

**"Two Years in the Making and 45 Years Later – the UCG Compact"**  
**Sandy Reimer** **October 9, 2011**

**Scripture - 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 12** – *adapted from The Message by Eugene Peterson*

All of our gifts have a common origin but are handed out by the one Spirit of God. You can easily see how this kind of thing works by looking no further than your own body. Your body has many parts – arms, legs, organs, cells – but no matter how many parts you can name, you are still one body. A body isn't just a single part blown up into something huge. A body is all the different but similar parts arranged and functioning together.

What if I, the Foot, said, "Oh, I'm not elegant like the Hand. I can't draw beautiful pictures and I don't wear jewelry." Would that make me any less a part of the body? What if I, the Ear, said, "Oh, I'm not beautiful like the Eye, smiling, crying, and so expressive. I don't even deserve to be in the Head?" Would that make me a second-rate body part?

I am the Eye. Can you imagine me saying to the Hand, "Get Lost! I don't need you!" I am the Hand. Can you imagine me saying to the Eye, "Forget it! You're history!" I am the Head. What if I said to the Mouth, "You're fired! Your job has been phased out!" I am the Mouth. What would happen if I said to the Head, "I can get along just fine without you!"

If one part of the body suffers, all parts suffer. If one part of the body is celebrated, all parts rejoice. Some parts of the body may seem more important because they are more attractive or more visible. But really, if you had to choose, wouldn't you prefer good digestion to lustrous hair?

The way God designed our bodies is a model for understanding our life as a spiritual community. In our church, every part is dependent on every other part. If one part of our church hurts, every other part is involved in the hurt and in the healing. If one part flourishes and grows, every other part enters into the joy. We are all parts of the same body, the body of God in this world. We are the church!

**Sermon** - In the winter of 1973, Larry was in his fourth year as the Associate Minister at the First Congregational Church in New Milford, Connecticut. It was a good church with lots of wonderful people and the senior minister was a good mentor. But it was time to move. We were both looking for a church where there would be more freedom in worship, more families with small children, and more focus on social justice from the entire congregation. So Larry sent out his UCC ministerial profile, and we started getting responses from churches that were looking for a pastor. We were a bit like Goldilocks: some churches were too small, some were too traditional, one seemed possible but didn't work out. Then Larry got a phone call from a Catherine Berg in Gainesville, Florida who wanted to send him information about their church. "Florida?" I said. "I thought we had an agreement that I would go anywhere between Maine and Virginia." "Yeah, we did," said Larry, "but this church sounds interesting." UCG's packet of information arrived one day when Larry was at work, so I opened it anyway. The first page was titled "Compact," and was printed in an old English hand-

caligraphied script. Honestly, I almost put the whole packet aside when I saw how traditionally old-school it looked. I just happened to glance at the end of one phrase "people of differing understanding and theological opinion" and I was intrigued, so I went back to the beginning and read it through. Wow! I thought, This really is an interesting church. That Compact led us here, on a hot July 4<sup>th</sup> week-end to interview with the Search Committee. And the rest, as they say, is history.

When these new members met a couple weeks ago for the orientation session prior to joining the church, I realized, as I was talking about how much I love this church, that the Compact is the glue that holds everything else together. The Compact is our compass, our true North, showing us the vision and the path, and it is our foundation, binding us together in action and in acceptance of one another. The verbs in our Compact describe so well what it means to be on a spiritual journey: to join, to worship, to welcome, to learn, to grow, to follow, and to act. Our Compact is a success story that is both a cause for celebration and a reminder of our challenges.

Forty seven years ago, in November of 1964, several Gainesville folks, including Bob Atkins, advertised a gathering for people who were interested in starting a new kind of church in Gainesville. Fifty people attended, and the United Church of Gainesville was conceived. Soon after, Gordon Tapper convened a Booklet Committee, charged with drafting a hand-out that could be given to folks interested in becoming part of this new church. Thus, the first version of what evolved into our Compact was written and included in this booklet and reads:

*We affirm and cherish:  
God, the Eternal and One Spirit, however known;  
Jesus of Nazareth and the singular love, way, and salvation he witnessed for us;  
Man, however else measured, as brother, under God, and of infinite worth;  
The responsible use of inquiry, doubt and intelligence as well as faith in religious affairs;  
Freedom of thought and conscience and the increasing meaning these make visible;  
Unity in essentials, diversity in non-essentials, and, in all things, Christian love.  
~ The Booklet draft, November, 1964*

