. This may seem to be a little egocentric in a negative way, until one remembers that the Deuteronomic Law states and Jesus commands us to love God and your neighbors, **as you love**

yourself.³ The ability to laugh at oneself is an indicator of an emotionally healthy, differentiated person, religion and society (Friedman 302). Another vital aspect of differentiation is the ability to recognize and embrace one's perceived shortcomings or psychological and emotional needs, and to relate with people because of a desire to do so, and not out of some deficit within one's self that requires fulfillment presumably by the other person. When a person is differentiated, it allows them to be able to laugh at themselves, and to not take themselves overly serious. Friedman advocates that the ability to laugh at self is a marker for the emotionally and psychologically healthy person.

The Penn Northeast Conference of the United Church of Christ has created a "Conflict Resource Team" that the churches can call upon to help themselves when they are conflicted; conflicted church is unfortunately not an oxymoron. When evaluating the level of intensity of any church conflict, this Team uses *laughter* and differentiation as signs of health and wellness (or lack thereof) within this system. The absence of laughter and taking one's self or church too seriously is a warning sign of an unhealthy system. Conflict is a normal part of communal life. How people deal with it, is the sticking point. "Not-taking-yourself-too-seriously" is a healthy approach to conflict, and to church life in general.

Harvey Cox expands on "the significance the Feasts of Fools brings to the church" by suggesting that it is a symbol of a valued (and needed) characteristic of a healthy person, religion and society (4). It can be concluded that as this celebration declined in popularity, and was judged negatively through the years which helped its demise, that the soul of the church was wounded. "How can you mend – a broken heart" (better quote if sung by Bee Gees).

³ Scripture references: Revised Standard Version Bible, Deut.6.5 and Mat.10.27

An answer is *Holy Fun*. The *Fools* part of the *Feasts* is this “not-take-yourself-too-seriously” aspect.

Cox also explores the “*homo fantasia* or human as dreamers, visionaries and mythmakers” as a vital component in *The Feast of Fools*. These festivals or rituals are “embodied fantasy” (73). These then become a means through which we can connect to the past, to each other and to the future (73).

“There is a festive way of appropriating the past, a way that accepts the past without being bound by it, that views past history not as a prison to escape or as an antique to be preserved but as a dimension of reality that enlarges and illuminates the present. “ (Cox 32)

Fantasy is a creative, playful and sometimes whimsical approach to life, to problems/impasses, and to God. Cox uses the jester as a symbol for the critical

function of fantasy, which is to stand outside of society and to render critique.⁴ “Only by learning to laugh at the hopelessness around us (and within us) can we touch the hem of hope” (142).

The jester or the clown can become a sign of this playful ability to laugh at self and help others do so as well, not unlike a comedian or even a prophet. Cox’s evocation of Christ the harlequin or

“As the Transitional Pastor of four congregations, I was not looking forward to the first Christmas Eve together – 4 services, 4 locations, everyone wanting their own time, etc. I found a quiet moment at the end of a Sunday evening ‘Blue Christmas’ service in Advent. Sitting in a pew with the candles still lit and the music playing softly, I started in on my Litany of Woes in a prayer with God. ‘How can I do this? There has to be someone else more qualified here God. I’ll screw this up for sure.’ It came to me rather clearly – ‘It’s not about you Jane.’ Hmmm God can do Holy Fun too. “

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clown signifies our playful appreciation of the past and our comic refusal to accept the spectra of inevitability in the future (142). This ability to stand outside oneself and critique one’s decisions with an integrity and playfulness is not something that comes very easily to folks.

⁴ In my more humorous imaginings I can envision most of the press core with the jester’s hat jostling on their heads as they deliver the evening news... it helps.

Both the modern day stand-up comedians and the prophets (of old and currently sitting in our pews) help us in these matters. The reading of the Bible, if done with *Holy Fun*, can also help.

Nouwen uses the clown as a metaphor for pastoral ministry but then also articulates that “Clowns show us by their ‘useless’ behavior not simply that many of our preoccupations, worries, tensions and anxieties need a smile, but that we too have white on our faces and that we too are called to clown a little” (Nouwen 109). This ability to take the self lightly helps one lighten the load of our apprehensions.

Koppel uses the term “mis-fit” in his description of the benefits of play. He explains that when we *play* we accept that not everyone, nor everything is perfect. Accepting our limits, our weaknesses, knowing that everyone is in the same place helps folks participate more freely in play, and not worry about “being the fool” or looking silly (Koppel 11). This is essential in the “not-take-yourself-too-seriously” element of *Holy Fun*. Recognizing the ‘mis-fit’ in ourselves allows everyone to participate fully.

This element of *Holy Fun*, to “not-take-yourself-too-seriously” is a lightheartedness that involves the whole of the congregation. It is a characteristic of an emotionally healthy person, and concurrently, a characteristic of an emotionally healthy congregation. This is a therapeutic transformation of the soul of the congregation. It therefore begs the question, “What percentage of the congregation needs to exhibit this element of *Holy Fun* in order to declare that the soul of the congregation has attained this ‘not-take-yourself-too-seriously’ quality?” The premise of Friedman’s book, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*, is that the leaders of an institution need to be differentiated in order for the system to function properly, otherwise the system becomes stuck. Therefore the answer is in the leadership. It is

my experience, that if the whole of the leadership, both the elected and the natural leaders (those people in the pews to whom folks look for answers) are able to participate fully in *Holy Fun*, and possess this essential ingredient of “not-to-take-oneself-overly-serious”, then it can be concluded that the soul of the congregation is a healthy system.

Rahner’s thoughts about the “grave-merry” nature of persons, Friedman’s differentiated presence, Cox’s use of the jesters and clowns to help folks lighten up and critique self/others, Nouwen’s call “to paint our faces white and clown a little ourselves” (Nouwen 109), as well as Koppel’s description of the “mis-fit” within each of us have all assisted this author in the justification of the element, the “not-take-the-self-so-seriously” for the *Holy Fun* adventure. If

as is stated before, *play* is the vehicle of change within *Holy Fun* that transforms the “way we do church”, then it can be said that this element of carefree casualness is the fuel for the vehicle. If one were to experience the element of *play* within *Holy Fun* without this nonchalant cheeriness, the *play* quickly becomes a competition to “out-do” the other as if one’s life or self-esteem were dependent on the outcome. An example of this mis-demeanor can be viewed at the covered dish supper, which could have all the essential elements to make it a *Holy Fun*

experience, but quickly falls apart when the cooks are more concerned about which dishes are consumed readily, and feel hurt or anger because their dish was not eaten in its entirety. Further discussion ensues on the proverbial gossip lines. This is not fun, holy or otherwise.

“I wish I could tell you how many times we have laughed together in church. I remember a Christmas when we were together already. Rev. Hess had arranged to have the Christmas Story read by one of our older members, Bob I think. After he had started she had asked some of the older ladies to start hollering across the sanctuary about a Christmas sale they were going to go to after service. And then as they continued to yammer, three or four young people started arguing about where they were supposed to go Christmas caroling. They continued and two parents started yelling at their kids about ‘Santa Claus’ coming and they were supposed to be good. It was quite a scene. We were all laughing. Then everyone stopped. Everything got quiet and Rev. Hess asked us if we could hear the Christmas Story. “ **Faith Voices**

Holy Fun is a rainbow of experiences that are playful and involve a demeanor on the part of the participants that they “not-take-themselves-too-seriously”. Now that we know *why* *Holy Fun* is needed (the church is dying of terminal seriousness), and *how* this is going to happen (the *play* and the “not-take-yourself-too-seriously” elements of *Holy Fun*), the question remains, *when* will this happen. The simple answer is when “you” are ready, the freedom to participate element.

Part Three: The Element of Freedom to Participate in Holy Fun

In Rahner’s definition of play, he includes an openness of choice: “Play is the expression of the soul through the freedom of word, sound and movement” (Rahner 7). It is difficult, or almost impossible, to make someone have fun or to play. A gym teacher can force participation in a game or activity (as there is always a grade evaluation in school) but cannot enlist a person

“It may sound like a little thing, but I really appreciate that Pastor Hess always invites us in worship to stand, ‘if you are able’. My Dad was elderly when we were first coming together, and her invitation allowed him to sit, but still be very much a part of things.”

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Fun experiences.

to be *playful and light-hearted* through coercion , even with the threat of a “bad grade on the permanent record”. It is also important to note, as mentioned before, both *Holy* and *Fun* are subjective in nature. Therefore it is crucial that the participant be given the choice to participate, or not, in any of these *Holy*

Huizinga included this freewill choice in his criteria of *play*. “Play is completely voluntary..... there is an inherent freedom in play that will not materialize if this element is bypassed” (Huizinga 32). This God given freedom of choosing is paramount in the essence of play. In the 1961 publication, *Man, Play and Games*, Roger Callois agrees with Huizinga and

insists that freedom of play is essential to the act of playing (6). This choice in whether one participates is sometimes dependent on how safe the participants feels, and is directly proportionate to the degree of involvement by the person. People will choose to participate and then “hang back” until they determine if it is safe. If the others “make fun of” or “laugh at” another’s creative contribution then the person will withdrawal, either leaving physically or mentally/emotionally.

After a review of play literature, Evans creates a working definition of play and concludes, “One of the central features of play is freedom” (11). He understands that play is something we choose to do every day (10). This choosing puts the individual in charge of their own fun factor, their own *Holy Fun*.

In the chapter entitled, “*Are We Having Fun Yet?*” Bado-Fralick and Norris explore the heart of fun. Admitting the subjective nature of fun, their research has revealed that fun is a “relatively recent” (mid to late 1900’s) and “culturally determined” phenomenon (112). They pose the question, “Is it still fun if it is a forced activity?” These play scholars conclude that “freedom, spontaneity, and lack of control are essential to the spirit of fun” (115).

In the United Church of Christ there is polity practice that is also primary in this *Holy Fun* element. This “local church autonomy” is the denominational policy that each local congregation has the autonomy to act on its own and includes (but is not limited to) making decisions concerning what they believe, who they hire or fire as Pastor, and if they will join with another congregation. The judicatory, in this case the Conference, cannot come

“The Roman Catholic churches have been closing left and right lately. But I noticed the people don’t have a choice about whether their church closes. The Bishop comes in and designates which buildings will close. It doesn’t seem right to me. I mean we got to decide ourselves about this merger. It’s like the ultimate Father Knows Best in their church. “
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into a local church and govern their decisions. In the arena of church consolidation, members must vote to consolidate or not; the members make the decision, it is not made for them. One might even determine that United Church of Christ churches are differentiated. This is a very healthy system. Because this polity is structured as such, this element of *Holy Fun*, the freedom to participate is a primary factor. *Holy Fun* can certainly be utilized by other churches, denominations or even in a secular merger of businesses, however, because of the design of the United Church of Christ polity, this voluntary participation is central to *Holy Fun*.

The freedom to choose whether or not to participate is a central element in *Holy Fun*. It is reflected in the element of *play* as defined by Rahner, Huizinga, Callois and Evans. It is sewn into the fabric of the United Church of Christ polity and is understood in the fun factor of *Holy Fun*. Keeping the same metaphor of the transportation, with *play* as the Vehicle, and “not-take-yourself-too-seriously” element as the fuel for the vehicle, then it follows that this Freedom to Choose is the Key turning in the ignition.

We have the *why* we as the church are in need of *Holy Fun* (we are too serious), the *how* (we will play and not take ourselves too seriously), the *when* (when we each choose to jump on board), now we need *the what* (what is actually going to happen, what changes will there be when we do participate).

Part Four: The Element of Consolidation with Others in Holy Fun

Our first Christmas together as Faith U.C.C. a newly consolidated congregation we had the children act-out the Christmas story on Christmas Eve. One of our six year old girls was

really nervous about her part as one of the sheep. Her mother asked her why she was so nervous about being a sheep in this church play, when she had just participated in a school production in which she had several lines to deliver and she had not been nervous at all. She responded incredulously, “Mom, at church everyone knows me!” This was very telling for me, as the Pastor. We were no longer four separate small to medium churches. We were now a large congregation, with worship attendance about three hundred plus. And yet her sense of belonging, being known, and knowing one another was indicative of our consolidation.

The Rev. Dr. Horace Sills had warned the Inter-Church Board that an entire generation would have to *pass on* before we could truly be one congregation. We did not find this to be true. We were just six months into this venture, worshipping in one of our four church buildings (we rotated every three months) when I looked around and realized that the pew folks were not sitting in their original church pods. Up until right around that moment, it was

easy to distinguish to which of the former congregations one belonged, because they sat together in worship. Perhaps the movement from one location to the next contributed to this mis-mash sitting arrangement, (and it was too much trouble to remember where we were supposed to be on Sunday morning, let alone which pews we were supposed to sit in at this new location) but I’d like to think that folks were really united in this *Holy Fun* venture.

“Remember the Widows Web? My Mother was part of this group. It was formed before we came together and I think it was for those interested in keeping our mission to others a priority. ‘It’s not just about us’ they would tell us. It happened that they were all Widows and named themselves the Widows Web. I looked forward to hearing their appeals at church. They were from all four of our churches and it did our hearts good to see their smiles and laughter!

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There are two entities to the consolidation: 1) People to people coming together, and 2)

People to God coming together which all leads us to church consolidation. This section will elucidate the people to people merger. How does *Holy Fun* help people want to merge their congregation with another congregation? Part of the answer lies within this closeness with each other that happens when folks participate in *Holy Fun*.

Cox describes humans as *homo festivus*. Humans by their very nature are created to share with others in their stories, their dances, their songs and their celebrations (10). The coming together around this festivity is what happens when we participate in a *Holy Fun* experience. There are connections of body (good food, passing the peace, a sympathetic touch), mind (new insights, understanding, connecting on a point of view) and soul (celebrating another's joy, sharing a laugh, tearful hug) that occur on the dance floor, the kitchen floor, the

"I remember, I think it was our first Lent together when we were just thinking about doing something together, we visited each other's churches for our mid-week lent services. Each congregation was asked, 'What has your church been known for?' We had such fun talking about our church suppers, making Pot Pie and our Summer Festival where we blocked off the streets. It felt good to *show off* a little for our new friends. "

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sanctuary floor or any floor of our choosing. Festivals include, "this ability to step outside the world governed by a protestant work ethic and gross national products, in order to regain *joie de vivre*. It is essential to our survival as a culture, religion and a person" (Cox12). It is also essential to church and how we do ministry. The festival is a play time

outside the ordinary life (using Huizinga's definition of *play*) and there is an innate need within all humans to regain the "*joie de vivre*".

The union of people in these feasts of fools is an intentional sharing of stories, dances, songs and dreams. Cox writes that the "ability to understand our place in history can be found in our sanctuaries and synagogues" (15). This aspect of feasting connects us to the past and the future. This connection of people to people (notice the plural pronoun in Cox's above

statements) happens with those who have gone before us, and those who will come after us when we share in these festival traditions. I have often used these exact words when presiding over Holy Communion. The eating and drinking and remembering in the act of sharing the Holy Meal are done within this festival mode. Communion is *Holy Fun*. Without the Christmas story, and traditions, Christmas becomes just a family practice. We need this gathering around our church traditions, it is the way we have been created. It is how we define who we are. We, as a people of God, are thirsty for a faith filled future as well. Without the vision of pew prophets, we “either fret, in a dreary present, a dull elongation of what we have now, or we spend ourselves in the frenzied pursuit of goals (usually fiscal) that turn to ashes” (Cox 151). Friedman would call this being stuck. We connect with others through the sharing of our traditions, feasting together, and dreaming dreams of our future together as a community of faith. *Holy Fun* is a significant path to church consolidation that celebrates the past and envisions the future, which helps us and our congregations realize our place in history.

At the funeral dinner I am often asked to offer the prayer over the meal. I encourage folks around the tables to share their memories of the deceased. In the prayer I often ask God’s blessing on “the food which nourishes our bodies, and the love and laughter shared around these tables which nourish our souls”. It is my experience that laughter, shared laughter is a vital nutrient for a healthy soul. This resonates with Ted Loder and his thoughts on laughter. “Laughter is a holy thing. It is as sacred as music and silence and solemnity, maybe more sacred. Laughter is like prayer, like a bridge over which creatures tiptoe to meet each other. When you laugh at yourself, you are free” (Jones 160). It is in the sharing of laughter, that souls unite, or “tiptoe to meet each other”.

Robert Provine is a Professor of Psychology and Assistant Director of the Neuroscience Program at the University of Maryland Baltimore County. After a purview of philosophical and theatrical approaches to laughter, and a history of the scientific study of laughter (rather brief until his contribution), Provine proceeds to analyze ten years of empirical data he had collected through his research. In his book, *Laughter: A Scientific Investigation*, he concludes that “laughter is about relationships” (Provine 44). Contrary to popular beliefs, laughter is not about humor, but about the bonding between people when they share a laugh. Laughter is meant to be shared in joy. Provine enlisted “logbook keepers” who were charged with keeping records of when they laughed. He notes, “The ratio of social to solitary performances of a behavior, or the sociality of laughter is striking. My logbook keepers laughed about thirty times more when they were around others than when they were alone – laughter almost disappeared among solitary subjects not exposed to media stimulation” (Provine 45). In discerning the purpose of laughter, Provine notes that humor can defuse anger and anxiety (Friedman agrees), and pave the path to intimacy. “The primary goal of laughter is to bring people together and to help them bond” (Provine 63). In twenty five years of ordained ministry, I have often gaged the frequency of laughter between a couple as a litmus test for a healthy relationship. When the laughter has stopped in a relationship there is cause for critical concern. Provine’s findings are congruent with my experience. One could also deduce that when the laughter within the Body of Christ stops, there is reason for concern.

Professor Provine also discovered that “laughter occurs when people are comfortable with one another, when they feel open and free. The more laughs that are shared, the more bonding occurs” (50). It is more than a coming together of “like minds”, as in we have the same

sense of humor. He also discovered that when two people (or more) laugh, it synchronizes their brain waves. The speaker and listeners are emotionally attuned (Provine 38).

“The more, the merrier” is a colloquialism that Provine proved truthful. He found that the larger the group of gathered people, the louder and longer the laughs (133). I cannot calculate the number of laughs we have shared together as a congregation. And although laughter is not a goal in a *Holy Fun* experiences, it often becomes a resultant by-product along the way.

There is also a tenuous connection between the element of “not-take-yourself-too-seriously” and laughter. In sermon illustrations about myself, I have modeled this “laugh at myself” characteristic. In doing so, others join with me in laughing. The distinction is fragile because it is important not to laugh at someone as in a “put down”, or “making fun of”. This can happen in worship when the Pastor brings the young people forward to have a “Special Moment”⁵ with them. The children are not there to provide entertainment or comic relief for the adults. We do not laugh at the children. This laughter is derisive and divisive. Provine explores this venue in his

“Do you remember when we started Bingo for the community on Friday Nights? We had this \$15,000 month mortgage to pay on top of our regular bills. Rev. Hess suggested it was a fun way to give to the church, and Hey, you might win too! It really is something.”

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research as well under the title, “Inappropriate Laughter”. Shared laughter is a coming together of the spirits, a bonding of the hearts and minds, and can be a pathway to bring people together. Not all laughter is *Holy Fun*, and not all *Holy Fun* involves laughing. But the lightheartedness of play, and the laughing at yourself spirit of “not-taking-yourself-too-

⁵ I am intentional about calling these children times, “Special Moments” as a way to convey to both the young people and the aged experienced that youth are welcomed, valued and respected in the church.

seriously” often elicit streams of laughter, giggles, and guffaws that strengthen this coming together, this consolidation of people to people.

As mentioned before, Huizinga expounds on his definition of *play* to include eight criteria. One of these criteria explains that “a play community continues even after the game is over” (Huizinga 35). This continuing sense of community, extends the awareness of others even when we are not together. It is part of the “coming together” that happens in *Holy Fun*.

Huizinga, in his study of play in worship, in rites, in the pageantry and ritual of the church,

“We voted to come together in Dec. 1996, the Charter closed March 1997. So our 1st Christmas together was Dec. 1997. We were at Grace or rather Faith UCC on Laurel Street (ha ha remember that name thing?). Anyway the Worship Committee was having a doozy of a time trying to decide which crèche to use, we had 4! So after much argument, we decided to have 1 Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus, we then used all the shepherds, all the magi and all the animals! It was quite a sight, and we laughed!”

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concludes, “As sacred activity, play naturally contributes to the well-being of the group” (28). When we play together in the church, when we have these *Holy Fun* experiences, there is a coming together of people, a forming, reforming, and renewing of this community of faith and family.

When congregations are looking at merger, often

times the corporate bodies are the focus, when what is vital in using *Holy Fun* as a path to church consolidation is the coming together of the people. It is a syndrome similar to the reversal of the adage, *We can’t see the forest for the trees*. In this case it is the other way around, *We can’t see the trees for the forest*. The focus is on the corporate structure rather than the individuals. This can happen in the secular world as well. Bringing churches together in a merger or consolidation⁶ can be done, and even voted in by the congregation, but unless there is a coming together of the people, it might be a consolidation on paper, but it will not

⁶It is important to note that a merger is when certain entities are ‘merged into’ an already existing body. A consolidation is the coming together of certain entities, equally, forming a new body. Although Faith U.C.C. ended up legally becoming a merger, the lawyers created Faith and then merged the four pre-existing congregations into Faith, theologically and for all intent and purposes we were a consolidation, all four churches on equal footing.

happen in the pews. The coming together of people with people and people with God is a joining together in covenant. A covenant involves a trusting relationship, something *Holy Fun* experiences can teach us. This will be discussed further in the final chapter of this paper.

Cox has proposed that as *homo festivus* we are humans that are thirsty for this union with others. He offers the feast of fools or festivals as a much needed scenario which can fulfill this need within the church. The festival has all of the elements of *Holy Fun*. It is a playful experience that helps us “*not-to-take-oneself-too-seriously*”, helps connect us to each other, to our traditions, and to our futures. Shared laughter is holy, it can nourish our souls, bring us together and synchronize our beings. Although it is not a purposeful direction or even a goal to always get the guffaws, it is a wonder-filled resultant of *Holy Fun* that helps solidify this union. And Huizinga reminds us that play is a “sacred activity” that brings us together long after the play time is over. Play, as the primary element of *Holy Fun* is the change agent in this experience that helps to bring people together with people, and not just in a consolidation of corporate bodies.

Continuing with our travel monologue metaphor, *play* is the vehicle on this *Holy Fun* path. The “don’t-take- yourself- too- seriously” element is the fuel in this vehicle of change. The *freedom to choose* to participate is the “key in the ignition” that actually gets us started down this path, which makes the connections of people to people the “nuts and bolts that hold this vehicle together”. The coming together of people is the added super glue that strengthens this *play mobile*. But what direction are we taking? Perhaps we need a GPS, Global Positioning System, or better yet a cruise control.

Part Five: The Element of Connecting with God Or...

The Theology of *Holy Fun*

In defining *Holy Fun* as holy, it needs to be situated in the broader sweep of theological reflection which can further refine our understanding of what it is and what it is not. *Holy Fun* is a theological understanding of who God is and our relationship with God therein. *Holy Fun* is an embodied theology. When we participate in *Holy Fun* experiences we become one with God. This is juxtaposing the view of God as “*numinous*” signified by Rudolf Otto and concurrent with Plato’s playful relationship between God and humans.

Dr. Rowan Williams, the current Archbishop of Canterbury, has proclaimed that the United States of America is one of the most spiritual nations of the world. He defends his statement by turning our attention to the seekers among us that are thirsty for the awesomeness of God. People in America are so desperate for this holy, awesome God that they pursue large venues with thrilling content. How do people describe the Grand Slam homerun in the Texas Rangers game? “It was awesome.” How do persons witnessing the NASCAR finals at Pocono Downs describe the race; “It was awesome, you should have seen it!” How do audiences of the Circus du Solei or Rock singers describe the performances they

“I was in the 1st Confirmation Class. When we were planning our actual Service for Confirmation on Pentecost that year we needed to decide which building we were going to be confirmed in. We hadn’t yet voted to be Faith. But we decided as a class to be confirmed in Christ Memorial because that was the only church that we didn’t have any class members from. We were from the other three churches. It was pretty cool because we were showing the older folks how this merger could work!” Faith Voices

experience? “They were just awesome!” He points to this as evidence of the fact that our souls here in North America are thirsty for the awesomeness of God (Barrett). This view of God is reminiscent of the “supra-rational” of God as presented by Rudolf Otto. Based on the Latin word *lumen* (which refers to

deity or spirit that is present in objects or places), Otto uses *luminous* to refer to the mystery of the awe fullness, overpoweringness, and urgency or energy of God that is beyond our comprehension. He entitles this mystery, “Mysterium Tremendum” (Forward). Because the *mysterium tremendum* is wholly Other, unlike anything we have ever encountered, it elicits within us a stupor or “a blank wonder, an astonishment that strikes one dumb” (Otto 42).

Otto’s description of God as the wholly Other or the Holy Other, is reflective of an understanding of God as “out there” in the universe. This is a God that is experienced through the earthquake, wind and fires of this world, as well as the “still small silences” in the caves of our beings. This God is unapproachable, and mysterious, creating almost a physical aversion within the human when we encounter God. Traditional views of God are based, sometimes loosely, on this almighty, omnipotent, powerful and awesome God. Understand that this author is not denying any of this reality and approach to the Holy. But just as everyone experiences God in different ways, I believe God approaches us in different ways as well. The wholly Other theology is in fact the antithesis of the embodied theology of God found in the *Holy Fun* experience. I agree with Williams’ evaluation of people searching and thirsty for God, but the awesome God is experienced in so many ways and we are missing these points of intersection. *Holy Fun* is one of these intersections. God or the Holy is experienced in the creation process and embodied in us when we play. God is experienced in the coming together with other people, “the God in me, greets the God in you”. *Holy Fun* experiences embody the presence of the Holy within us.

Hugo Rahner builds upon Plato’s concept that “play is a returning to God”, and adds that this play time here on earth is a “rehearsal” of sorts for the “dance of heaven involving the

freedom and gaiety of heart” (Rahner 10). What a wonderful, and playful vision of heaven as the ultimate playground. Plato understands that God’s creation of the world was the ultimate playtime (qtd. in Rahner 11). Rahner concludes that if God is a God that plays, and we are created in God’s image, then it follows that we are players as well (25). This returning to God and emulating God in *play* skims the surface of this embodiment theology. It points the way, but does not quite dive into the pond of existence.

Cox suggested in his evaluation of festivals that Christ himself was the incarnation of the Feasts of Fools and fantasy (142). He links Christ’s clown-like playfulness to connecting us with God.

“In the biblical portrait of Christ there are elements that can easily suggest clown symbols. Like the jester, Christ defies custom and scorns crowned heads. Like a wandering troubadour he has no place to lay his head. Like the clown in the circus parade, he satirizes existing authority by riding into town replete with regal pageantry when he has no earthly power. Like a minstrel he frequents dinners and parties. At the end he is costumed by his enemies in a mocking caricature of royal paraphernalia. He is crucified amidst sniggers and taunts with a sign over his head that lampoons his laughable claim. “ (Cox 140-141)

He points to the certainty that “Christ the clown signifies our playful appreciation of the past and our comic refusal to accept the spectra of inevitability in the future” (142). Christ and the Christian as comic, this lighthearted playfulness of reality, have met with objections, notes Cox. There are three usual defenses to these objections: 1) Biblically it contends “there is nothing funny about the Bible”. 2) Theologically, because Christianity is based on historic facts and not fantasy (like Hinduism), such comic detachment is not possible. 3) Ethically, laughter is not an appropriate response to faith. The first protestation is refuted by Cox in recalling that the Bible does have its comic side:

“God himself “laughs at the wicked” the Psalmist says, because he foresees their downfall. Noah, like Jonah, is pictured as an

inept buffoon. Morality plays for centuries correctly played him with slapstick and pratfall. His wife was always a loquacious hussy. When the senile Sarah gives birth to a son, she names him 'laughter' because having a child at her age was certainly a joke. There is satire in Isaiah's famous description of the oafish idol makers, ribaldry in the yarn about David and Bethsheba, and bawdy hyperbole in Elijah's tirades against the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel." (152)

I agree with Cox's assessment that the Bible, and even Jesus, has a comic side. Unfortunately the gospel writers do not include Jesus' tone of voice when he questions the Pharisees or the disciples, but it is possible that he did have a smile on his face and a lilt in his voice when talking about the camel and the eye of the needle, or casting the demons into the herd of pigs (remember Jesus was Jewish and could not eat them anyway). Gideon's frustrated proof of God'speak looks ridiculous in the light of God's patient indulgence and how was Joshua to choose his army, really? The second reason people do not appreciate the comic, lighter side of Faith theologically is argued by Cox that Christianity is not unreal but that Christians need to be able to *live in between*, both real and unreal so as to be able to grow spiritually. I appreciate Professor Cox's reference to the Hindu goddess and her multiple arms and elephant head, she does have a comedic look to her. But how unreal is a picture of Jesus as a blond haired white male when he was born in the Middle east of Jewish parents and most likely had dark skin and black curly hair (and possibly a large nose?). To say that we cannot experience God through comedy, and even that God cannot approach us in this lightheartedness, is limiting God. Laughter, according to the critics is never appropriate especially in this serious matter of faith. My thoughts on

"We were designing our new facility and the committee couldn't decide if we wanted to hook up our sewage with the city or get our own septic system. There was a three hour debate, discussion and argument about this. Finally, I remember Jane pronounced, 'Well most folks in Hazleton think we're full of 'you know what' building this new church, and I don't think a septic system will be able to hold it all, so we should go with the city.' Well everyone roared with laughter. But we ended debate and are hooked to the city system."

Faith Voices

laughter were stated earlier; ethically I believe it is very appropriate in the presence of the Holy and the absurdity that we may think we are “all that” in God’s presence just makes me laugh out loud. I agree with Cox that Christ is the incarnation of festivity and fantasy. Because it was concluded previously that festivals and fantasies are *Holy Fun* experiences therefore it follows that *Holy Fun* is also the incarnation of Christ. And the converse of that statement places God within humans when participating in *Holy Fun*. Huizinga purports that humans are *homo ludens*. Cox offers that humans are created as *homo festivus* and *home fantasia*. Therefore, if we have been created in God’s image, then when we fulfill this human nature and actually do what it is we were created to do, we are participating in God and God in us. When we play, create, come together in festivals and dream together of the future in fantasies of hope, we embody God. This argument does not preclude the person as *Homo sapiens* nor does it falsify the *homo fabers*, of humans as workers or producers, thinking, but rather it is in addition to these descriptions.

“We were about five years into Faith, when we were down to our last \$20,000 in the bank. It was a scary time. We ended up cutting Jane’s salary package by \$13,000, Music Director by \$5,000, and laid off paid secretary and paid sexton. It looked really bleak. To pick up the slack, our worship committee designed 12 Clean Teams of 8 people each to clean the church every other week and 5 volunteer Church secretaries! Wow, what church!” **Faith Voices**

The premise of Julia Cameron’s book, *The Artist’s Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity*, is that creative energy is life, and when we open ourselves to exploring our creativity, we open ourselves to God within us (3). In this delightfully inspired book she plots a twelve step process to recovering this creative energy (which is life and God) within each of us that is buried under the baggage of

hurt, pain and a simple “lack-of-confidence”. She supposes that God is the source of all creativity. And not only that, but when we create we are one with God, a perfect communion.

She points to the depletion of our spirits when we do not take the time to create. Creating is found in the simple act and the artistic notions; creating a garden, a painting, a meal, a sermon, a prayer, a child, or even a new congregation are all part of this higher creativity. It is not that we are just co-creators with God, we become one with God.

Professor Koppel defines *play* as embodied theology and contends that each person has a capacity for play and creativity within us. He builds on this thinking to incorporate a kindness and respect in the building up of the Body of Christ.

“Creative play is really a posture of the soul, an alignment of willful intention and bodily presence. In genuine play, we show up in ministry – body, soul and mind – aware of the well-being or lack thereof to the lives of others. In genuine play, we do not dismiss or slight others.” (Koppel 7)

Koppel suggests that play involves the head and the heart in a variety of ministries in his chapters entitled: “Play and Grief: Renewing trust for Ministry, Plays and Playing: Discovering Authentic Selfhood, Playful Teaching and Learning, Leadership as Playful Creative Adventure, The Play of Pastor Care.” It is quite evident in the whole of Koppel’s book that play is the embodiment of God, the two are inseparable. If we believe that God played when God created, then we can conclude that in the act of playing and creating we become one with God.

Moltman suggests that by defining people as players, this takes one out of the realm of “doing, having and achieving, and leads us into the categories of being,

“I remember when we were just joining together and we did a joint Pictorial Directory. All of our pictures were in it. Pictures of our four church buildings were on the cover. It was a great way to get to know people’s faces and names. I thought it was a pretty neat way to ‘see’ what our church would look like if we came together. Of course not everyone participated, but that’s ok. That was their choice.” **Faith Voices**

authentic human existence and demonstrative rejoicing” (qtd. in Rahner 23). This is a significant point in the theology of fun. Fun, play, and *Holy Fun* is not simply something that we do, but it is written into our DNA as humans created in God’s image. It defines who we are and what we were created to do..... to play, not-take-ourselves-so seriously, to lighten up and have some *Holy Fun*. When we finally do that for which we have been created, we are in union with each other and with God.

Evans agrees with this transformation that can happen in the midst of play. “Play is what we are” (xiv). Evans *quotes*, and agrees with, Karl Goos: “Play is at the heart of the physiological, biological, psychological, aesthetic, sociological, and pedagogical dimensions of human existence” (qtd. in Evans 4). Evans continues his play theology by concluding, “Play helps us apprehend, embody and express God” (xviii). When individuals are living in this intersection of who we have been created to be and the embodiment of God, when folks play, “not-take-themselves-too-seriously”, are given the freedom to choose their level of participation and come together with others, when people answer their hearts desire and join in the *Holy Fun* experiences, there is a confirmation of joy within the soul that is reminiscent of the song, “Joyful, Joyful. Hearts unfold like flowers before Thee, opening to the Son above.”

Holy Fun Is an embodied theology that moves us toward this covenantal relationship with God. If *play* is the vehicle going down this path to church consolidation, and to “not-take-yourself-so-seriously” is the fuel which powers this experience, and the freedom to choose one’s level of participation is the key in the ignition, and the people to people connections are the nuts and bolts holding it all together, than the embodiment of God is a new creation, a

combination GPS, giving us direction, and cruise control, showing us how to get there, one that completely embodies the vehicle.

Part Six: Creative Freedom as a Product of *Holy Fun*

Because up until now I have been using *creativity* as a part of the rational for the argument that we embody God when we play, and as a synonym for play, I would like to invite the reader to indulge me for a few moments as I switch gears (back to the *play mobile* metaphor?) and suggest that creative freedom is a result of a person (or a congregation) who has participated in *Holy Fun*. This was not something that we as a congregation set out to accomplish, but have in fact realized over the years.

Father Rahner discusses Augustine's Reversal in which people move from "using God to enjoying God"; This in turn opens one up to "reproductive imaginings and productive imagination" (70). Participation in *Holy Fun* experiences allows the church to open itself to a new dimension in ministry. Similar to Rahner's *reproductive imaginings and productive imagination*, Cox defines fantasy as "advanced imagining" something that we do together as a church (61). He suggests that this *joie de vivre* which results from the festival celebrations gives us a freedom to create which is vital to the fantasy or futuring we engage in as a people of God (12). Evans concurs with both of these evaluations by adding, "Play is activity from which creativity is released" (11). It is my experience that this transition from "using God to enjoying God" which then generates increased Freedom to Create is evident in the use of *Holy Fun* over the long haul. When I first noticed this increase in creativity, I thought perhaps

"I remember when the Inter-Church Board suggested we have a few Joint Committees to help plan things. We had a Worship Com., a Joint Sunday School Com., a Joint Property Committee that evaluated all of our properties, and a Joint Communications Com. I was on this last one and we wrote a monthly fact sheet with advertisements of all our Joint ventures. But the really great part was that all the committees and the Inter-Church Board met at the same time, at the same place. Then we would have a reporting out at the end of the sessions so we could know what everyone else was doing! We had goodies to eat and it was fun!" **Faith Voices**

that my usual “out of the box” thinking and enthusiastic approach to *Holy Fun* was beginning to rub off on others, as if modeling creativity and imaginings could produce more creativity. Although I do believe modeling is an important part of learning how to laugh at oneself, and even to play, this increase of creativity was from within the Body of Christ. Yes, we can provide the safe space in which to create, and the tools of imagination with which to be creative, but this increase of freedom to create was different. I was asked by a colleague how much of this consolidation in Hazleton was just the churches coming together themselves, and how much of it was my personality making it happen. This rather astute and timely question was given careful consideration as I began to discern how it is *Holy Fun* could be taught to others. No, it is not just my personality. What became evident was a transformation of openness to “other ways of looking at things/problems/dreams”, an innate creativity after participating in *Holy Fun*. An example of this increase in creativity at Faith U.C.C. Hazleton is the writing of our own Psalms of Faith. The worship committee was focusing on the congregation’s expression of Faith and came up with this idea of writing our own Psalms. We handed out “fill in the blank” psalms for everyone to complete based on Psalm 145 and then again two years later for Psalm 31. The results are amazing (Reference Appendix E). We use this venue often in our weekly worship

“When we were designing our new facility we had a committee for everything, of course. The worship committee was thinking about a Cry Room for the babies, because one of the young mothers on the committee reluctantly suggested it. One of our octogenarians said, ‘No, we will have a Quiet Room and put all of the old people in the room that complain about the babies!’ Oh did we laugh. And, we have a Quiet Room!”

Faith Voices

design and people have resonated within their souls in this creative expression. (The third incarnation of this Psalm writing will be completed March 2012.) Professor Jones’ focus in his book about “using play in ministry” is this production of a creative energy. He believes, “Our power to create is our supreme spiritual

birthmark” (120). Jones has seven suggestions about ‘how to stir up creativity’ which entail connecting with the Creator by “Being Still, Holy Openness, Listen and Trusting Your Inner Voice” and connecting with your “playful self” and instructs people to “Be Joyful, Cultivate a Playful Heart, Enjoy More Playtime and Expect to Be Creative” (128-137). Although this is not exactly *Holy Fun*, some of the experiences he recommends can be *Holy Fun*, and the elements are similar, as is the resultant increased creativity.

Koppel has also found that “creativity is the resultant of playfulness” (10). Both the head and the heart need to be involved in a kind of back and forth motion. It is not an *either or* situation but more of a “slinky” play movement between them. He adds that one’s being able to manage the “mis-fit” inside does allow one to not worry about “making a fool of oneself” and therefore one is free to create even more (11). This is a combination of being able to laugh at oneself and being able to trust the community gathered not to laugh at you, provides a safe place within which to create. *Holy Fun* can create this atmosphere of trust.

Additional evidence that points towards this increase in creativity that participating in *Holy Fun* can produce, were the development of Lenten devotionals every year. The Blind Faith Youth Group took the lead in this venture and has created some poignant and fun devotionals over the years. There was also a development of a CD that guided people in prayers which had both original prayers and original background music. These were pre-recorded and produced in-house and then handed out to folks for their Lenten Journey.

This final element of *Holy Fun* is not a criteria of what

“It was really hard to vote to sell our other churches. But when our new church was being built, we went to the sanctuary one Sunday after worship with our Black Markers and we wrote on the cement slab that was the sanctuary floor our favorite Bible verses. I thought it was fun when we did it, but now I find comfort in the fact that we are “Standing on the Promises.”

Faith Voices

makes *Holy Fun* happen, but more of a resultant, by-product of a congregation's or person's participation in *Holy Fun*. If we still want to "drive down this road" of a trip metaphor (although this passenger is tiring of its use), we could say that this creative freedom element is the tire tracks left on the road. So how did this work for the four congregations in Hazleton, PA? How did their participation in *Holy Fun* motivate folks to come together. The final chapter is an analysis of this consolidation of four congregations in Hazleton, PA.

Chapter Four: *Holy Fun* an Evaluation

It seems a bit ironic that after spending the last fifty plus pages trying to convince the reader that *Holy Fun* is a significant, viable and needed philosophy of ministry well-grounded in theological perspective that may help congregations, seminaries, nursing homes, secular business future their dreams that I would begin this final chapter doing a case study evaluation with the following passage, but this really is at the heart of what church is all about. "Jesus called a child, whom he put among them, and said, *'Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will not enter the Kingdom of heaven.'*" (Revised Standard Version Bible Mat. 18.2-3). Jesus, in my opinion, was trying to get the listeners to **play, not-take-themselves-so-seriously, and to come together with others**. Jesus gives us the models for our church behavior. The children are not the future of our churches, as is frequently proposed by church folks, they are the present, as in a precious gift and present as in the current time frame.

So how did we at Faith use *Holy Fun* as a path to church consolidation? The first part of this chapter will play with the building blocks of this *Holy Fun Path to Church Consolidations*. The *Holy Fun* experiences were utilized to build relationships, build trust and to build hope .

These building blocks in turn helped create this newly consolidated congregation. Then we will turn our attention to the learning's and the helpful hints for others thinking about this venture.

How did *Holy Fun* lead us down a path to Church Consolidation?

In a democracy people vote to express their opinions about everything. Church consolidation within the polity of the United Church of Christ needs to be voted upon in democratic fashion in order to become a reality. All votes have a tally in the end, and therefore have *winners and losers*, but the church is in the people business, and it matters whether or not our neighbor is a *winner or a loser*. *Holy Fun* is an attempt to make everyone a winner. The vote to consolidate is not just a carefully thought out decision based on fiscal and numerical realities, but also a building of covenantal relationships with others in our own congregations as well as the other church(es) with whom we are consolidating.

Part One: The Building Block of Relationships

Holy Fun helps move people forward by building relationships . Relationships, connections between people, are the strong foundation upon which our churches need to be built. Not only are we thirsty for this connection, but these relationships are vital to our emotional health as a community. In my own observations over the years I have noted that England has their royal family around which they can rally, come together, and garner hope. Americans tend to come together around issues which ebb and flow over the years. These ever changing issues are not stable and cause us unrest, anxiety and a lack of relationships. *Holy Fun* builds relationships which helps churches or organizations to come together. This building block

of Relationships does this through a) dating, b) Bible Study, c) finding common ground, and d) Inter-Church Board.

Building Relationships – Through Dating

One of the ways *Holy Fun* was used to enable church consolidation was to build relationships. The analogy of “dating” is apropos to this situation. Relationship building between individuals was important within each of the congregations or intra-congregational, as well as between the congregations or inter-congregational. Because the amount of time spent participating in *Holy Fun* experiences is not conversely proportionate to the sense of community gained from the experience. These experiences could happen formally, planned for the beginning of a committee meeting when the leader asked us to share our favorite stress relief food or it could happen out in the parking lot when two people discover they drive the

“Rev. Hess took our Blind Faith Youth Group to Heifer Farms in Connecticut, Dorney Park, and camping at Knoebels. But my favorite trips were the Retreats we had at the Jersey Shore. There was always a theme but the only one I remember is, ‘God Is Loser Friendly’. Communion on the Beach at sunrise was the best! I don’t think I ever said thank you to her, so Thanks Rev. Hess!”

Faith Voices

same model truck. These opportunities arose on the spur of the moment and were also intentionally planned into meetings, group gatherings, worship and suggestions in the Newsletters. The youth ministry manuals refer to *Ice-Breaker activities* that help to build relationships. Although these were a good reference point, the seemingly more intense or intimate sharing’s happened when individuals would just ask

questions of each other. The point here was that we were not obsessed with doing it by the book (where we had to participate in Ice-Breaker on page eight) but we were flexible enough to see that it was about connections. Just as in a good strong marriage, dating is still evident even after fifty years together, these *Holy Fun* experiences continue ad infinitum.

Building Relationships - Through Bible Study

We invited the Rev. Dr. Kim Johansson, at the time an Associate Conference Minister of the Penn Northeast Conference of the United Church of Christ, to come to each of these congregations to lead them in a “Discovering Our Roots” session. Using the passage in Revelation chapter two, “to the angel of Church in Ephesus” in which the Ephesians are reproved for leaving that which they were known for “in the beginning”, and then encouraged to return to that mission, she enticed each congregation to re-evaluate their current state of affairs with this focus in mind. In their church groups they were able to delve into their pasts and identify “that for which they were known” and then we shared these with the other churches. What happened in this process was a rejuvenation of identity, and a boost in their collective congregational self-esteem. They were connecting intra-congregationally as well as with their ancestors. Although I am not sure Johansson would have called this activity *Holy Fun*, it did have all the elements of *Holy Fun*. It was also an important step in their interchurch relationships. It is difficult to join with someone else if you do not know who you are. The same is true when congregations join. Continuing relationships work better when we know from where we have come.

Building Relationships – Through Finding Common Ground

Within the building of relationships process there is a discovering of common grounds. This was important at the Inter-congregational level because it reminded folks that “we are all in the same boat”. There were two significant *Holy Fun* experiences that I can point to which provoked this process. One was the “Murmurings Sermon”. We had the Inter-Church Board in

place and had decided to worship together on Sunday mornings four times a year. This was the

Spring Event, 1995. The Joint Worship Committee, which

included their four current pastors, planned the Worship

Service. I was asked to preach and chose the Exodus passage

where the Hebrew Children were murmuring in the wilderness.

I wrote a script that included people “murmuring” the exact

words I had heard from our pews. Basically there were twelve people wondering with their

heads down, bumping into each other, muttering “Murmur, Murmur, Murmur”. There was a

chime sounded, everyone froze and three people would read their lines. “I can’t believe we

have to go to another church to worship on Sunday. I couldn’t find a parking space and then

when I got inside I couldn’t find a seat!” “Why is this church consolidation process taking so

long? We will all be dead and gone by the time they get to the vote. We need to keep moving.”

“I’m not sure this consolidation is a good idea. We are moving too fast. We need to slow

down.” Then there would be a voice over the speaker system, “I have heard your murmurings,

come near before the Lord.” Then they went back to the murmurings. This happened for three

more times with different quotes. When I introduced this skit I explained that these people

were playing parts, and these were not their “murmurings”. I went on to preach about how we

are all over the map in our murmurings, but that God is with us, and has heard our murmurings.

What happened around the sanctuary that day was a realization that we are all in the same

boat. There were people in each congregation that were thinking all of these things. People

were able to see themselves in the sermon that day, and laugh a little. We were building

relationships through finding common ground as experienced in sermons. As a preacher I know

“The Inter-Church Board was busy recruiting people to help out with some joint committees. Peg Saunderschaeffer came up to me and asked if I would represent our church on the Christian Education Committee. I was so surprised. I said yes, and it changed my life. I will never forget it.” **Faith Voices**

that the message is not always received in the manner it was intended, but what is telling is that most of the folks today who were there at that worship service remember this ‘Murmuring Sermon’.

A second significant *Holy Fun* experience that helped to build relationships by finding common grounds was instigated by Sills. He had researched each of the four congregations, made up newsprint he posted on the walls of the sanctuary, as well as handouts and used the overhead projector to show, as he termed it, “The Handwriting on the Wall.” This report, given to all four congregations at the end of a joint worship service, contained the amounts of money each congregation had spent on their buildings for the last ten years in regular maintenance bills, insurance and remodeling. These figures were staggering. It also included all of the membership stats, attendance stats and money spent on missions and salaries. He had us looking at the money spent on the upkeep of these older buildings, “Money spent and gone,” he explained. Then we looked at money spent on mission the last ten years and compared this to building costs. He suggested the salaries could have been a little more cost effective if we had been paying one secretary, one sexton, one choir director, one or two pastors for the four churches. And finally we looked at membership and attendance stats. He talked about the life-cycle of the person, business and church. “Everything has a birth, a life and a death.... *Everything*. It’s just the natural order of things” (Sills). This was something we all needed to accept and realize the end was coming. It was easy to see that all four congregations were on a slippery slope. Two things were important in this session. One was that everyone was able to see the handwriting on the wall, literally and figuratively. There was no denying the facts. I noticed there were some folks who were insistent, “all we need is just one good fund raiser and

we can get by” or “if we had a full time Pastor our church would be all right”. One of the congregations in the larger church building had money in the bank, but the median age of the people in the pews was late seventies. Some of them thought that if we merged everyone could come to their church. And the other larger congregation had the largest youth population and felt they could make it on their own, they did not need this merger. It is important to note that not everyone, nor necessarily the leadership thought these things, but these were murmurings. Sills presentation was an eye-opener for each congregation to honestly see the big picture. And two, everyone could see everyone else’s stats. We broke into church groups and discussed our own church’s statistics – Were there any surprises? Would you have done anything differently? Where should we go from here? Of course we were only supposed to discuss our own stats, but everyone seemed interested in comparing ourselves with the other three churches. What we discovered was that we were all in this together. We had found our common ground and it was sinking fast. There was a leveling of the playing field that day through this *holy fun* experience. As I look back on Rev. Sill’s report this could have been a very “gut wrenching” or “judgmental” presentation, but Sills gave us the information with grace and mirth, letting us discover the hard facts, learning the truths for ourselves. We were building relationships on this common ground.

Building Relationships – Through Inter-Church Board

Another aspect of building relationships was aided by the “not-take-yourself-so-seriously” aspect of *holy fun*. The Inter-Church Board was hard at work hammering out the details of this church consolidation. But they were also modeling this “not-take-yourself-so-seriously”. They had learned that we can disagree and still respect and honor the person who

does not think like you do. They learned that not every decision could be honed to a yes or no decision. There were compromises and a “third way” created together. These were all possible because we were coming together as a board of individuals and congregations, we were building relationships. In the process of building people to people connections on the Board by using *Holy Fun* experiences, we also learned not to take ourselves so seriously - not that there was a lot of clowning around, but there was an atmosphere of mutual respect and, more importantly, there were no power struggles. These leaders of their congregations could have brought to the table a competitive air of control, and a “what can I get for me and mine”, rather than a lightness of heart and spirit of playfulness that we developed through *Holy Fun*.⁷ One of the *Holy Fun* experiences the Inter-Church Board participated in on a regular basis was Bible Study. Besides the coming together around the coffee pot and a piece of pie offered by the

“That first year we had those joint Lent services, it was before we voted. The Inter-Church Board suggested we have one Maundy Thursday Service. I remember how Ron and Louis and Rev. Hess acted out the trial of Jesus. They held up cards for our response. We were the crowds. I was never so moved as we cried out Crucify Him. It was something.” **Faith Voices**

host for that meeting, or the *Ice-Breaker* getting to know you activity planned for the beginning of the meeting, there was the exploration of God’s word with a *Holy Fun* slant.

Although I do not consider myself a Biblical Scholar by any stretch of the imagination, reading the familiar Bible stories together and trying to get folks to see themselves in the story

or to ask questions about the passages, and getting folks to think and share their opinions about the passages were *playful ways* to engage the scriptures and one another. As in any Bible Study we were able to learn more about ourselves and others within the truth of the scriptures. We could find each other in the scriptures, sometimes laughing at ourselves when

⁷ One only needs to look as far as the Peace Talks in the Middle east to understand what I am saying. I think perhaps they could use some *holy fun* experiences. Perhaps I will email Secretary of State Clinton.

we realized that we were not gods, which then had the effect of strengthening our relationship with each other and God. We laughed with Jonah who thought he was in charge and at ourselves in like manner. We ached along with the Psalmist who cries out to the Lord in pain and frustration. We were heartbroken with Herodias' daughter who may have been a young girl being used by her unstable mother rather than a harlot with dancing veils. These Bible Studies and our discoveries therein were referenced in sermons and other group settings letting folks know that their Inter-Church Board was building faith as we built our relationships. The people in the pews recognized this spirit of cooperation and playfulness. They saw us not-taking-ourselves-so-seriously and were able to lighten up as well. We were building our covenantal relationships together.

Part Two: The Building Block of Trust

The second use of *Holy Fun* in helping congregations to want to leave the security of their own church buildings, and move in together planning a future of possibilities was to build trust. In an arranged marriage trust needs to be built after the union, but I am suggesting that if congregations are integral about building trust before the consolidation, the union is healthier and there is motivation to enter into the union. There are two approaches to trust: 1) Trust is given immediately until there is a breach in this system, 2) Trust is not given until it is earned. For the most part, these are determined by the individuals and cannot be forced or coerced: Trust takes time to build. In Hazleton we utilized *Holy Fun* to build trust: a) One Person at a Time, b) Through the Inter-Church Board Design, c) Through Good Communication, d) Through the Freedom to Choose, e) Through Pastoral Care, f) Through Preaching, g) Through Sharing Circles, h) Innovative Leadership.

Building Trust – One Person at a Time

Trust is built most of the time through individuals. It is hard to trust a company, or an institution. We are more likely to trust the people within the company or an institution.

This is why most businesses try to put a face in their advertising so that people can associate and trust the spokesperson and likewise their businesses. We utilized *Holy Fun* to build trust between individuals, people to people, which then became the rock upon which we could build trust between churches.

Building Trust – Through the Inter-Church Board Design

Because the Inter-Church Board was the only constant contact the congregations had with one another, the trust around this table in particular was imperative. One of the key ingredients in this trust relationship was established in the design composition. The Board was created to have the same number of representatives from each congregation. This composite was designed through a *Holy Fun* experience with all four consistories. Sills had what he termed a Work Session with all four consistories and their Pastors in which he led us in a series of discussions around the design of this Inter-Church Board. Through the laughter and Bible Study we did around those tables we determined together that the Inter-Church Board would have authority to make recommendations to the consistory and congregations, but no real authority to make changes. This work session decided together that the number of representatives to the Inter-Church Board would not be based on the number of dollars that congregations had in the bank nor the numbers of contributing members in the pews. Each congregation represented around the table received the same number of representatives and therefore each had an equal number of votes. There were no *poor cousins* or *sugar daddies* that received

extra consideration. The added benefit of this equality within the Inter-Church Board was that everyone in the pews knew someone on the Board. These connections were strong. There was an empowering of the consistories and the people in the pews through the design as well. All of these consistory people and the members in the pews were not threatened by the Inter-Church Board, because they knew that all the Board could do was make recommendations to them. Through the establishment of this equal design people in the pews began to trust the leadership and the process. The freedom to choose element of *Holy Fun* was evident and empowering.

Building Trust – Through Good Communication

Trusting both the leadership and the process were crucial to the coming together of the congregations and *holy fun* experiences promoted this. The Inter-Church Board developed a communications task force that dispersed information to everyone at the same time, through bulletin inserts and newsletters mailed to their homes. Sills suggested that everyone should receive the same information at the same time. This open communication helped to establish trust in the leaders and the process as well as keeping the rumor mills quiet. The Board could not keep people from talking through these grape vines, but we could keep the facts straight and the mis-information to a minimum. Often we as a Board would hold parking lot conversations. It would be advertised as such to each congregation, scheduled at a certain lot (yes outside), for a certain time and everyone was welcome (We named these meetings playfully because the parking lot was often where the meeting after the meeting was held. These referred to informal discussions between folks

"I like the Amen Choir. I'm not sure when we started that, but I love seeing, and hearing our sweet little children singing at the top of their lungs as if our souls depend on it. Hey, maybe they do!?" **Faith Voices**

who were not 'happy' with whatever.) The purpose of these parking lot conversations was to squelch the rumors, correct the mis-information and to answer questions. The whole Inter-Church Board was in attendance (a very visual sign of unity) and the Co-Chairs of the Board led the conversations.⁸ This creative and *holy fun* experience was an answer to the 'tensions' at the time, and we were building trust.

Building Trust – Through Freedom to Choose

Holy Fun was used to build trust by allowing the freedom to choose whether to participate in any *Holy Fun* experience. People are going to choose what they want to do anyway, but *holy fun* was intentional about the choice. We tried to use the motto, "Having a Choice is the U.C.C. Way". People were assured that the decision had not been made about church consolidation and that it was ultimately their votes, their choosing or not that would determine the outcome.

Holy Fun times were generally offered with different levels of participation. When involved in a Bible Study and we would go around the table to take turns reading, anyone was 'allowed to' just say pass if they did not want to read. Or in worship when we are asked to stand it is always with the caveat, "If you are able please rise." Or an invitation to a covered dish includes room at the table for those who were too busy this week to cook, or (wink wink) "for those like me, who they don't allow into the kitchen." We have added a new church season to the calendar year. There is Pentecost, Advent, Christmas, Epiphany and Flu Season. We

⁸ It is interesting at this point to look back and realize that the co-chairs of this Board were from the two smaller congregations. The Board had originally thought when they were forming themselves to have one chair, but after much discussion decided on Co-Chairs. I don't think it was intentional that these folks were from the two smaller congregations (I don't recall any discussion about the size of congregations), but I do know the history of the previous attempts to merge were stymied because for the most part the larger churches were accused of taking over. This co-chair leadership configuration was inspiring. Maybe there really is a Spirit of God working. (smile)

laughingly add this season and invite people to Pass the Peace without hand shaking.

Sometimes they are invited to give the “elbow bump”, or the head nod, or the “peace poke” or even to sit in your seat and share a smile and prayer for the person. Giving folks choices let people build trust at their own comfort levels.

Building Trust – Through Pastoral Care

As the transitional pastor I was pastor to both those who were excited about this merger, those who were confused and those who were adamantly opposed to the possibilities. I remember going to one of our Home Bound for a communion visit, about two months before the vote. When I came into her apartment, the older lady was weeping. I sat quietly with her for a while until she was able to tell me that her former Pastor had just left. He had told her that she needed to vote no to this consolidation. She had thought it was a good idea and now she just didn't know what to do. I counseled her on making her own decision, but that either way she voted God would still love her and be with her. I never did learn which way she voted. Right around this same time I had learned that this same former pastor, who was supposed to be retired, had said no to doing a funeral for one of his former parishners. This was ok except that he had already done a funeral for two other parishners this past year. So the latest no response left the recipient feeling hurt and betrayed. They asked me, “Why did he do the funeral for (so and so) and not for my Mother?” Another incident occurred within the following month that was similar. The same former Pastor had visited a member in the hospital, had given her communion, prayed with her and then told her to vote no for this consolidation. I happened to visit her in the hospital that same day. She told me that she really did not appreciate the former Pastor coming to see her, and would I please tell him so. Normally I

would have suggested that she need to talk with him because triangulation is never a good way to communicate, however I saw this as an opportunity to clear the air. I made an appointment with this retired pastor in his home and the Transitional Assistant Pastor and I went to visit with him. We shared with him the difficulties of being Transitional Pastors, all of the changes everyone was experiencing and that he was making our jobs even more difficult. I

told him of the *trail of tears* he had spread and knew that was not his intention, but that we were left with the folks feeling hurt and betrayed. We talked about how when people retire that they usually do not go back and do their job for the current person. And although we expected him to have an opinion about this merger, when he voiced it to folks it was not just his opinion but that of someone they respected and loved because of his former position with them. By trying to sway the folks he was using or rather abusing his pastoral authority which he no longer should claim. I am still not certain that he heard us, but I do know that the people

involved in these incidents appreciated our “Come to Jesus” meeting with this former pastor. They were beginning to trust that the current system and Pastors would take care of them. I was called “The Evil Hess Woman” by this same former pastor’s family. I preached about this new title of mine, laughing, playfully and lovingly accepting that some

“When we were looking for possible church sites to build, the three real estate agents in our congregation got their respective companies to share the profits and found us four possible sites,. Before we voted on which site, we took a caravan of cars and as Rev. Hess called it, “Wandered in the Wilderness” looking for our promised land.” **Faith Voices**

folks needed someone to blame. It is interesting to note that this congregation voted by only a margin of one vote to move forward into the consolidation. Consequently when we announced the voting results, it was at the conclusion of a Joint Worship Service. Sills had suggested to me earlier that when the vote is announced to immediately and joyfully break into singing the

Doxology. However, with the three churches voting yes to the consolidation by a huge margin and then this congregation by only one vote, I knew there were people that had voted no. So instead of singing right away, I prayed first complaining to God that every vote yielded seemingly winners and losers, but that we were all winners today. We were given the choice and in choosing we knew that God was with each of us. After the prayer we sang our new congregational song which was to the tune “Amazing Grace” (this had been written by one of our twenty-something’s): **“Thro’ many dangers, fears and snares, we have already come, Tis faith that brought us safe this far, and faith will lead us home.”** One of the teenagers from the church that voted yes by one vote came up to me after the service and told me it was his vote that caused the victory! I shared his smile, winked and said, “Oh yea. It’s all you!”

Trust began intra-congregational naturally with the familial connections. “My grandparents were members here, so I can trust this church.” Trust was built on the common ground of having a history together, working together, worshipping together and having *Holy Fun* together.

Building Trust – Through Preaching

As the Pastor I was able to facilitate the use of *Holy Fun* in sermons. When it came time to decide what facility we were going to use, we had to vote yet again. This vote was probably the more volatile emotionally. Folks in the pews were feeling like they were going to betray their ancestors if they voted to sell their buildings and build new, but knew that ‘neutral ground’ was essential to the coming together. So I used my German accent and preached the word of God. Keeping in mind that we were from the German Reformed tradition, I reminded folks in the sermon that our German ancestors left the comforts of their own homes, their

beautiful churches in Germany and came to this land of opportunities. I reminded them that they too are of good German stock and can step out in faith on their own ventures as well. I am not sure we can say definitively that this *Holy Fun* sermon was a deciding factor, but I do think it did add to their understanding that we can trust God and take a step in Faith together. They did vote that day with a three quarters margin in favor to sell their buildings, all the churches and parsonages, purchase new land and build a new facility.

Building Trust – Through Sharing Circles

Another *Holy Fun* experience that built deeper relationships and the trust we needed, was the formation of Sharing Groups. These were “hand-picked” or rather, “hand invited”

“When we were first getting it together it was important that we include our children in Worship so they knew it was their church too. We had these worship bags that contained a sleeve of bells they could ring when we sang hymns, a slip of paper they could draw or write on and then place it in the offering plate and surprise each week. These were great for the kids and the parents.”

Faith Voices

neighborhood groups of people that I invited to meet together on a monthly or bi-weekly basis at someone’s home. This took a little bit of organizing on my part, but we were able to develop twelve groups. The goal was two- fold. One was to help folks in the same neighborhood realize that they now knew someone from the other churches living near-by and get to know them

better. Also, in reading the Bible together they strengthened their ties with the Word as well as with each other. In the spirit of *Holy Fun* some of the groups named themselves – “Faith Finders”, “EHW’s People” (stands for Evil Hess Woman’s People), “Nosey Neighbors”, “People of Faith”, “Ruth’s Circle”. These groups forged a deeper relationship beyond the *Holy Fun* ‘getting to know you’ experiences which helped build relationships. With these Sharing Groups came the building of trust within these relationships.

Building Trust – Through Innovative Leadership

The other way that as their Pastor I was able to help build their trust in each other, in their church and in the process was by being attentive to Pastoral duties. It was imperative that everyone knew they could 'reach' their Pastor when they wanted her. I also made it a priority to visit hospitals twice a week and give Home Bound communion on a monthly basis. This was challenging especially after my Assistant Transitional Pastor left rather suddenly (health reasons) and the Inter-Church Board decided not to replace him (saving money). We brainstormed some areas where I could use laity help. Three areas were identified: 1) Home communions (I was doing 35-40 per month) 2) Lay Pastors to help lead worship and do hospital visits, 3) Hire a Christian Education Director. We established a Pastoral Care Team that was trained by Sister Pauline (the Catholics had this training in place and let us utilize it) and helped share communion every other month to the Home Bound. I still communed them on six times a year as well. I wanted the home bound folks and those in the nursing homes to know that they were going to be cared for, even if the churches changed. The loved ones of the Home Bound were also reassured that their Grandmother or Great Uncle was not going to *get lost in the shuffle*. With these assurances they were able to trust the leadership and the process. Remember that communion can and was a *holy fun* experience. The sixteen folks who took the training were commissioned at a joint service and formed their own Sharing Group. They are still going strong today, although a few folks have gone on to their heavenly home and new ones have joined the ranks. We only

"Do you remember how we named our new congregation? We had a committee, of course, that gathered all of the suggestions for names. Then they put ALL of the names on a ballot, I think there were seventy three suggestions. They took the top five vote getters and we had one more vote. Whew! The name was announced at a Joint Worship in February. Oh what fun!" Faith Voices

commune our folks six times a year now that the transition time is past, with special request handled promptly for those that request communion on the in between times. So both the givers and the receivers are having a *holy fun* experience.

A second group of people were identified with the help of the help of the Inter-Church Board and our brainstorming *Holy Fun* experience and asked to serve as Lay Pastors. Brainstorming involves everyone throwing out answers at the same time, with no one allowed to veto anything. This is all done to a one or two minute time frame and usually in answer to a specific question. The question for this session was, "Describe what kind of person you would like your Pastor to be?" I thought it very revealing that they did not mention "good preacher" or "good administrator", but things like kind, integral, and nice person. They decided the Lay Pastors were folks that exhibited a spiritual maturity, and a good helping of the fruits of the spirit. We then brainstormed, "Who in our pews could fill these shoes?" They identified six people. When asked to serve those six were "honored" to do so. I did a good deal of in-house training for them to visit hospitals (listening, being present, praying) and then expanded this to lead worship, and eventually to preach. It did not happen overnight, but with perseverance they came through for us. Four of these Lay Pastors went on to Conference Training for Lay Ministry. Two of these pastors now have their own churches. This group regenerates itself every couple of years with new folks being trained in-house. It has been a *holy fun* answer to our pastoral needs.

The third idea from our initial brainstorm session (which by the way was also a *holy fun* experience) was the establishment of a Christian Education Director's position. This was the only paid position of the three ideas. When it came time for the congregational meetings to

vote whether or not to hire a Christian Educator there was a good deal of rumblings. Who would it be? Why do we need one? Can we afford it? I preached (in all four locations) on Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac and how I never quite understood how God could ask Abraham to sacrifice his son. Then I told them of an "Ah Ha" moment when I realized how I sacrifice my own children every week. "Do you know how many soccer games I've missed? How many Spring concerts I didn't hear? With seven hundred plus people on the rolls within these four congregations there is always something to do and yes, you all need to be the "angel of the Lord" and stop this sacrifice before it's too late." It did bring the folks together around a need with purpose and compassion. They did vote as four separate congregations to hire a part-time Christian Education Director. This was evidence that the trust level was growing.

Part Three: The Building Block of Hope

The third employment of *holy fun* experiences that enabled and empowered the members of four separate congregations to move forward into a covenantal consolidation is that their participation in *holy fun* happenings helped to Build Hope. Just as motivation is not something tangible that can be bought or given to someone, hope needs to be planted into the psychic or seeds of hope need to be sown into the soul. These congregations were given daily, weekly, and monthly sprinklings of *holy fun* that grew into hope.

There is a lightness of spirit when one is a positive person. This is contrasted to the heaviness of despair found within a negative person. The same is true of congregations. Although I have no statistical evidence with which to back my opinions, there are congregations that are hope-filled, that think positively, looking towards the future with dreams and expectations of "goodness and grace". This is contrasted to congregations that worry about the

future, that look to the future with dread and judgment. These two types of congregations are not divided by numbers, there are both small churches and large churches that can live in either of these personas. I have seen small congregations that are hope filled, mission driven looking to do good in the world. I have also found large churches that are very self-centered, negative, and worried about what tomorrow may bring. So how did participating in *holy fun* experiences garner hope? This Building Block of Hope was constructed through: a) Worship, b) Out of the Box Thinking, c) Welcome.

Building Hope – Through Worship

There was an older couple, both in their eighties when we were just forming the Inter-church Board that really latched on to the vision of a new church birthed from four congregations. Both of them were retired teachers, very active in their church and even though they were dealing with their own end of life issues were excitedly looking forward to the possibilities of leaving a legacy of hope behind. *Holy Fun* experiences for them were life giving.

They enthused about the “latest worship experience” that always held surprises and laughter. This couple is an example of those German Reformed people in the pews that were good at imagining the possibilities, and our future together. The German Reformed tradition very staunchly thought the seven last words of Christ were,

“I looked forward to our Joint Worship Services when we were still four congregations. It was during Easter season and Rev. Hess brought a baby pig out for Special Moment. The kids (and the congregation) loved it. New life. New ideas, New surprises. The kids named the pig Bob. My grown-up kids still talk about it.” **Faith Voices**

“We have always done it that way”, well, not in reality. But this comment does reflect the attitudes of a good many German Reformed folks. So it makes couples as described above a wonderful gift to our congregations, and these were not the only ones. This couple was quick

to make lots of new friends in the other congregations and became advocates of a hopeful future together. They were of the mindset that “we were not moving quickly enough in the process”. When I asked them during a home visit, what were their dreams for our future, they said that they just wanted to be a brick at the bottom of the wall of our new church. I assured them that they already were in position, and that our new church was being built on the foundations they had laid. The husband died suddenly and the wife eighteen months later. They had left instructions for their funerals about having a brass band playing as their caskets were being carried out of the church. The band was instructed to play, “When the Saints Go Marching In”, not because they felt that they were saints but that they “wanted to be in that number, when the saints go marching in.”

The joint Worship services became a *holy fun* experience for those who planned all of the aspects of them, as well as the ones who came to worship together. The first Joint Worship Service suggested by the Inter-Church Board was a Joint *Kirchentaug* Service which was a celebration of their common German Reformed heritage. The Worship committee attended to details such as having greeters from all four congregations at whichever location we were worshipping. That familiar face when they were coming to a new location was appreciated. We had extended times for the Passing of the Peace which included different instructions – find someone you do not know and tell them where you parked this morning, or find someone who went to or goes to your high school, or ask God’s peace to be upon each person you greet and meet this morning. The Committee would ask the host choir director to pick an anthem and invite the other church choirs to practice with them. It was a *holy fun* experience just to listen to them. Each choir would wear their own robes which were very colorful, and the choirs

singing together became a *holy fun* time for the singers as well. The Committee always had some type of a themed gift for everyone – they had packets of seeds in the spring and invited folks to help grow a church, or bags of popcorn and invited people to pop-back for the next Joint Service. The Worship Committee became so involved they broke off to form new committees so they could get everything done. There was a Hostess Committee that planned a time of fellowship following each joint service. These hours also contained *holy fun* moments as we were invited to go through the serving lines if you had a birthday in January, February or March, or if you were wearing “whatever color”, or you had a cat or dog or fish or bird. The committee was able to make going through the line to get your food a *Holy Fun* experience each time. The order of Worship varied according to which ever host church we were at. This allowed us to experience each other’s church experience, use their hymnals and participate in communion in the manner they were

“We decided to have a joint Good Friday Service in addition to the four services we had yearly. Rev. Hess preached a first person sermon I thought very moving. She became Mary, the Mother of Jesus for us. Mary told us of her anguish and heartache of watching her Son die. She said that ‘she thought it was ironic in a sad way that a carpenter would die with a hammer and nail,’ I’ll never forget it.” **Faith Voices**

accustomed, although the committee used people from all four churches to serve as ushers, and communion stewards from all four churches. There was something very visual about all of us worshipping together at each location. People were able to see their pews filled, their choir lofts bursting, the children running down the aisles for the Special Moments, and the laughter around the tables after worship. The hope for the future was tangible at those moments. People would leave worship with a hope they could taste, it was so very real. When I was hired as the Senior Transitional Pastor of these four churches I only changed two things across the board in all four worship services. Each church would have a “Prayer Joys and Concerns” time at

the very beginning of worship, before the prelude, and that there would be a “Special Moment” for any young people that would come forward. Other than that we had four different services. The Prayer Joys and Concerns at the beginning would get the announcements out of the middle of the service, (a half time or seventh inning stretch genre), and also would allow the prelude to be a time to make the transition of getting physically to the church to actually being there in the presence of God. The Special Moment time was important to teach everyone how it is we care for our children. I advocate that you can tell how healthy a person’s soul is by how they treat children and animals. The same is true about the soul of the congregation.

Building Hope – Through Out-of-the-Box Thinking

Besides utilizing worship as a central *holy fun* experience to garner hope we also used *holy fun* to get outside the box. I noticed that depressed people are very focused on themselves – “poor me”, “I can’t seem to function”; “He did this to me”. Part of the relief effort for depression is to get them focused on something or someone outside of themselves. This is true of congregations as well. *Holy Fun* has always been a driving force to focus on mission outside of our church doors. How can we serve the community? What can we do together as four congregations to change the lives of people around us? Early on during the Inter-Church Board days, several people from the different congregations had approached their representatives on the Inter-Church Board about the possibility of doing some type of joint mission project. It was interesting at the Board meeting when one of the representatives brought up this suggestion and how there were quite a few others that chimed in with this same suggestion coming from their folks. I appreciated that the members were already dreaming of

the possibilities. From this inception the Joint Outreach Committee was formed that would lead the churches in four different mission projects per year, including gathering the goods (non-perishable food items and clothing for local food banks and Salvation Army), trash walks (cleaning up the highways and neighborhoods), prayer vigils (with the Hispanic Immigration community), and helping the Jewish community clean-up the graffiti on their building. These *holy fun* experiences helped folks in their out-of-the-box thinking which then in turn garnered hope.

The “Itsy Bitsy Spider” Sermon where the spider is the hero as she climbs back up the water spout again, the “Soul Exercises” Sermon where we explored (not just me) how we can

“I don’t think everyone really understands the hard work to make four congregations one. Every decision seemed to be difficult. When we decided to worship together four times a year, what time do we do worship? At first I remember, we just went with the time of the host congregation. But then we picked 10:00 as it was NOT a time of any of the four. ” **Faith Voices**

strengthen our souls, the sermon where I ate a carnation and talked about how Mary at the tomb felt when trying to tell others about Jesus resurrection and how this is not unlike what they are going to experience when they try to tell others their pastor ate a flower this Easter morning, or the first person sermons where I became the woman caught in adultery, or the man born blind, Peter at the

cross, and the woman in the crowd at Jesus Trial, are just a sampling of the *holy fun* experiences that have helped folks with their out the box thinking. The *holy fun* Bible Studies that promoted this out of the box thinking included the scripture about Jesus walking on the water - when the folks asked why Jesus did this and was he just trying to scare the disciples? It included the study on the passage of Jesus turning water into wine and what was Jesus purpose – to keep the party going? After a *holy fun* sermon (and not all of my sermons are *holy fun*) I

will often get the comment, “I’d never thought about that passage that way before.” (I wish I had a dollar for every time this was said, I could probably pay off the mortgage on the church!) When folks began to look at the Bible stories with this *holy fun* lens, they began to see God in a different light and with this out-of-the-box thinking came hope.

Building Hope – Through Welcome

Long before the United Church of Christ began their “Extravagant Welcome” and their motto, “No matter who you are, or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here,” we had *opened our arms, our doors and our hearts to others*, a phrase we used as our motto and as a creed by which we lived. Through *holy fun* times we learned how to “give up your pew” to a stranger, and how “there are no strangers, or visitors, but friends and special guests we haven’t met yet”. Through *holy fun* experiences we developed bulletins that were user friendly so that people not familiar with our worship service would be able to follow easily and not feel like an outsider. Through *holy fun* happenings we made guests baskets for the restrooms and sent handwritten notes to guests who sign our pew cards. Through *holy fun* moments we made sure that our churches were “safe places” for children and where folks would know they would not be laughed at or judged, but welcomed and accepted. This last instance was critical in our approach to issues around teenage drug abuse, abortion, gay marriages, and immigration. We spent several Sundays during the service (either Sermon time or Mission Moments) in a *holy fun* venue exploring how the Bible had been used as a weapon and came to the group conclusion that this was not what we wanted to promote within our churches, and we were pretty conclusive that Jesus would not have either (What Would Jesus Do?). Even though people were all over the place in their opinions about these issues, we all agreed that everyone

was welcome here. Because of this stance, that we did not think it was right for the Bible to be used as a weapon against any group or person, we as a congregation have lived as an Open and Affirming Congregation, even if we have never voted on this policy, or have done the U.C.C. official study. Part of the discussion around gay rights was the gay and lesbian folks in our pews that insisted our congregations were not to be known as a “gay rights church”, but rather a church that welcomes everyone. As the pastor, I had gone to the elders early in this newly consolidated church and told them I would be doing Holy Unions. Interestingly enough, half of the Elders said, “It’s about time!” and the other half said, “You don’t have to put it in the Newspaper do you?” Again I find this very telling that they did not say no. Because of this holy welcoming everyone into our sanctuary of peace, the first wedding in our new facility was a Holy Union between two men.

This playful, “not-take-yourself-so-seriously”, freedom of choice *Holy Fun* path was used to construct these building blocks of relationships, trust and hope that empowered these congregations to covenant together and become one consolidated church. Because we took the time to have some *Holy Fun*, we now have a healthy, thriving congregation. I have presented the aforementioned examples as a way to support my theory that participating in *Holy Fun* experiences did become a path to church consolidation and not as examples of *Holy Fun* times that others must use. The next two areas of concern will be of help to those congregations thinking about church consolidation.

Learnings from the *Holy Fun* Path

The *Learnings* are the things we at Faith have discovered, “tools” that a congregation could use along this road to church consolidation. They include: talking, listening, and dreaming. Besides these learning tools, there are a few *Helpful Hints* that may be of use if congregations are interested in getting started down this path to consolidation. These learnings and helpful hints will be interspersed with a few Pastoral Insights that the reader may or may not find useful. Using *Holy Fun* as the vehicle of change, the Learnings could be considered the tools in the tool box of the vehicle of change. The helpful hints may be the road maps, and yes there is often a propensity of strong independent churches and pastors not to read the map.

Learnings from *Holy Fun*: The Tool of Talking

As evident in the more conclusive history written in the article, “Make a Joyful Noise”, found in Appendix B, the process of consolidation began for these four U.C.C. congregations in Hazleton, PA about forty plus years previous to the vote to merge in 1997. Along the way there were four times when various combinations of these congregations tried to vote on a merger. These unsuccessful attempts at church consolidation were necessary in order for this to happen today. The conclusion is that *Talking* is never a bad thing. Planting the seeds of possibility needs to begin somewhere.

“I remember Vacation Bible School was one of the first joint ventures of our four churches. We planned it together and rather than purchase the craft boxes and ready-made curriculum, we did our own. I was excited and pleased with the “Waters of the Bible” lessons we taught the kids that summer. It was really the first time we had tried anything like that and it was pretty cool.” **Faith Voices**

In Hazleton there was always a bit of competition between the four congregations. The pastors and people took pride in their particular church building, their suppers, their Sundays School programs and festivals. This was a good attitude,

and indicated a healthy self-esteem. But rather than building cooperation and supporting each other's events they would use the numbers game and gloat a little when the numbers leaned in their favor. This is not said in judgment, but more of an observation. The posting of last week's attendance on the board in the front of the sanctuary, and the printing of last week's offering in the bulletins were common practices. One of the four congregations would publish every families' yearly giving in the descending order starting with those who gave the most. All of these practices were common in the German Reformed churches and used to try to motivate folks to do better, at least I think that was the purpose. As budgets got tighter, and were stretched to capacity, they began to look at other possibilities to increase revenue. From these seeds of discontent, they talked about church merger, and in some instances, "hostile take-overs". (These were instances where one congregation expected the other to close their building and come to their church.) One of these failed attempts at merger blew up because of clergy egos, and another because of laity egos. Those attempts did not even come to a vote. The other two votes were not even close to passing. However, it was all good. The seeds were planted. The Learning here is that there are no such things as bad talks. All of these failed attempts at merger were good steps toward the churches' consolidation, though not necessarily *Holy Fun*.

Helpful Hints: If at any time now or in the future a congregation should become interested in consolidating with another church (or two or three), start Talking. Now!

Something that the four congregations and the Inter-Church Board did quite well together was talk. The talk around this Inter-Church Board table was not always *Holy Fun* but the notion of getting to know each other better, share a piece of pie or cup of coffee together after the meeting, and being able to laugh at ourselves, were all key elements of the talking. As

we shared where each group of three representatives and their Pastors thought their own churches were in the probability or possibility of coming together, it became obvious the Inter-Church Board was made up of the “shakers and movers” in their congregations. They invited the Rev. Dr. Horace Sills to come talk with them about the possibilities. It is important to mention at this point with all of the emphasis in this project about *Holy Fun* and its role in church consolidation, there are certain legal steps that must be attended to in this process. The Inter-Church Board received much needed help in this area from Dr. Sills.

Helpful Hint: Getting someone from outside the congregations to help with legal steps is essential.

Even though it was in the back of everyone’s minds, merging or consolidation was not at the fore when we were discussing “new ways” to do things together. The Worship Team decided on their own that we needed a Hostess Team to plan for the Holy Grounds Fellowship after the service and a Sunday School Team to plan for a Joint Sunday School session as well. These expansions were the result of people being open to the possibilities, talking with others.

Probably because the last attempt to come together was the idea of “sharing one pastor between two congregations” which they called Mutual Ministry, one of the first ideas that the Inter-Church Board had was to hire one or two Interim Pastors for all four congregations. This interim position, which they called, “Transitional Pastor”, was not viewed as a step toward consolidation, but rather a way to allow “breathing room” for a decision to be made. This may seem like a subtle difference, but was in fact vital to the Talking around the tables, and let folks know that the decisions were not pre-made. Everyone still had a choice

about whether or not to consolidate. I was hired as the Sr. Transitional Pastor one month short of year after the Inter-Church Board was inaugurated, July 1995.

Helpful Hints: Instead of waiting for the Inter-Church Board (or whatever your official steps are) to start joint ventures, start talking now with other congregations about doing ‘ministry’ together. What mission project can we do together? What discount can we give to our neighbor church at our next supper? What can our youth do together for fun or service? What music in our music libraries can our choirs share? What equipment can our secretaries or sextons share? What quid pro quo arrangements can we get involved with? ‘We’ll print your bulletins if you shovel our sidewalks?’

Important to note: Do not just invite them to come to you and then sit back and sneer because they did not come. Talk with them about doing things together, even if nothing ‘concrete’ comes of it or even if it blows up in your faces, TALK.

If there is one thing that I would recommend to any congregation to get them started down this *Holy Fun Path to Church Consolidation*, it would be to Talk.

Pastoral Insights: *Although it makes sense in a marriage to have only two parties, I think it was efficient for the Hazleton churches to have four. There was an incident that occurred three months before the vote in December 1996. The largest church by square footage, also considered to have the most money, decided rather quickly to spend \$12,000 to put a Parking Lot on the back of their church property. The lot was big enough for eight spaces. I was sure this was going to blow the Consolidation out of the water. It felt like being engaged and your fiancé goes out and buys a motorcycle without consulting you. It’s their money, but ‘geez Louise’! The church did indeed pave their way to a new eight space Parking Lot, and the other three congregations, who I thought would be furious, or at least feel betrayed, said nothing. Or if they did it was, ‘Well, it’s their money.’ Had there been only two churches it may have been a different story. I really think having four churches helped in this situation. So, when you are Talking with other congregations, do not limit your talks to just one other church.*

Learnings from *Holy Fun*: The Tool of Listening

Listening is something everyone could work to improve, not just congregations thinking about consolidation. When we listen to others, really listen, we are present with them where they are; it helps communication and bring us together.

Dr. Toby Holleman, an Associate Conference Minister of Penn Northeast Conference, United Church of Christ, commented to me recently that not everyone can do what it is I did in

Hazleton with the four churches. At first I thought, “Wait a minute, it wasn’t me. It was all these folks. It was God in the midst of all this.” But as I pondered the wisdom of his pointed observation, I realized that the leadership is the key in both the *Holy Fun* stuff and in the process of consolidation.

Helpful Hints: Identify a few folks in your congregation who can play, are creative, have a playful attitude, don’t take themselves too seriously, are differentiated, have a healthy bowl of the fruits of the spirit and *some* of whom are already looked at as leaders within your congregation. (Perhaps one from each major group/committee in the church Would help?) Give them a playful name, or better yet, let them pick their own (Shakers and Movers, Fun Faith Folks, Holy Howlers, Congregational Clowns). Their roll within the congregation is to model healthy *Holy Fun* behavior and infuse *Holy Fun* into every aspect of church life. Let them Brainstorm the ideas themselves. For example: The Women’s Group is having their annual *whatever*. The person from the Women’s Group on this *Holy Fun* task force would bring to the group the question, “How can we infuse the annual *whatever* with *holy fun*?” The key in this type of organization is that each of the folks from their respective groups will know what may work for their group and what will not have a chance. They are the Listeners.

As the Transitional Pastor of four congregations I thought it was all about connections, me connecting with folks, helping the people connect with each other, with God, and all of us participating in *Holy Fun*. The tool of listening is vital. With four secretaries, four choir directors, four consistories, four worship services on Sunday morning, four Sunday Schools, four church sextons, (well, you get the gist, the list goes on) I felt it was imperative that people knew they could connect with their Pastor. At the beginning of this venture in Hazleton, the Inter-Church Board insisted that I have a pager, a bag phone (prelude to cell) and answering machines at each of the four churches. These electronic connections allowed for the people connections to

begin. Being connected electronically, which is even easier today with Facebook, Twitter, and instant messages by text, are important 'listening' devices for the Pastor.

Pastoral Insight: *I noticed that whenever I received a 'concerned' call from a person informing me about 'so and so' who probably could use a Pastoral visit, I realized it was the person who was contacting me that needed the attention. Although I would follow through with a visit to the suggested person in need, I would take the time to listen carefully to the caller, helping them connect with me, with others and with God.*

As the Inter-Church Board began forming more working committees with participants from all four congregations, I noticed an odd occurrence. Although I was still on a learning curve as far as learning people's names, and from which congregation they hailed, I began to realize that everyone from "Church X"⁹ would sit at meetings with a closed and "distrustful" demeanor. These were all different people, on different committees/groups, but all from the same congregation. They would sit with their arms folded, sitting back physically away from the table, and react with anger if they felt threatened. The threat was not physical, but if they felt "their church" was getting the "short end of the stick" or the "poor cousin" treatment, or the "you're not good enough" shuffle off to the side, they would react strongly.

An example of this odd behavior was with the Joint Property Committee (representatives from all four churches) decided to do an assessment of each church location using criteria such as capacity of sanctuary, handicapped accessibility, parking spaces available, kitchen use, hall capacity, heating units, etc. Each of the church's representatives did an assessment of their own facility and then they had a "walk through" with everyone on the committee. When it came time for Church X, they were very defensive about any questions the

⁹ Not wanting to name names here, I am using a false name to protect the identities of this congregation and the people or Pastors herein.

“My former congregation St. Paul’s had always had a yearly picnic at Knoebels. Well, when we started talking, we invited the other three congregations to come with us. We didn’t have tons of people come, but those that did allowed us to start to imagine that this might just be possible.” **Faith Voices**

committee had, and even cut the ‘walk through’ of their facility short ‘in a huff’. I was sitting at an Inter-Church Board meeting at which we were pretty intentional about rotating the locations to include all four churches’, when there was yet another “ruckus” from Church X about being skipped in the meeting location rotation. It occurred to me that the members from this particular congregation, pretty much across the board, were reacting like victims – angry, defensive, making sure no one else would take advantage of them. I researched this on my own and found two pastors in the last fifteen years of their congregation’s history who had abused their pastoral authority. (One Pastor did something illegal and another did something morally wrong.) I preached on this in a *Holy Fun* way that allowed the folks to realize I not only knew about these Pastoral abuses, but that they could speak with me about it. It was no longer a “secret”. So what was the *Holy Fun* way? I preached a sermon at all four locations about the architecture of their particular sanctuaries. Church X had a closed rail in the front which enclosed the raised altar, pulpit and lectern. This was reflective of the separation of clergy and laity theology. After talking about this in the sermon, I mentioned, “I understand there were some clergy in your not too distant past you really needed to be kept separate from.” There was a couple seconds pause, and then they laughed. It was enough to let them know that I knew, and that they could come and talk, share their pain, sense of betrayal and stories. This *Holy Fun* moment was the beginning of healing for some of these folks all because I was listening carefully.

When is a *Holy Fun* experience not holy, or not fun? When people get into a conflicted situation in the midst of “whatever”, and do not fight fair. This is not holy and not fun. Conflict can happen anytime, anywhere. It is normal, and healthy to have conflict. But there is a way to fight fair and a way to fight dishonorably. Calling the other person names, or putting them into a derogatory category is under the heading, “dis-fight”, short for dishonorable fight. Using generalities – you always, you never- is also a part of a dis-fight. Going to a third party to complain about the first party is a dis-fight, also referred to as a triangle. When neither party is listening to the other, it is a sign that it is time to step in. All of the church leaders had been trained in conflict management. What do we do when people complain to us about whatever? We were trained to listen carefully to the person, taking notes is good way to show them you are listening. If the person is complaining about the staff or another member, encourage them to go directly to that person or even offer to go with them. We were told to try and bring the two parties together. When “things” get out of hand between two or more people, it is important to step in and pronounce simply, “We do not do that here.” (Sometimes just being the referee and calling the game is enough.) Sometimes it takes a bit more doing. A procedure that can be implemented in conflict resolution is to invite each party to repeat what the other person has said in their own words, and to keep doing this until the other says, “Yes, that’s what I am saying”. That is when one knows they have been heard correctly. People can have different opinions and still respect each other and come together. Sometimes there is no resolution, neither party can convince the other, and so then we follow the procedure in Matthew 18. Each one brings one to the table, and they all sit down. Sometimes rather than coming to a compromise or agree to disagree (which are both valid resolutions) it is a good time

to suggest that rather than settling on solution A or solution B to come up with a solution C, a third way. In all of this, the parties involved need to listen carefully and prayerfully to one another.

Helpful Hint: Expect conflict. Conflict Management Training, or Training in Mediation are helpful tools for your leadership, or Pastors to have going into a church consolidation.

***Pastoral Insight:** I was Transitional Pastor for these four congregations for two and a half years before the vote to consolidate. During that time together I had come to know, what I would call the matriarchs of these different congregations. These were octogenarians that were the glue of their congregations. They were in church early every Sunday, meeting and glad handing the folks as they came in the doors. They knew everyone and would ask concernedly about the sick grandmother or the new car purchase. These were women that I myself called upon to ask who was related to whom, or how do I get to so and so's house. These ladies may not have been the elected leadership, but they were at the epicenter of church life. I had good relationships with all four, and would even look to them as my Spiritual Elders. When it looked pretty certain that we were actually going to vote on this consolidation, in a matter of four months three of the four women left the church. Two of them went to the churches of their daughters and one went back to her Catholic roots. I was morally devastated. What was happening? Why were they abandoning ship? I went to visit each of them to say goodbye, ask if there was something the church could have done differently, were they hurt, or angry? They were each very kind, spoke highly of their churches and then quite simply just said they 'couldn't move ahead' with the congregation. We prayed together. I prayed for their continuing journey and they in turn prayed for me and the congregation. I felt abandoned. How could this new congregation go forward without these wonderful ladies? I began to question if this was the direction we were supposed to be traveling? They had not left in an angry storm taking a dozen people with them. They left quietly, gracefully and with dignity. I came to the conclusion that maybe they had to leave, to step aside so that new leadership would bubble up from within the ranks. I do not think these women even knew each other. This had not been planned together. Perhaps God was closing a door to allow the new congregation to move forward, or perhaps it was their collective 240 years of wisdom that guided them to move on because they did not have the energy to move forward?*

Learnings from the *Holy Fun* Path: The Tool of Dreaming

This church consolidation began with the consistory folks from six United Church of Christ congregations dreaming about the future. Two of the churches voted not to continue with this dream because they were afraid. They did not trust the people, the process, or the Conference Minister that had called them together to dream. They were incapable of dreaming,

they could not imagine the possibilities. This sad realization has stopped many a project in its course. Granted some people, some congregations are better at this dreaming and imagining than others, but everyone needs a dream. My professor in college (remember I was a gym teacher) often said, “If you don’t have a goal in life, you are going to spend your life running up and down the field and never scoring.” I can laugh now, but there is truth in this. We need dreams, and visions, and goals, and possibilities as people and as congregations.

Every five years or so we as a congregation continue this dreaming, an intentional *holy fun* time out that takes place in meetings of groups and committees, in Sunday School classes and consistory meetings, in Home Bound visits and coffee fellowship times. We have used all kinds of mediums (play dough, crayons, pipe cleaners, or chalk) to stimulate people’s imaginations. From these musings, we have compiled a list and used these dreams as a guide for ministry the next couple of years. From these dreams we have sent people on a Mission Trip to Honduras and a retreat to the Holy Lands. We have constructed an outside worship space, and created a Giving Tree.¹⁰ Dream Big! Fear Not!

Conclusion: *Holy Fun as a Path to Church Consolidation*

Recently I preached yet another first person sermon in which I became Mary, the mother of Jesus sharing the ponderings of her heart. She was now a grandmother herself and told the story rocking in a chair in the front of the altar. I ended her remembering’s after she returned to Nazareth from being with her cousin Elizabeth and telling Joseph about her

¹⁰ This is a tree made up of platforms that originally held poinsettias, which stands in our sanctuary year round. Every two months we as congregation collect items for different groups in need of the community, such as diapers for Women’s Center, or non-perishable food-items for the food bank, or dog/cat items for Animal shelter. This is a very visual reminder of our Mission Projects.

pregnancy. With tears in her eyes she rejoices yet again when Joseph accepts her and the babe. I concluded with, “Well, there’s more to the story, but I’m going to end it here. Maybe I’ll tell the rest next week.” And then, from the congregation, one of my Confirmation students exclaimed rather loudly, “Oh no, she’s going to leave us hanging!” (like he did not know that Jesus was going to be born!) Well, we all heard him, and we all laughed together. The story shared herein has been the ponderings of my heart. There is more to the story and I hope that others will continue to write it. I know, not just in my head, that what happened at Faith United Church of Christ in Hazleton, PA was in part due to the *Holy Fun* experiences we had along this journey. The beautiful rainbow of laughter shared, the fragrance of the bouquet of memories pondered, and the blanket of blessings bestowed on us has been rich and fulfilling. I cannot prove this empirically unless another couple of congregations take up the gauntlet and replicate the *Holy Fun* experiences with the same results. It is a good story in and of itself.

My second concluding remark reflects my own journey through this Doctoral of Ministry process. I started several years ago believing that what happened at Faith U.C.C. was at least in part due to the *Holy Fun* experiences; in essence I started with my conclusion. What I have learned along the way is that *Holy Fun* has a much broader significance and could be used by multiple congregations or faith communities to do a plethora of ministry. The United Church of Christ has imprinted on their U.C.C. symbol, “That all may be one.” I can envision helping to make this happen through *Holy Fun*. The U.C.C. judicatories, or conferences, could use *Holy Fun* to do some creative futuring together. Opening our national church to futuring with other denominations is a wonder-filled possibility. *Holy Fun* can be beneficial to the business world, the non-profit sector, the Middle East peace talks or the neighborhood “watch group”. It is

only limited in use by our imaginations. It is time to lighten up, to play, to begin to build relationships, trust and hope in our future together.

I have sprinkled this document with **Faith Voices** and rather than conclude this by myself, I have asked them to help. Their responses are in answer to the query: If they could sit and talk with another congregation that was looking to do church consolidation, what would you say to them? Here are their responses:

“It won’t be smooth sailing but it will be worth it! Get involved, voice your opinion, be open to new experiences. Don’t get stuck in ‘this is the way we have always done it’! Don’t be afraid. God is with us, we are not alone! Oh, and it’s not about you!”

“Even though it may seem impossible at times, and you may even feel like you are betraying your Grandparents by giving up your church building, have faith and trust in God that it will all work out. Go forth in Faith and with Faith!”

“You may never know if you don’t try. If failing is holding you back, just know that even that is good. It’s all good. If you are holding back because you are afraid to succeed, please know that you will not be alone. There are new friends waiting to know you!”

“Be good to yourself. Stick together. And for Pete’s sake don’t take yourself so seriously. No one is right all the time. Oh, and this is definitely not your Grandfather’s church any more – it is ours!”

“It has been a wonderful and wonder-filled journey that I have been blessed and privileged to be a part of. I pray that you will find your way together, with God. Remember we don’t have to agree about everything, just willing to find a new way together.”

AMEN.....AND.....AMEN

APPENDIX A

Faith Voices References

Page 5 “I remember sitting there that 1st evening together as an Inter-Church Board and wondering if anything good could come of this. How could we trust the larger churches not to take over? But if we don’t do something, I’m pretty sure my church will not make it through the winter.” **Faith Voices**

Page 6 “One of the first Joint Worship services, when we were still four separate congregations, instead of Passing the Peace, we had a “Howdy Judy” Sunday. It turns out there were 16 Judy’s in all four of our congregations, and they led us in introducing ourselves to each other. It was a hoot!” **Faith Voices**

Page 7 “I remember in one of our joint worship services, before we became one, Jane was illustrating how God called Abraham to uproot his whole family, the animals and the servants to a new land. She had all of us get up out of our pews and move to another one. Oh my, what grumbling, moaning, and laughter we heard that day!” **Faith Voices**

Page 8 “Do you remember that Editorial in the paper about Jane? We had already taken the vote and my congregation moved into the merger by a margin of one vote. Whew Well, there were some who left the church over it. The Editorial said, “Little Bo Peep has lost her sheep.” We all felt bad about them leaving, but she told us to pray they find a good church family, and we should, “leave them alone and they’ll come home.” Actually some of them did.” **Faith Voices**

Page 10 “The first time we had communion together as four church bodies I remember thinking it was going to be this serious, eyebrow clenching ceremony. And what a wonderful, celebration it turned out to be. We included our children with grapes and seeds, and we were allowed to come forward to receive communion at the rail. Everyone was smiling and happy. Oh what difference.” **Faith Voices**

Page 12 “Not everyone was thrilled with the talks of consolidation. Some didn’t like what they perceived to be a frivolous attempt at ‘getting to know you’ activities. They thought it was a waste of time. But the good part was that there were always options for everyone to participate or not. Rev. Hess emphasized the choices as the U.C.C. way.” **Faith Voices**

Page 13 “After we had become one church, we were invited to some churches in Easton to talk about our journey. Rev. Hess had written a script “The Good, the Bad and the Ugly” that explained in a fun way what we had done. **(See Appendix C)** But in the discussion afterword

one of the Consistory Presidents suggested the other three churches close their buildings and join with them because they had the largest building. There was a stunned silence. Then Rev. Hess, using the southern drawl we had just used in our skit said, 'Well, that there isn't a consolidation, that there is what we call a hostile take-over.' Everyone laughed." **Faith Voices**

Page 16 "I realized early on in the talks with the other congregations that joining with the other churches was not going to be easy, even though we really needed to take this step or we wouldn't have a church. But when we had anything together, a meeting, a picnic, or a service, there was always such a good feeling. We laughed and argued, but it was all good, like we were doing something important." **Faith Voices**

Page 18 "We were discussing the pro's and con's of sending a group of folks on a mission trip. Some thought we should just send the money, it would do the people we are helping more good. Others really wanted to experience the hands on helping. We turned to one of youth who had been on a trip and asked her what she thought. She said we should do both. Sending money changes their lives. Going and helping changes our lives. Such wonderful wisdom in our young people. **Faith Voices**

Page 22 "Ever since we've been one we have had Women's Retreats. At first it was another way to get to know some people. But it has become a strong and spiritually mature group. We have traveled to Washington and Bucks County, to Lancaster and Stroudsburg. It's been a real pleasure to come together." **Faith Voices**

Page 24 "Do you remember "Everyone's Birthday Party?" We decorated each of the tables for a month of the year and then sat at our Birth month table. Then we had to sing for our supper coming up with a song about our month. We had contest and lots of fun was had." **Faith Voices**

Page 26 "I really don't like games. When Rev. Hess first started with those 'getting to know you' times, I just avoided the situation. It took a little doing on my wife's part, but after a while I would stay in the background and observe. When I realized it wasn't games so much as talking I was able to relax and enjoy it. Games and play are not the same." **Faith Voices**

Page 28 "I always appreciated the different ideas everyone seemed to be coming out with. Do you remember when we were moving into our new facility and decided to have a "clean out your closets" sale of all the stuff we had collected in our former church buildings. We had it at

Emmanuels and even had an auctioneer. It was our first annual Yard Sale. Now we have them in our parking lot for anyone to sell their own stuff. We had 35 folks last month. It's been helpful and fun." **Faith Voices**

Page 30 "We had four joint worship services a year and our Sunday Schools would join together for the day too. They were asked to come up with a way to express forgiveness to us. We had spoken our confession together in worship and then with all the seriousness of the 'important task' they were performing, they came to each of us, took one of our hands and swiped a sponge over our palms. She looked me in the eyes and said simply, 'God loves you. And you are forgiven.' And then she smiled at me." **Faith Voices**

Page 32 "I loved Senior Sundays. Once a month we would gather at one of the four church halls and play cards, bingo, make crafts or just sit, crochet and chat. The younger folks would make us a simple supper (they were delicious) and we would share a meal together around those tables. H-mmm, maybe we should do this again!?" **Faith Voices**

Page 33 "When we were still just thinking about coming together, Pastor Hess invited our previous minister Richard Abernethy, to preach just at our church for Reformation Sunday. At the beginning of worship she had The Rev to stand next to her (he's 6' 2" and she is 5'2") and then proceeded to do a little introduction. 'See Dick. See Jane. Preach Dick. Preach Jane. See Dick and Jane Preach.' Well, we laughed and laughed! It was good." **Faith Voices**

Page 37 "As the Transitional Pastor of four congregations, I was not looking forward to the first Christmas Eve together – 4 services, 4 locations, everyone wanting their own time, etc. I found a quiet moment at the end of a Sunday evening 'Blue Christmas' service in Advent. Sitting in a pew with the candles still lit and the music playing softly, I started in on my Litany of Woes in a prayer with God. 'How can I do this? There has to be someone else more qualified here God. I'll screw this up for sure.' It came to me rather clearly – "It's not about you Jane." HmMMM God can do Holy Fun too." **Faith Voices**

Page 39 "I wish I could tell you how many times we have laughed together in church. I remember a Christmas when we were together already. Rev. Hess had arranged to have the Christmas Story read by one of our older members, Bob I think. After he had started she had asked some of the older ladies to start hollering across the sanctuary about a Christmas sale they were going to go to after service. And then as they continued to yammer, three or four young people started arguing about where they were supposed to go Christmas caroling. They continued and two parents started yelling at their kids about 'Santa Claus' coming and they were supposed to be good. It was quite a scene. We were all laughing. Then everyone stopped. Everything got quiet and Rev. Hess asked us if we could hear the Christmas Story."

Faith Voices

Page 40 “It may sound like a little thing, but I really appreciate that Rev. Hess always invites us in worship to stand, ‘if you are able’. My Dad was elderly when we were first coming together, and her invitation allowed him to sit, but still be very much a part of things.” **Faith Voices**

Page 40 “The Roman Catholic churches have been closing left and right lately. But I noticed the people don’t have a choice about whether their church closes. The Bishop comes in and designates which buildings will close. It doesn’t seem right to me. I mean we got to decide ourselves about this merger. It’s like the ultimate Father Knows Best in their church.”

Faith Voices

Page 43 “Remember the Widows Web? My Mother was part of this group. It was formed before we came together and I think it was for those interested in keeping our mission to others a priority. ‘It’s not just about us’ they would tell us. It happened that they were all Widows and named themselves the Widows Web. I looked forward to hearing their appeals at church. They were from all four of our churches and it did our hearts good to see their smiles and laughter!” **Faith Voices**

Page 44 “I remember, I think it was our first Lent together when we were just thinking about doing something together, we visited each other’s churches for our mid-week lent services. Each congregation was asked, ‘What has your church been known for?’ We had such fun talking about our church suppers, making Pot Pie and our Summer Festival where we blocked off the streets. It felt good to ‘show off’ a little for our new friends.” **Faith Voices**

Page 47 “Do you remember when we started Bingo for the community on Friday Nights? We had this \$15,000 month mortgage to pay on top of our regular bills. Rev. Hess suggested it was a fun way to give to the church, and Hey, you might win too! It really is something.”

Faith Voices

Page 48 “We voted to come together in Dec. 1996, the Charter closed March 1997. So our 1st Christmas together was Dec. 1997. We were at Grace or rather Faith UCC on Laurel Street (ha ha remember that name thing?). Anyway the Worship Committee was having a doozy of a time trying to decide which crèche to use, we had 4! So after much argument, we decided to have 1 Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus, we put out all the shepherds, all the wise men and all the animals! It was quite a sight, and we laughed!”

Faith Voices

Page 50 “I was in the 1st Confirmation Class. When we were planning our actual Service for Confirmation on Pentecost that year we needed to decide which building we were going to be confirmed in. We hadn’t yet voted to be Faith. But we decided as a class to be confirmed in Christ Memorial because that was the only church that we didn’t have any class members from. We were from the other three churches. It was pretty cool because we were showing the older folks how this merger could work!” **Faith Voices**

Page 53 “We were designing our new facility and the committee couldn’t decide if we wanted to hook up our sewage with the city or get our own septic system. There was a three hour debate, discussion and argument about this. Finally, I remember Jane pronounced, ‘Well most folks in Hazleton think we’re full of ‘you know what’ building this new church, and I don’t think a septic system will be able to hold it all, so we should go with the city.’ Well everyone roared with laughter. But we ended debate and are hooked to the city system.”

Faith Voices

Page 54 “We were about five years into Faith, when we were down to our last \$20,000 in the bank. It was a scary time. We ended up cutting Jane’s salary package by \$13,000, Music Director by \$5,000, and laid off paid secretary and paid sexton. It looked really bleak. To pick up the slack, our worship committee designed 12 Clean Teams of 8 people each to clean the church every other week and 5 volunteer Church secretaries! Wow, what church!”

Faith Voices

Page 55 “I remember when we were just joining together and we did a joint Pictorial Directory. All of our pictures were in it. Pictures of our four church buildings were on the cover. It was a great way to get to know people’s faces and names. I thought it was a pretty neat way to ‘see’ what our church would look like if we came together. Of course not everyone participated, but that’s ok. That was their choice.” **Faith Voices**

Page 57 “I remember when the Inter-Church Board suggested we have a few Joint Committees to help plan things. We had a Worship Com., a Joint Sunday School Com., a Joint Property Committee that evaluated all of our properties, and a Joint Communications Com. I was on this last one and we wrote a monthly fact sheet with advertisements of all our Joint ventures. But the really great part was that all the committees and the Inter-Church Board met at the same time, at the same place. Then we would have a reporting out at the end of the sessions so we could know what everyone else was doing! We had goodies to eat and it was fun!”

Faith Voices

Page 58 “When we were designing our new facility we had a committee for everything, of course. The worship committee was thinking about a Cry Room for the babies, because one of the young mothers on the committee reluctantly suggested it. One of our octogenarians said, ‘No, we will have a Quiet Room and put all of the old people in the room that complain about

the babies!’ Oh did we laugh. And, we have a Quiet Room!” **Faith Voices**

Page 59 “It was really hard to vote to sell our other churches. But when our new church was being built, we went to the new sanctuary one Sunday after worship with our Black Markers and we wrote on the cement slab that was the sanctuary floor our favorite Bible verses. I thought it was fun when we did it, but now I find comfort in the fact that we are ‘Standing on the Promises.’” **Faith Voices**

Page 62 “Rev. Hess took our Blind Faith Youth Group to Heifer Farms in Connecticut, Dorney Park, and camping at Knoebels. But my favorite trips were the Retreats we had at the Jersey Shore. There was always a theme but the only one I remember is, ‘God Is Loser Friendly’. Communion on the Beach at sunrise was the best! I don’t think I ever said thank you to her, so Thanks Rev. Hess!” **Faith Voices**

Page 64 “The Inter-Church Board was busy recruiting people to help out with some joint committees. Peg Saunderschaeffer came up to me and asked if I would represent our church on the Christian Education Committee. I was so surprised. I said yes, and it changed my life. I will never forget it.” **Faith Voices**

Page 67 “That first year we had those joint Lent services, it was before we voted. The Inter-Church Board suggested we have one Maundy Thursday Service. I remember how Ron and Louis and Rev. Hess acted out the trial of Jesus. They held up cards for our response. We were the crowds. I was never so moved as we cried out Crucify Him. It was something.”

Faith Voices

Page 70 “I like the Amen Choir. I’m not sure when we started that, but I love seeing, and hearing our sweet little children singing at the top of their lungs as if our souls depend on it. Hey, maybe they do!?!” **Faith Voices**

Page 73 “When we were looking for possible church sites to build, the three real estate agents in our congregation got their respective companies to share the profits and found us four possible sites,. Before we voted on which site, we took a caravan of cars and as Rev. Hess called it, ‘Wandered in the Wilderness’ looking for our promised land.” **Faith Voices**

Page 75 “When we were first getting it together it was important that we include our children in Worship so they knew it was their church too. We had these worship bags that contained a sleeve of bells they could ring when we sang hymns, a slip of paper they could draw or write on and then place it in the offering plate and surprise each week. These were great for the kids and the parents.” **Faith Voices**

Page 76 “Do you remember how we named our new congregation? We had a committee, of course, that gathered all of the suggestions for names. Then they put ALL of the names on a ballot, I think there were seventy three suggestions. They took the top five vote getters and we had one more vote. Whew! The name was announced at a Joint Worship in February. Oh what fun!” **Faith Voices**

Page 79 “I looked forward to our Joint Worship Services when we were still four congregations. It was during Easter season and Rev. Hess brought a baby pig out for Special Moment. The kids (and the congregation) loved it. New life. New ideas, New surprises. The kids named the pig Bob. My grown-up kids still talk about it.” **Faith Voices**

Page 81 “We decided to have a joint Good Friday Service in addition to the four services we had yearly. Rev. Hess preached a first person sermon I thought very moving. She became Mary, the Mother of Jesus for us. Mary told us of her anguish and heartache of watching her Son die. She said that ‘she thought it was ironic in a sad way that a carpenter would die with a hammer and nail,’ I’ll never forget it.” **Faith Voices**

Page 83 “I don’t think everyone really understands the hard work to make four congregations one. Every decision seemed to be difficult. When we decided to worship together four times a year, what time do we do worship? At first I remember, we just went with the time of the host congregation. But then we picked 10:00 as it was NOT a time of any of the four.” **Faith Voices**

Page 87 “I remember Vacation Bible School was one of the first joint ventures of our four churches. We planned it together and rather than purchase the craft boxes and ready-made curriculum, we did our own. I was excited and pleased with the “Waters of the Bible” lessons we taught the kids that summer. It was really the first time we had tried anything like that and it was pretty cool.” **Faith Voices**

Page 92 “My former congregation St. Paul’s had always had a yearly picnic at Knoebels. Well, when started talking, we invited the other three congregations to come with us. We didn’t have tons of people come, but those that did allowed us to start to imagine that this might just be possible.” **Faith Voices**

Page 97 “It won’t be smooth sailing but it will be worth it! Get involved, voice your opinion, be open to new experiences. Don’t get stuck in ‘this is the way we have always done it’! Don’t be afraid. God is with us, we are not alone! Oh, and it’s not about you!” **Faith Voices**

Page 97 “Even though it may seem impossible at times, and you may even feel like you are betraying your Grandparents by giving up your church building, have faith and trust in God that it will all work out. Go forth in Faith and with Faith!” **Faith Voices**

Page 97 “You may never know if you don’t try. If failing is holding you back, just know that even that is good. It’s all good. If you are holding back because you are afraid to succeed, please know that you will not be alone. There are new friends waiting to know you!”

Faith Voices

Page 97 “Be good to yourself. Stick together. And for Pete’s sake don’t take yourself so seriously. No one is right all the time. Oh, and this is definitely not your Grandfather’s church any more – it is ours!” **Faith Voices**

Page 97 “It has been a wonderful and wonder-filled journey that I have been blessed and privileged to be a part of. I pray that you will find your way together, with God. Remember we don’t have to agree about everything, just willing to find a new way together.” **Faith Voices**

Appendix B

Evans, Rev. Melbalenia D., Editor. *United Church Board for Homeland Ministries' Growing Plans*. Kutztown, Pennsylvania: Kutztown Publishing Company, Inc.; Spring 2000.
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Make a Joyful Noise

by the Rev. M. Jane Hess



"**M**ake a joyful noise to Yahweh, all the earth. Serve Yahweh with gladness; come into Yahweh's presence with singing!" (Psalm 100) We here at Faith United Church of Christ in Hazleton, Pa., are busy making an abundance of joyful noise, serving God with gladness and singing praises! We are a recently (March, 1997) consolidated congregation incorporating four former United Churches of Christ: Grace Reformed UCC & Emmanuel's Reformed UCC, both from Hazleton, and St. Paul's Reformed UCC & Christ Memorial Reformed UCC from West Hazleton.

What more joyful noise could there be for God's ears than the sound of 90+ children and youths laughing and learning in Sunday School, three Youth Groups, three youth choirs and youth retreats. (Please note that our four previous congregations had a combined total of 35 children.) We gladly are serving God with a committee structure involving over 100 people, three worship services on Sunday morning involving 260 people, 871 people on the rolls, and numerous service/social organizations with a healthy combination of groups from former congregations who have

found a "safe place" in Faith United and newly formed groups (Sharing Groups, Bible Study, Women of Faith, Men of Faith). (Our former congregations worshipped a combined 135/Sunday, the Consistory did all the work, and the sizes of our congregations were small.) We have bought 10 acres of undeveloped land (with the help of a loan from United Church Board for Homeland Ministries) and raised over \$350,000 for our new church building. We have tentatively scheduled our groundbreaking service for April 1, 2000. It seems rather appropriate for April Fools' Day because we are indeed, "fools for Christ" (1 Cor. 4:10). Yes, we have a good deal about which to be thankful, and truly grateful! God has been a vital part of our vision, implementation process and impact on the life of Faith United from the beginning!

The broad vision began back in the late 50s when our Conference, the Penn Northeast, made the decision to structure ourselves without associations and instead incorporated Area Mission Councils (AMC). (From an Oral History of Our Conference, I interviewed the Rev. Dr. Bill Longsdorf, our first Conference Minister, who explained



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April 2000



that we wanted to cut down on the administration and concentrate on the mission of our church.) With this in mind, the question, which formed our vision was, "What can we do together with other UCC churches?" Our Anthracite AMC included 12 local UCC churches and began having a joint Kirchentaug Service (celebrating our German Reformed Heritage), pulpit exchanges, and a May Fellowship Dinner. It was in 1958 that Longsdorf called a joint meeting and, over dinner, discussed the possibilities. Grace members and Pastor Gebhardt walked out of the meeting. Not a very fruitful meeting, but in my humble opinion, it was a very necessary part of what has happened today. It was during the early 60s that two of Faith United's congregations (Emmanuel's and Grace) talked about the possibility of doing more together. Nothing ever came of this except that it added seeds of faith which began to grow. In the late 60s another two of our former congregations (St. Paul's and Christ Memorial) talked about doing something together. This talk blew up in the flurry of egos and power struggles (both clergy and laity). Again, I really believe this had to have happened in order for us to be where we are today. In the 70s, the Rev. Dr. Allen Richardson, Associate Conference Minister, visited our congregations (plus three others in the area) in an attempt to narrow the vision from "What can we do together?" to "How can we work together?" Nothing formally came from this (at least at the time) but St. Paul's and Grace talked again with seemingly no results. In the late 80s, at the impetus of a new Conference Minister, the Rev. Dr. Donald Overlock, the Rev. Eleanor Allen, the Associate Conference Minister, called a meeting of six UCC churches' consistories and their spouses (including our four former congregations) and narrowed the vision to be... "What if...". A goodly amount of dreaming took place at this meeting. From this genesis the formation of C.O.H.A.C., Covenant of Hazleton Area Churches was founded. This was formulated with two representatives from each of the six congregations meeting monthly to continue dreaming and to implement combined programming. The programs included: joint Lenten services, confirmation classes, youth activities, and better communications (i.e. the sharing of bazaar dates, etc).

At this point in time there was a "kairos",

"With this in mind, the question, which formed our vision was, 'What can we do together with other UCC churches?'"

appointed time, in which three of our congregations were with interim pastors and three had stated supply pastors. The C.O.H.A.C. called a joint congregational meeting in the spring of 1994, when they presented the vision of one, United Congregation. Two churches dropped out at this point, but the remaining four appointed three people each to what was called an Inter-Church Board. Their purpose was to move us toward a United Congregation. They had no authority other than to recommend to their consistories/councils and congregations suggested actions. Keys to their success include: 1.) key lay folk who

were both positive, open, and respected by their congregations, 2.) nothing was written in stone; it was a very fluid process, 3.) equal footing

around the table (i.e. no matter the size of your congregation, everyone was equal), 4.) controlling the rumor mills by keeping the talks confidential until it was shared to all congregations at the same time, 5.) knowing when to ask for help from the outside, 6.) this board was LAY-LED, LAY-POWERED and LAY-SPONSORED! (The interims, supply pastors and later myself as Transitional Pastor, were a part of this Board, but the impetus was now the laity!) The motivation behind all of this activity up until now was clearly the declining finances, numbers of people, and the survival mentality that infused each of our four congregations. The first meeting of the Inter-Church Board in August 1994 was held with Associate Conference Minister, the Rev. Dr. Kim Johannesson. It was decided to ask the Rev. Dr. Horace Sills, a consultant for the UCBHM, to help us with a feasibility study. This included much research into our histories and where we were at the time. Questions such as, "How much money have we spent on each of our church buildings in the past 10 years (both maintenance and repair), and what does each of our congregations look like according to numbers of people at which ages," helped to paint a rather stark and bleak picture (one about which we were painfully aware but had not sketched out in detail before).

Sills led us through this process and the Inter-Church Board called another joint congregational meeting at which all four congregations voted to move ahead in this process. By this point we, the Inter-Church Board, had asked for volunteers from each congregation to serve on Inter-Church Com-

mittees: 1.) Communication (which published a joint newsletter, newspaper publicity), 2.) Worship (planned and implemented four joint worship services per year, rotating locations and including joint choir anthems, plus joint mid-week Lenten services), 3.) Christian Education (confirmation classes, joint Sunday School activities, V.B.S.), 4.) Fellowship (social time after joint services, joint picnic, Sunday Senior Socials) and 5.) Evaluation Committee (looked at current properties and evaluated their use/disuse in new United Church). These committees met on the same night at the same location. This proved to be a very enthusiastic motivational force. There were over 60 people meeting together in the same room, around different tables; so even if

you didn't have very many folk at your committee meeting, there were still good numbers over all. At the end of the evening, everyone stood up and shared right there what it was his/her committee did.

The congregations decided together in the spring 1995 to hire a Team of Transitional Pastors to minister unto the four congregations. In September of 1995, after yet another joint congregations meeting, the Inter-Church Board hired me as Senior Transitional Pastor. Having been the interim at one of the former congregations I recognized that everyone seemed to be aware of the need to come together, but felt that if these four congregations came together just out of need it would be a co-dependent union and possibly quite short-lived. So, one of my overriding principles was to help folk really want to do this. Getting to know each other, small group stuff (mixing up the congregational mix), and just plain having fun was a high priority! With four worship services a Sunday, four bulletins, four Consistories/Councils, Inter-Church Board, plus 700 folks to do ministry with it was an exciting time! In January 1996, the Rev. George Bahner was hired as the Associate Transitional Pastor. (This addition definitely made Sunday mornings a little more do-able!)

The folks in the pews were at every end of the spectrum...We're moving too fast...We're moving too slow...We are going to use OUR building, right?...I hope we can keep the doors open until this happens, we may not make it through the winter...Do we really have to do this? As the Team of Transitional Pastors, we were kept busy drying the tears of fear and pain, stopping the

rumor mill from destroying hopes, sharing communion monthly with the 112 homebound, preaching the Good Word and bringing laughter and love which nourishes our souls. Johannesohn helped us with some integral programs around celebrating and remembering our separate congregational histories.

As we moved toward the vote, the Inter-Church Board made a wise decision to keep the consolidation of the congregation separate from the what shall we do about buildings issue. They drew up a Plan of Consolidation, with Sills' help, so that when people voted "yes" they would know exactly

what was going to happen. It stated that the Charter would be open for three months for anyone to sign, a committee for the

"The folks in the pews were at every end of the spectrum...We're moving too fast...We're moving too slow."

name would be formed and the name chosen during this three-month period, a committee for the Constitution and Bylaws which would be voted on at the end of the three months, and a nominating committee which would nominate new consistory folk to be elected at the congregational meeting at the end of the three months. Prior to the vote, there were two open meetings at which all questions were addressed. Again, remember we had not decided at this point what to do about using our existing buildings or a new construction. The vote itself took place at the same location, by ballot, in individual congregations. Dec. 4, 1996 the votes were tallied. Three of the congregations voted "yes" by a large margin, and one congregation voted "yes" by one vote. Whew. Heavy sigh. This was not exactly what we would hoped would happen and knowing that not everyone was overwhelmingly in favor was reality. But the majority rules and we moved ahead with our Plan of Consolidation. (By the way, a merger is when one entity remains and the others merge into it. A consolidation is when all come together equally.) There were about two dozen people who left to find other church families. I was called the Evil Hess Woman and even "little bo peep" in an editorial to the local newspaper, titles I prefer not to use after my name. When we opened the Charter there were 771 people in our four congregations and when we closed the Charter there were 773 people who signed.

March 2, 1997, was the congregational meeting scheduled at the end of the three-month voted on by the Plan of Consolidation. The Charter was closed. The Consistory elected. The Constitution





and Bylaws instated! "Praise God from whom all blessings flow!" This was Palm Sunday. Bahner resigned, because of health reasons on Holy Tuesday. From Easter forward we were one congregation worshipping together in one location, which we rotated every three months.

The new Consistory tackled the staffing situation (we had four of everything: secretaries, sextons, choir directors, organists) and formed a Site Committee, which researched 38 different locations for our new congregation. In June 1997, we voted to sell our current buildings and parson-

ages, and purchase 10 acres of undeveloped land.

Please keep in mind that we did much to educate our congregation about the current building costs and even did a "Moses Tour" of wandering through the wilderness of our possible site locations looking for the Promised Land. Both votes, done at separate congregational meetings, were preceded by open meetings to answer questions and several newsletter articles asking and answering questions. This vote was probably the more volatile, eliciting emotions of betrayal to our previous generation, and making very real all the changes we had gone through.

Because of the resignation of Bahner, Pastoral Care became a challenge and the formation of a Pastoral Care Team (16 trained laity) was instituted for the sharing of communion with the homebound (I still serve three times a year). We were privileged to have a Lay-Licensed Pastor, John Culp, in our congregation. I also encouraged two new people to go for Lay Pastor Training, Louis Aita and Ron Schell. They have since completed their training and are ministering with us, assisting with Nursing Home Worship Services, hospital visits, covering the pulpit in my absence and being a pastoral presence within the flock. This is a blessing for all of us here and probably would not have happened if we had an Associate Pastor (maybe I assume too much?). This past December our congregation has hired a Christian Education Director, Lynne Wallace. She is a welcome addition to our church family and has taken over the ministry with our children and youths!

I'd like to share two stories. One of our older members, who was an advocate for Faith United and looking forward to our new construction, died. His widow asked if she could use the money from his memorial to purchase just a few

bricks at the bottom of the building so that she would know her husband was a part of the foundation of Faith. Wow. I assured her that he was definitely part of our foundation with or without the bricks and mortar.

This past Christmas one of our little shepherds was really nervous about her part in our play. Her mother asked her why she was so nervous when just the week before she had participated in a school production in which she had a spoken part and here at church she didn't have any lines. The shepherd said, "But Mom, at school nobody

knows me, here at church everyone knows me!"

I hope these two stories help convey on a more personal note where we are today. I have been

"I have been truly privileged to share in this journey of Faith with these faithfilled and 'faith-full' folk."

truly privileged to share in this journey of Faith with these faithfilled and "faith-full" folk. I have two observations. I think it was important that it was not just two congregations coming together. When it is just two, it's easier to see the "us" vs. "them". When it is more than two, the "them" outnumber the "us". Right before the vote, one of our congregations decided to put an \$18,000 parking lot on the back of their building (12 spaces). I thought this would definitely blow the vote out of the water. It didn't. But I think because it was more than one congregation involved, it allowed this behavior. If it had been just two congregations it would have been a very different dynamic. (Not unlike being engaged and having your fiancé go out and buy a car without consulting you.) So if you and your congregation are inclined to start looking around, dream big!

I would like to urge any congregation who is looking at the handwriting on the wall (the declining finances, the numbers of people declining, the age of the congregation growing older) and beginning to ask the hard questions, don't be afraid to dream a little with other congregations.

What can we do together? There is no such thing as too small a step. Even if nothing comes from it, and it blows up in everyone's face, you could be the generation to plant the seeds (remember it took us 39 years and biblically 40 years). After having made the contact, remember your motivation to come together may be a need but you need to move beyond this to really want to come together! And please, have fun and make as much joyful noise as you can! We are! ☺

Appendix C

The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

Hess: (western slang) Hi! I'm Jane Hess and this here is Faith United Church of Christ

(cue music – folks enter with western hats and banana guns)

Hess: Here they are.

Group A: We're the Good

Group B: We're the Bad.

Group C: And we're the Ugly.

Hess: We're here to tell you about our faith journey. It wasn't easy. In fact it was

Group A: Good

Hess: And

Group B: Bad

Hess: And even downright

Group C: Ugly

Hess" We

D like to tell 'you all' how this here church came to be. It didn't happen overnight.

A-1: About 25 years ago two of our former congregations talked about a merger. The seeds of ideas were planted.

B-01: Yea, but we voted it down...after all, you can't move too fast!

A-2: Then about 15 years ago two other congregations started talking about a jointure. Again more seeds.

C-1: Yea, but that blew up even before the vote. He He He.

Hess: So then 4 congregations, Christ Memorial & St. Paul's in West Hazleton and Emmanuels and Grace in Hazleton, started doing some things together.

A-2: I remember the once a year Joint Worship Service for Kirchentaug celebrating our German Heritage. We even included McAdoo and Shepton in with us and had a wonderful time! It was Good.

Group A: (Shakes heads yes)

B-2: Well, it was OK, but the 2 big churches seemed to be in charge and the little ones didn't have a lot to say.

Group B: Yes!

C-2: Yea, well we weren't going to worship in any other church. If the service wasn't at our church we weren't going! So there!

Group C: (Everyone folds arms together)

Hess: The plot thickens. The 4 churches formed a Cooperative ministry where they planned a few programs together. And then officially each Consistory appointed 3 shakers and movers to what they called an Int3r-Church Board.

A-1: Now that was a good thing.

Group A: (agrees)

A-1; These people were well respected by their congregations and on the one hand, weren't afraid to ask for help when they needed it and on the other hand were very creative, careful, and convincing on their own.

A-2: We started worshipping together 4 times a year, and had joint confirmation class, youth groups and a trained joint Lay Visitation Team. The Inter-Church Board formed 6 committees with people from all 4 congregations. All the committees, 60 people , met on the 1st Tuesday and they shared their progress right then and there! It was great!

B-2: I remember that feasibility study the Inter-Church Board did. It really looked like the end of the road for all 4 congregations. Membership was down, giving was down, Sunday Schools were at an all time low for most of us. It was awful bad looking at ourselves so honestly.

C-1: It'll never work. And besides we don't need anyone else. We've been keeping these doors open all these years and our parents before us. Heck my Grandfather helped dig the cellar and if you think I'm giving up this church you're a blanket blank fool!

Everyone: OOOOOH!

Hess: Ah yes, the buildings, more than just your average structure of wood or brick.

A-2: I thought the Inter-Church Board did an excellent job about that too. Even though the buildings were on everyone's mind, they called for a vote in December 1996 to consolidate the congregations and left the building questions alone until after this consolidation.

A-1: And they had several joint congregational meetings where all 4 congregations would meet at one time and receive the same information and all the questions were answered.

B-2 Well, even though it was a yes vote in the end for all 4 congregations, there were some negative votes. Actually, one of the congregations made it yes by only 1 vote. That was bad. (sadly)

C-1: It was that evil Hess Woman!

Group C; Hissss

C-1: If she wouldn't have brought those new members in we would be 1 church short -- then where would you be. He He He

Hess: Well, we moved ahead. Just as in a Presidential Election, it doesn't matter by how many votes the President is elected with you put it behind you and live with it. So, The Charter was open for 3 months.

A-1: What an exciting time. I mean, how often do you get to be a charter member of a new congregation.

A-2: And we voted on our name after gathering 38 suggestions. I think it was probably good that we didn't pick the name Charity UCC because the conference already has a Faith Church, a Hope Church but the greatest of these.... Well, you know!

B-1 Well, yes, but it didn't seem as though anything had changed. We were still worshipping in our own church buildings and didn't even know who was going to be on Consistory, or be our Church Secretary, or Organist/Choir Director, or Sexton...After all we had four of each.

C-2: Yes, well Little Bo Peep has lost her sheep and doesn't know where to find them!! I talked to my lawyer and he said I could have anything I donated to the church so we're taking our marbles and going home. Oh and the dishes too!

Hess: H-mm The numbers didn't prove the uglies out. Before the Charter there were 771 members in all 4 congregations. After some folks left and there were some more that came on Board, we closed the Charter march 3, 1997 with 772 members!

ALL: Yea Yea Boo Hiss!

A-1: It really was good. After the vote we worshipped every Sunday together in the same building. On a regular Sunday we would have about 2560 people; a lot of times we had to put up chairs! It was like Easter every Sunday.

A-2: Most of our churches hadn't been full like that in years. AND our choir now had 30+ members.

A-1: And our Sunday School before the vote had about 35 and after we had 80 kids. It was really good.

B-1 Yes, but we were a large church and we didn't know everybody. I used to be able to call everyone by name and they knew me. After the vote I'd sit next to strangers.

C2: For awhile there, every 3 months we were rotating which building we worshipped in on Sunday. I couldn't find a stupid parking space within 4 blocks of the church. If I did find a parking space I'd get to church and couldn't find a seat.

C-2: Yea and if we found a seat it wasn't OUR pew. Things had gone from bad to worse! And where did all those kids come from?!

Hess: Actually those were good problems to have.

Group C: Hurumpf!

Hess: The congregation voted in June '97 to sell the four church properties and to purchase new ground which was probably a vote that touched the heart more than the actual consolidation.

A-2: The church is the people, but if we were to pick one of our remaining structures as THE church it would always be Grace or St. Paul's or Christ Memorial or Emmanuels. And we really needed neutral ground to start our church. It was Great!

B-1: It may have been needed but it was so-o hard to leave, close the doors and see a for sale sign on the church. I never thought I'd see the day. It felt bad, real bad.

B-2: It felt almost like we were deserting our heritage and all the faithful workers down through the years. It was real hard.

C-1: I just couldn't understand why we were going and spending money we didn't have when we already had a perfectly good church. After all MY church was the biggest.

C-2: yea, well I think we should have used MY church 'cause we had the best parking!

Hess: As you see the Ugliers still have a problem with the pronouns. It's not yours and mine it's ours now.

A-1: WE bought the land, got a lone from the local bank and broke ground in June 2000.

A-2: We were off and running with contractors, architects and designs! What an exciting time.

B-1: Exciting?!? Exciting?!?! You call weekly arguments with the builders exciting??

B-2: And boy howdy did we have to keep after them to stay on track. You'd think in this day and age you could trust the contractors, especially to build a CHURCH!

C-2: It ain't never gonna work. Where do 'they' think they're going to get the people to fill all those there pews?

C-1: And how do they expect to pay for all of this! I'm not given one cent till I see it for myself.

Hess: As you can see, we did get the church built. It hasn't been easy but it has definatly been worth it! We started worshipping here on Feb. 18, 2001. And yea, we had to set up chairs for that first service!

A-2: We have three worship services a weekend and average about 300+ and have taken in 578 new members this year!

A-1: Our Sunday School is still growing we have about 95+ now.

B-1: I can't believe all the work involved in taking care of a church this size!

B-2" It seems as though there is always something to be fixed and it's a brand new building.

C-1:I know we have to pay the bills but it seems like they're always asking for money!

C-2: Yes, if I wanted two offerings I'd have gone to St. Stephens!

Hess: Well, we've come a long way blazing this here trail, but it's not done yet! Be the way, how man church people does it take to change a light bulb??

A-1: Well, one good janitor could do it!

B-2: (Whiny) Oh great, if we change the light bulb we'll go over budget! Can't we just sit in the dark.

C-1: What do you mean change the light bulb! My grandmother donated that light bulb!

Hess: Ah yes, we are Faith United Church of Christ of Hazleton.

Group A: The Good.

Group B: The Bad

Group C: and the Ugly.

Appendix D

“Are we having fun yet?”

Responses to (very) informal oral questioning –
What do you do to have fun?

Please note: my comments and further questions are in parenthesis.

Answers from Lancaster Theological Seminary

“Spending the day with my wife, just driving around looking at stuff, shopping sort of and finding bargains.”

“Playing with my cat and dog outside”

“I have fun going to the movies.” (I asked, ‘alone?’) “With friends. I enjoy going alone, but I have fun when I go with others.”

“Research and writing.” (I asked if this was enjoyable or if after a day of this you had fun?) “Both. I argue and interact with the authors and thinkers. It brings me closer to them. It’s Holy Fun.”

“Reading, in my hammock, with my favorite beverage of the day and gentle breeze.” (I asked if this was enjoyable or fun?) She changed it to “I have fun playing racquetball with my friends.”

“Cooking for a bunch of people and then helping them enjoy it.”

“I have fun joking with some of the professors.”

“I have fun competing with my boys on the basketball court or with you in class.”

“I have fun cutting the grass. (really?) Well, I did this for a part time job when I was much younger. But now, I think it’s because it’s something you can see completed, not like prayers or sermons or papers to write, there’s always one more to do.”

Answers from my family

“I have fun riding my crotch rocket with my friends, or taking Elyse out for a surprise lunch.”

"I have fun going on Fire calls, even if it's not easy. It's still fun, I get a big satisfaction from it."

"I have fun on face book." (when I asked if that was really fun, or just enjoyable) she said "I have fun in marching band competitions and riding my four wheeler with the dogs."

"I have fun playing cards with my family. It's something we all can do and include Ashley (who has Cerebral Palsy)."

"I enjoy picking on my sister." (When I asked if that was really fun, or just enjoyable) he said, "No it really is fun. And I enjoy teasing her."

"I enjoy a round of golf." (Alone?) "Yes, I have fun competing against myself. That doesn't preclude playing with or against others."

"I have fun with family, laughing with everyone, playing games or just eating. And vacations with family is the most fun."

"I have fun playing disc golf (alone?) Yes and with others, but I generally have fun trying to beat my previous score on that particular course."

Answers from my Church

"I have fun shopping." (alone?) "Well, yes, but when I can do it with a friend it's even more fun."

"I have fun watching my kid play ball, whichever one is in season – baseball, football, basketball."

"I have fun cleaning out the garage." (really?) "Yea it's like Christmas. I always find something I wasn't expecting Or something I was looking for." (what if you didn't have a wife to share your discoveries with, would it still be fun?) "Hmmm I don't know. It might seem more like work, but then again, she has fun cutting the grass."

(Your husband said you have fun cutting the grass?) "Oh yea. I enjoy doing it. Seeing it done. Sometimes it's just a 'thing to get done', but most of the time I can enjoy it on an aesthetic level." (but when you are done can you say you've had fun) "Yes. I can. Most of the time." (so when isn't it fun?) "When I don't have the time, or rather, take the time to simply enjoy it. Then it becomes a chore."

"I like riding my bike."

"I have fun at school."

"I have fun coming to church on Sunday morning." (you don't have to say that) "No, really. I like being with everyone else. I have fun just being with the kids, they're so full of life."

"I have fun when all my work is done and I can relax." (Is relaxing fun?) "Hmm I don't know. I guess it's more a relief?" (so you have fun at the end of the day and everything is done?) "No, I have fun getting to the relief."

"I have fun working in my wood shop. Just puttering around. I enjoy gifting my little projects. (Is enjoying something and having fun the same thing?) Well, both are very satisfying, but I'm not sure. I can enjoy cleaning and organizing my shop, but I'm not sure I had fun doing it. But working on a project that I know will bring joy to my granddaughter is fun. I made her a doll house for Christmas this year. I can't wait to give it to her."

"I have fun watching the Grandkids play. I can't physically participate, but I'm right there with them."

"I have fun going to school. Sometimes it's a lot of work, but I like to get good grades and have fun doing it."

"I have fun cooking for my family. I like planning the meals, shopping for bargains, and then serving it. Even if they stick up their collective noses, it's fun and enjoyable."

"I have fun reading, curled up with a mystery, the dog at my feet and the cat in my lap. It may not sound like fun to you, but having spent the evening like this I can look back and say, yes, I had fun."

"I have fun playing sports with the gang. It's not always the same guys, but pretty much. We play competitive soccer, volleyball and softball."

"I have fun taking a drive. Just wondering around, no destination. Just spending the day with my wife, or kids, or even by myself. It reminds me of the Sunday drives we used to take as kids. "

"I have fun playing cards. My husband and I have 3 or 4 other couples we get together with and play cards. It's pretty competitive, but always fun."

Appendix E

Psalms of Faith

Based on Psalm 146

Written by the people of Faith UCC Fall 2010

PSALMS II A OF FAITH UCC

Pastor: In the midst of colitis, pains in the back, worries about making ends meet, caring for kids, homework and retirement plans, we at Faith UCC will...

ALL: Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord, O our souls!

Pastor: We will praise the Lord as long as we can wake up in the morning, read the paper and not see our name in the O'bits.

People: We will sing praises to God all our lives long.

Pastor: Do not put your trust in material things, foolish get rich scams, or politicians, because they cannot help us, they are created by humans and they are only ordinary people.

People: Happy are those whose help is in the God of Bob, Eleanor, Josh and Kayla, whose hope is in the Lord.

Pastor: Praise God who made people in His image, the skies & starry nights, heaven and earth. Praise the God who made each of us here.

People: Praise God who keeps everyone in His care, who keeps His arms open for us, God who keeps us close.

Pastor: The Lord lifts those who open their hearts to Him, who need a lift, and who share His love.

People: God lifts those who are in deep despair, and who turn toward Him.

Pastor: The Lord watches over those who love Him and those who don't,

People: God watches over all God's children, even the naughty ones. The Lord watches over me.

Pastor: The Lord will reign forever, our God, for all generations to come. Praise the Lord Faith UCC!

People: Praise the Lord, Amen!

PSALM II B Faith UCC

Pastor: In the midst of worry about kids, bills, job security, world affairs and Tuesday's elections, we at Faith UCC will...

ALL: Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord, O our souls!

Pastor: We will praise the Lord as long as we can pay the bills, paint a bright future, as long as we have breath, as long as we can.

People: We will sing praises to God all our lives long.

Pastor: Do not put your trust in others because God alone cares for us.

People: Do not put your trust in me, I might be wrong.

Pastor: Do not put your trust in ignorance, because God is the truth and the way.

People: Happy are those whose help is in the God of Tom, Cathy, Gary and Gail, whose hope is in the Lord.

Pastor: Praise God who made people of all colors and races, who made the world and The United Nations. Praise God who makes the world fresh every morning.

People: Praise God who keeps us safe, whole and holy. Praise God who keeps promises.

Pastor: The Lord lifts those who pray, who think of others before themselves.

People: The Lord lifts those who believe, have faith and who live the Word.

Pastor: The Lord watches over the littlest bed bug and 'giant' whale, over all creatures great and small..

People: The Lord watches over everyone and everything, wishing He could help us more, if we would only let Him..

Pastor: The Lord will reign forever, our God, for all generations to come. Praise the Lord Faith UCC!

People: Praise the Lord! Amen!

PSALM II C FAITH UCC

Pastor: In the midst of travel plans, stresses at work, home improvement projects, school, homework and an upset stomach, Faith UCC will..

ALL: Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord O our souls!

Pastor: We will praise the Lord as long as we live and breathe, and have life.

People: We will sing praises to God all our lives long.

Pastor: Do not put your trust in idols because they are not believers.

People: Do not put your trust in words of man, because people will tell you what you want to hear.

Pastor: Do not put your trust in others because they are not always there for you.

People: Happy are those whose help is in the God of Shirley, Nicholas, Debbie and

Bill whose hope is in the Lord. *Pastor: Praise God who made right and wrong, democrats and republicans, heaven and Earth.*

People: Praise God who keeps his word, who keeps everything in the light. Praise God who keeps us in Faith.

Pastor: The Lord lifts those who believe, and who are in special need of God's loving touch.

People: The Lord lifts those who trust that He will not drop me.

Pastor: The Lord watches over the sun and the moon, the stars and the sparkles.

People: The Lord watches over the angels of our hearts.

Pastor: The Lord will reign forever, our God, for all generations to come. Praise the Lord Faith UCC!

People: Praise the Lord! Amen!

PSALM II D FAITH UCC

Pastor: In the midst of the mental and emotional stresses of kids, healthcare expenses, eating habits, and taking care of property problems, Faith UCC will continue to

ALL: Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord O our souls!

Pastor: We will praise the Lord as long as we can raise our hearts and our voices.

People: We will sing praises to God all our whole lives long.

Pastor: Do not put your trust in material things because they can wear out, and don't last.

People: Do not put your trust in the government, because it can be corrupted too easily.

E-2

Pastor: Do not put your trust in other people, only trust in God and yourself, because

God loves you and you are God's.

People: Happy are those whose help is in the God of Bonnie and Stan, Florence and Fred, whose hope is in the Lord.

Pastor: Praise God who made us and the U.S. Praise God who made and makes everything!.

People: Praise God who keeps order and not chaos, who keeps everything in His hands, who keeps us each safe!

Pastor: The Lord lifts those who are doing God's work. The Lord lifts those who are in special need of God's grace.

People: The Lord lifts those who are in need of a faith lift.

Pastor: The Lord watches over our comings and goings, our hello's and good-bye's.

People: The Lord watches over the smallest hurts in our hearts and the tentative tears of wounded hearts.

Pastor: The Lord will reign forever, our God, for all generations to come. Praise the Lord Faith UCC!

People: Praise the Lord! Amen!

PSALM II E FAITH UCC

Pastor: In the midst of the step-daughter's emotions, hurt toe, sore back, deadlines at work and plans for the Holidays, Faith UCC will continue to..

ALL: Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord O our souls!

Pastor: We will praise the Lord as long as we can live and breath, and have life.

People: We will praise the Lord as long as our hearts and souls are willing.

Pastor: We will sing praises to God all our whole lives long.

Pastor: Do not put your trust in people, they don't always tell the truth.

People: Do not put your trust in anything evil, it will destroy your soul.

Pastor: Do not put your trust in politicians, they do not always have our best interest at heart.

People: Happy are those whose help is in the God of Barbara and Billy, of Jeanne and Judy, whose hope is in the Lord.

Pastor: Praise God who made loving husbands and wives, a God who makes all things possible.

People: Praise God who keeps us safe in the palms of His hands. Praise God who keeps our souls in His heart.

Pastor: The Lord lifts those who seek, ask, and find God's grace and love.

People: The Lord lifts those lost sheep for a joyful ride home!

Pastor: The Lord watches over our commitments to each other.

People: The Lord watches over all the children of the world, red and yellow, black and white, we are precious in His sight.

Pastor: The Lord will reign forever, our God, for all generations to come. Praise the Lord Faith UCC!

ALL: Praise the Lord. Amen!

PSALM II F FAITH UCC

Pastor: In the midst of missing my granddaughter, worries about my daughter getting a job, my loss of hearing, parents failing, cold-flu season, and new work situation, Faith UCC will continue to..

ALL: Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord O our souls!

Pastor: We will praise the Lord as long as our faith is on steroids..

People: We will praise the Lord as long as we are mentally competent, which might not last too much longer.

Pastor: We will praise the Lord as long as the world exists.

People: We will sing praises to God all our whole lives long.

Pastor: Do not put your trust in materialistic things, but only in the Love of God.

People: Do not put your trust in money, because money cannot buy happiness or health, or the love of family and friends.

Pastor: Do not put your trust in false gods, because they are in virtual reality, they are not real.

People: Happy are those whose help is in the God of Dot and Dave, of Patricia and Lee, whose hope is in the Lord.

Pastor: Praise God who made us in His likeness, who made all people equal unto Himself, who made everything with purpose.

People: Praise God who keeps us in prayerful rest, who keeps us in health, who keeps us close in His arms.

Pastor: The Lord lifts those who believe, who love others, who help themselves.

People: The Lord lifts those who pray and praise Him without ceasing.

Pastor: The Lord watches over all His creations, the saints and sinners alike.

People: The Lord watches over the whole world, and blesses us all with extra Grace!

Pastor: The Lord will reign forever, our God, for all generations to come. Praise the Lord Faith UCC!

ALL: Praise the Lord. Amen!

PSALM II G FAITH UCC

Pastor: In the midst of stresses over decisions to move closer to our grandchildren, my eye condition, my sore feet and legs, worries about money and paying bills, Faith UCC will continue to....

ALL: Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord O our souls!

Pastor: We will praise the Lord as long as we live.

People: We will praise the Lord as long as we are able to suck in air and feel the breath of God within us.

Pastor: We will sing praises to God all our whole lives long.

People: Do not put your trust in earthly treasures because they are not eternal.

Pastor: Do not put your trust in selfish people, because they can turn on you.

People: Do not put your trust in high-tech stuff, because help comes from God.

Pastor: Do not put your trust in credit cards, because they change the rules at whim.

People: Happy are those whose help is in the God of Mildred and Mark, of Dolores and Elwood, whose hope is in the Lord.

Pastor: Praise God who made the heavens sing and the earth ring.

People: Praise God who keeps aware of our neighbors and friends.

Pastor: Praise God who keeps His promises and helps us keep ours.

People: Praise God who keeps us surrounded day and night with His loving embrace.

Pastor: The Lord lifts those who seek God's comfort and care.

People: The Lord lifts those who never take a break from caring.

Pastor: The Lord watches over the good times and the bad.

People: The Lord watches over every living creature, every hair on our heads, every prayer from our hearts.

Pastor: The Lord will reign forever, our God, for all generations to come. Praise the Lord Faith UCC!

ALL: Praise the Lord. Amen!

PSALM II H of Faith UCC

Pastor: In the midst of doctors' appointments, paying all the co-pays, daily fatigue, worry about school and kids, and not having enough time to take of everything, Faith UCC will continue to....

ALL: Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord O our souls!

Pastor: We will praise the Lord as long as we live here on earth and as long as our souls exist.

People: We will praise the Lord as long as our hope to heal never fades..

Pastor: We will sing praises to God all our whole lives long.

People: Do not put your trust in high-tech stuff, because help comes from God.

Pastor: Do not put your trust in those with dogmatic spirits because their turn to receive the Lord is still under way.

People: Do not put your trust in the devil, things of this earth, for these shall all pass away.

Pastor: Happy are those whose help is in the God of Gloria and Harold, Michael and Maryann, whose hope is in the Lord their God..

People: Praise God who made life, love, joy, family and Faith UCC.

Pastor: Praise God who keeps watch over all of us.

People: Praise God who keeps promises given and received.

Pastor: The Lord lifts those who believe, or who want to believe.

People: The Lord lifts those who have even a mustard seed faith.

Pastor: The Lord watches over the good times and the bad.

People: The Lord watches over our every move, He watches our back!

Pastor: The Lord will reign forever, our God, for all generations to come. Praise the Lord Faith UCC!

ALL: Praise the Lord. Amen!

PSALM II I of Faith UCC

Pastor: In the midst of worries about grandchildren, making it through the winter, pains in my arms, legs, over worked and underpaid, and the class reunion Faith UCC will continue to....

ALL: Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord O our souls!

Pastor: We will praise the Lord as long as we can put one foot in front of the other.

E-5

People: We will praise the Lord as long as we live, in sickness and in health.

Pastor: We will sing praises to God all our whole lives long.

People: Do not put your trust in money, it comes and goes, sometimes too quickly.

Pastor: Do not put your trust in a job, because you can loose it, even though you think you never will.

People: Do not put your trust in material things, because that does you more harm than good.

Pastor: Happy are those whose help is in the God of Cheryl and Joe, Gavin and Hailey, whose hope is in the Lord their God..

People: Praise God who made our young people as independent thinkers and spirits.

Pastor: Praise God who made the sun, the moon and stars. Praise God who Made everything good and right.

People: Praise God who keeps us sane, who keeps us trusting.

Pastor: The Lord lifts those who believe and have faith.

People: The Lord lifts those who know He is present with them in life, in death and life beyond death.

Pastor: The Lord watches over all creatures great and small.

People: The Lord watches over our comings and goings.

Pastor: The Lord will reign forever, our God, for all generations to come. Praise the Lord Faith UCC!

ALL: Praise the Lord. Amen!

PSALM II J of Faith UCC

Pastor: In the midst of grief over the death of my husband, dealing with the pain and fatigue of rheumatoid arthritis, worries about the employment of my son-in-law, and taking my Driver's test again, Faith UCC will continue to....

ALL: Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord O our souls!

Pastor: We will praise the Lord as I can, as long as I am able.

People: We will praise the Lord as long as we live, and grow everyday.

Pastor: We will sing praises to God all our whole lives long.

People: Do not put your trust in individuals who promise to do things for you, because they often 'forget' their promises.

Pastor: Do not put your trust in anything evil because you will be promoting the wrong side..

People: Do not put your trust in the bank, because you can go bankrupt.

Pastor: Happy are those whose help is in the God of Cheryl and Joe, Gavin and Hailey, whose hope is in the Lord their God..

People: Praise God who made all life, us, the heavens and the earth.

Pastor: Praise God who made the rules and gave us the choices.

People: Praise God who keeps watch over us and remains true to His teachings.

Pastor: The Lord lifts those who have lost their faith.

People: The Lord lifts those who pray, and pray, and pray again, keep knocking!

Pastor: The Lord watches over His lost sheep.

People: The Lord watches over the good, the bad and the ugly.

Pastor: The Lord will reign forever, our God, for all generations to come. Praise the Lord Faith UCC!

ALL: Praise the Lord. Amen!

E-6

PSALM II K of Faith UCC

Pastor: In the midst of worries about problems with son's marriage/separation, Problems at work, Grandma's slow trip down hill, and brokenness of my own family, Faith UCC will continue to....

ALL: Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord O our souls!

Pastor: We will praise the Lord as we have hope and faith.

People: We will praise the Lord as long as You give us breath.

Pastor: We will praise the Lord as long as we live and dream.

People: We will sing praises to God our entire lives long.

Pastor: Do not put your trust in things because things can break, get lost, Do not satisfy and require lots of maintenance.

People: Do not put your trust in items around you, because love is not an item, it's a spirit, it's your heart...

Pastor: Do not put your trust in guns, because you can go can shoot yourself in the foot..

People: Happy are those whose help is in the God of Alice and Lois, Kirk and Fred whose hope is in the Lord their God..

Pastor: Praise God who made us to love and respect others.

People: Praise God who made heaven, and earth, and all the children of the world.

Pastor: Praise God who keeps us under His watchful eye.

People: Praise God who keeps us busy.

Pastor: The Lord lifts those who have faith and request help

People: The Lord lifts those who think love is gone.

Pastor: The Lord watches over those who spread joy and love.

People: The Lord watches over babies and fools.

Pastor: The Lord will reign forever, our God, for all generations to come. Praise the Lord Faith UCC!

ALL: Praise the Lord. Amen!

PSALM II L of Faith UCC

Pastor: In the midst of worries about getting the garage door fixed, possible pregnancy, Lack of family time and money, money and money problems, Faith UCC will continue to....

ALL: Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord O our souls!

Pastor: We will praise the Lord as we can walk this earth together,

People: We will praise the Lord as long as my partner is by my side.

Pastor: We will praise the Lord as long as we are in this together.

People: We will sing praises to God our entire lives long.

Pastor: Do not put your trust in the easy way because it's not gona work, it never does..

People: Do not put your trust in uncertainty because will surely show us the way.

Pastor: Do not put your trust in humans and their constructs, because they will fail..

People: Happy are those whose help is in the God of Alice and Lois, Kirk and Fred whose hope is in the Lord their God..

Pastor: Praise God who made us in His image.

People: Praise God who made each of us equally different.

Pastor: Praise God who keeps giving.

People: Praise God who keeps speaking, even if we don't always listen.

Pastor: The Lord lifts those who lift themselves.

People: The Lord lifts those who are handicapped.

Pastor: The Lord watches over all of us, even though we forget that many times.

People: The Lord watches over the heavens and earth, the cherubim and seraphim.

Pastor: The Lord will reign forever, our God, for all generations to come. Praise the Lord Faith UCC!

ALL: Praise the Lord. Amen!

PSALM II M of Faith UCC

Pastor: In the midst of worries about car repairs, pains in my body, weakness on my right side and getting my kids to all of their events, Faith UCC will continue to....

ALL: Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord O our souls!

Pastor: We will praise the Lord as long as I am able and the computer works.

People: We will praise the Lord as long as I choose to.

Pastor: We will sing praises to God our entire lives long.

People: Do not put your trust in earthly possessions because they are soon gone.

Pastor: Do not put your trust in government and crooked judges, because they are not Godly.

People: Do not put your trust in anyone who is hurting because they will lash out at you.

Pastor: Happy are those whose help is in the God of Gayle and Marlene, Eric and Andrew...

People: Praise God who made each of us strong people, able to deal with any travesty.

Pastor: Praise God who made a partner for each of us.

People: Praise God who made the leaves on the trees, the snow crystal, the cherry blossoms and the bright sunshiny days.

Pastor: Praise God who us each close to His heart.

People: Praise God who keeps loving us and never gives up on us.

Pastor: The Lord lifts those who are short on patience.

People: The Lord lifts those who are sad and stressed

Pastor: The Lord watches over the righteous and the unrighteous.

People: The Lord watches over the edge of the earth, waiting expectantly for us to Come to Him.

Pastor: The Lord will reign forever, our God, for all generations to come. Praise the Lord Faith UCC!

ALL: Praise the Lord. Amen!

PSALMS II N of Faith UCC

Pastor: In the midst of aches and pains, schoolwork, worries over sick grandmother, trying to be my family's salvation, Faith UCC will continue to....

ALL: Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord O our souls!

Pastor: We will praise the Lord as long as we live, as long as we are stuck here on earth.

People: We will praise the Lord as long as possible.

Pastor: We will sing praises to God our entire lives long.

People: Do not put your trust in others, in people who don't care, in any one who doesn't carefully and prayerfully consider all the possibilities, including yourself because in God we trust, like it says on the money.

Pastor: Do not put your trust in things and people who are temporary, because God is concerned with the eternal.

People: Happy are those whose help is in the God of Gerry and Sam, Eddie and

Elizabeth, whose hope is in the Lord their God.

Pastor: Praise God who made all the good stuff, and the bad stuff, and gives us the choices..

People: Praise God who made heaven and earth, angels and demons, stress and stress-relief.

Pastor: Praise God who keeps us straight.

People: Praise God who keeps up with us.

Pastor: Praise God who promises.

People: The Lord lifts those who seek Him.

Pastor: The Lord lifts those who are in need of a smile or a miracle.

People: The Lord watches over the universe and infinity.

Pastor: The Lord watches over all people, all creatures, all creation all the time.

People: : The Lord will reign forever, our God, for all generations to come.

Pastor: Praise the Lord Faith UCC!

ALL: Praise the Lord. Amen!

PSALMS II O OF FAITH UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

Pastor: In the midst of losing my husband and living alone, trouble with my eye and no help at work, in the midst of completing stuff for school, preparations for the visit and concerns for a client, Faith UCC will continue to....

ALL: Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord O our souls!

Pastor: We will praise the Lord as long as we breathe deeply of God's grace.

People: We will praise the Lord as long as we live our faith to the fullest.

Pastor: We will sing praises to God our entire lives long.

People: Do not put your trust in material things because they cannot give you emotional support.

Pastor: Do not put your trust in those who preach false idols because only God is worthy of our trust.

People: Do not put your trust in me, O Lord, because I keep trying, but sometimes I am not worth it.

Pastor: Do not put your trust in secretaries, because they get distracted easily.

People: Happy are those whose help is in the God of Rachel and Ron, Deanna and David whose hope is in the Lord their God.

Pastor: Praise God who made me and guides me.

People: Praise God who made the world, the universe and made me understand it.

Pastor: Praise God who keeps us in the palms of his hands.

People: Praise God who keeps me and loves me.

Pastor: Praise God who keeps a watchful eye on the little angels.

People: The Lord lifts those who are in need of rest.

Pastor: The Lord lifts those who come to Him on their knees.

People: The Lord watches over me for I believe in Him to guide me in His plan for me.

Pastor: The Lord watches over the sunrise and sunset, it's a great time to watch with Him..

People: : The Lord will reign forever, our God, for all generations to come.

Pastor: Praise the Lord Faith UCC!

ALL: Praise the Lord. Amen!

PSALMS II P OF FAITH UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

Pastor: In the midst of a leaking roof, cracked windshield, my friend's terminal illness, too many things to do and not enough time, and learning how to retire, Faith UCC will continue to....

ALL: Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord O our souls!

Pastor: We will praise the Lord as long as possible.

People: We will praise the Lord as long as God needs me to.

Pastor: We will sing praises to God our entire lives long.

People: Do not put your trust in computers and electronics, because they tend to fail.

Pastor: Do not put your trust in those who are selfish and uncaring, because they can't seem to think beyond their sphere of influence.

People: Do not put your trust in evil or evildoers, because they just don't get it.

Pastor: Happy are those whose help is in the God of Betty and Bob, of Mackenzie and Mark whose hope is in the Lord their God.

People: Praise God who made the heavens full of stars and the earth full of nature.

Pastor: Praise God who made gardens of life within which we can thrive.

People: Praise God who keeps our hearts and happiness.

Pastor: Praise God who keeps us safe, and challenges us every day.

People: The Lord lifts those who cry out to Him and believe in His goodness.

Pastor: The Lord lifts those who are so very heavy laden, we cannot even put one foot in front of the other.

People: The Lord watches over needy and the poor of heart.

Pastor: The Lord watches over all His flock, whether gather or scattered.

People: : The Lord will reign forever, our God, for all generations to come.

Pastor: Praise the Lord Faith UCC!

ALL: Praise the Lord. Amen!

PSALMS II Q OF FAITH UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

Pastor: In the midst of loss of income, college stuff, dealing with nasty people, having a friend with cancer and seeing my family fight among themselves, Faith UCC will continue to....

ALL: Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord O our souls!

Pastor: We will praise the Lord as we know how.

People: We will praise the Lord as long as we live, love and laugh together.

Pastor: We will sing praises to God our entire lives long.

People: Do not put your trust in worldly items because they only matter in this world.

Pastor: Do not put your trust in certain people because a lot of people are not honest, As House says, everybody lies.

People: Do not put your trust in anything but God because God does not disappoint.

Pastor: Happy are those whose help is in the God of Sheldon and Sam, Blake and Barbara whose hope is in the Lord their God.

People: Praise God who made the heavens full of angels and the earth full of life.

Pastor: Praise God who made the sun and the rain that fall on all of us equally.

People: Praise God who keeps the peace, both of mind and souls.

Pastor: Praise God who keeps us together, kind of like the Holy Glue in relationships.

People: The Lord lifts those who are sad, sick, or fell foresaken.

E-10

Pastor: The Lord lifts those who open their hearts, and allow God to care for them..

People: *The Lord watches over all the sports teams, not just my favorite.*

Pastor: *The Lord watches over all who need Him – and we all do!*

People: : *The Lord will reign forever, our God, for all generations to come.*

Pastor: *Praise the Lord Faith UCC!*

ALL: *Praise the Lord. Amen!*

PSALMS II R OF FAITH UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

Pastor: *In the midst of settling into a new apartment, getting ready for the wedding, worries about family and world's future, Faith UCC will continue to....*

ALL: *Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord O our souls!*

Pastor: *We will praise the Lord as we can lift up our hearts and souls.*

People: *We will praise the Lord as long as we live here on earth and in heaven.*

Pastor: *We will sing praises to God our entire lives long.*

People: *Do not put your trust in princes and mortals because there is no help in them.*

Pastor: *Do not put your trust in my parents because they will hurt you!*

People: *Do not put your trust in anything that brings you down, because we only do ups!*

Pastor: *Happy are those whose help is in the God of Dani and Dotty, of Lee and Linda, whose hope is in the Lord their God.*

People: *Praise God who made us for wonderful and marvelous purposes.*

Pastor: *Praise God who made doctors, and lawyers and Indian Chiefs.*

People: *Praise God who keeps faith in us.*

Pastor: *Praise God who keeps on, keeping on.*

People: *The Lord lifts those who can't do ups.*

Pastor: *The Lord lifts those who are bowed down, unable to see, or hear, or do.*

People: *The Lord watches over the strangers and sojourners.*

Pastor: *The Lord watches over His shoulder at those of us sneaking up behind Him to touch His healing cloak.*

People: : *The Lord will reign forever, our God, for all generations to come.*

Pastor: *Praise the Lord Faith UCC!*

ALL: *Praise the Lord. Amen!*

PSALMS II S OF FAITH UCC

Pastor: *In the midst of worries over work, a leaking roof, spouse's attitude, parents' health, we at Faith UCC will...*

ALL: *Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord, O our souls!*

Pastor: *We will praise the Lord as long as can breath this ancient, wonder-filled air.*

People: *We will praise the Lord as long as blood flows through my body.*

Pastor: *We will sing praises to God all our lives long.*

People: *Do not put your trust in car dealers and pushy sales people, because sometimes they just tell you what they think you want to hear.*

Pastor: *Do not put your trust in the devil, because he is not real.*

People: *Happy are those whose help is in the God of Jack and Chris, Donna and Anna, whose hope is in the Lord.*

Pastor: *Praise God who made red apples, orange sunbeams, yellow sunflowers, green snakes, blue fish, and purple mountains majesty..*

E-11

People: *Praise God who keeps us in this rainbow of Faith, and wrapped*

in His blanket of love.

Pastor: The Lord lifts those who believe in Him and in themselves.

People: God lifts those who don't take themselves so seriously, and have a light-hearted spirit.

Pastor: The Lord watches over all creatures of our God and King.

People: God watches over everyone, no matter where they are or what they have done.

Pastor: The Lord will reign forever, our God, for all generations to come.

Praise the Lord Faith UCC!

People: Praise the Lord, Amen!

PSALMS II T OF FAITH UCC (based on Psalm 146)

Pastor: In the midst of worries overwork stresses, son's head injury, Grandma's operation, doctor's appointments and their outcome, we here at Faith UCC will continue to ...

ALL: Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord, O our souls!

Pastor: We will praise the Lord as long as we live in life, in death and in life beyond death.

People: We will praise the Lord as long as we can breath on our own, or with life support for that matter.

Pastor: We will sing praises to God all our lives long.

People: Do not put your trust in sillyneers, because sometimes it is not real.

Pastor: Do not put your trust in wrong or evil, because it does not prevail.

People: Happy are those whose help is in the God of Marsha and Mike, the God of Ava and Andrew, whose hope is in the Lord their God.

Pastor: Praise God who made blessings of people and communities...

People: Praise God who keeps welcoming us home, even when we have been a disappointment.

Pastor: The Lord lifts those who look up.

People: God lifts those who know how to laugh together, and cry together.

Pastor: The Lord watches over the spiders and bugs, and even my brother.

People: God watches over me when I am out of control.

Pastor: The Lord will reign forever, our God, for all generations to come.

raise the Lord Faith UCC!

People: Praise the Lord, Amen!

PSALMS II U OF FAITH UCC (based on Psalm 146)

Pastor: In the midst of pain and sorrows, party preparations, 'to do' list that never seems to find the bottom, we here at Faith UCC will continue to ...

ALL: Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord, O our souls!

Pastor: We will praise the Lord as long as breath and blood flow freely through me and mine.

People: We will praise the Lord as long as summer turns into fall and winter turns into spring.

E-12

Pastor: We will sing praises to God all our lives long.

People: Do not put your trust in people of the shadows because they cannot find the light.

Pastor: Do not put your trust same 'ole, same 'ole, because everything changes.

People: Happy are those whose help is in the God of Greg and Gloria, the God of Iris and Izzy, whose hope is in the Lord their God.

Pastor: Praise God who made baskets of hope and rainbows of joy.

People: Praise God who keeps us knee deep in love.

Pastor: The Lord lifts those who put others before themselves, who reach out with a helping hand and willing heart.

People: God lifts those who don't drag everyone else down.

Pastor: The Lord watches over my brother and my brother's keeper.

People: God watches over me, even when I run the other way.

*Pastor: The Lord will reign forever, our God, for all generations to come.
raise the Lord Faith UCC!*

People: Praise the Lord, Amen!

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