Although this statement was printed in the booklet, it was not well-received by the entire congregation. One booklet committee member left the church with her family because this statement did not express more conventional Christian theology. Disagreement grew among the remaining folks, some of whom thought it was not open enough. Discussions and meetings to work out the statement ran late into the nights. The Chairperson of the Sponsoring Committee for this new church resigned due to stress. Later the founding group members voted by a 3% margin to adopt this statement, but they delayed implementing it because, in their own words, "it would have caused many others to leave the proposed church." And the Rev. Melvin Dollar, the UCC Florida Conference Minister of Church Extension, who was working with UCG's founders, wrote to the UCG Moderator in January of 1965, "I wonder if we should not postpone the calling of a permanent minister until we can determine the ability of the present group to live with each other in peace and harmony as a church family."

Later that year, the founding group had successfully adopted a constitution, but had voted down this first version of the Compact. In June 1966, under the leadership

of the new minister, Ken Stokes (whose picture is hanging in the foyer this morning), each church participant was assigned to one of four discussion groups with a leader. Each group was to draft their own "agreed-upon" Compact for the church. Group leaders were to combine these four separate drafts and bring that single version to a congregational meeting for a vote – and so the Compact as we know it now was written and adopted. Note that two families left the church after this vote because it was too liberal and one family left because they felt it was too conservative.

From the very beginning of the United Church of Gainesville, the balance of its vision has been its strength and the tension in that vision has been its challenge. I like to say we are a church rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition and open to the many paths of faith and exploration. I think our Compact reflects this very clearly. Look at the Compact printed on the back of your bulletin. There is a quick introduction line – and then the next two lines - *"to worship God however known" and "to welcome into our church those of differing understanding and theological opinion"* - speak to that openness to all paths and to all people. We accept everyone here. There is no dogma, no creed, no litmus test, no barrier to membership, other than a person's willingness to affirm this Compact. However you know God or not – whatever words you use for God or spirituality or not – you are welcome here. You are welcome, whoever you are and wherever you are on your journey. We are a congregation of seekers.

The fourth and fifth lines of the Compact - *"to follow, even imperfectly, the way of Jesus in personal involvement with each other"* - *"and to act in Christian concern for the welfare of all people"* - speak to our roots in the Judeo-Christian tradition, and it's good for us to be reminded that Jesus was Jewish. Note that these last two lines of the Compact are not statements about belief or dogma or affiliation, but they are statements about actions, about what we will do, about how we will be connected with and be of service to others. To me, they imply that we will take the most important parts of our roots, our religious heritage, and apply them to our daily life, our communal life, our interactions with the world and with all people.

As I see it, then the third line of the Compact is the bridge – *"to learn from our religious heritage, yet to grow by seeking new dimensions of truth"* – is the mediating connector between the first and last parts of the Compact. This third line provides both the framework for balance between those two poles and also implicitly provides an acknowledgment of the tension between them.

Are we too Christian? Not Christian enough? Too traditional? Too liberal? Are there any limits to our acceptance? How can we incorporate all the ways God is known or not known among us? I hear these questions repeated again and again, not only this year, this month, this week, but I have also heard them echoed over the course of our life as a church. And I hear those same questions echoed in the struggles of the founders of this church and in the creation of our Compact.

My belief is that these questions are precisely who we are as a church. These very questions are the essence of our mission, the essence of the vision that is the United Church of Gainesville. And I believe that our purpose as a church is not to resolve the questions for once and for all, but instead our purpose is to live these questions. Can we – and how can we – be an inclusive spiritual community, open to

all? Can we – and how can we - be an inclusive community of seekers who are growing and evolving in their individual experiences and understanding of life and belief, and yet still be rooted in a faith tradition of a God who calls us to service, to personal involvement, to walking the mile and bearing the load for one another? I submit to you that this unwieldy stretch of balance and tension is exactly who we are as a congregation. The very nature of our Compact reminds us that we are both/and - not either/or. And while this is a wonderful exhilarating vision, it is also a complex challenge when we get down to the nitty gritty of living it, of worshipping, of preaching, of finding common ground, not just tolerating but affirming our differences.

I think of a piece of elastic. UCG is not a static piece of elastic, sitting here with the potential to move and grow. No, we are a piece of elastic, that is constantly stretched by folks who are at different points in the theological spectrum. That is the stretch we are called to live, the guidewires that hold up the bridge we walk on here. Is our elastic strong? Yes, absolutely. It is as strong as our commitment to the Compact's vision and to one another. Is it also fragile? Yes, absolutely. It is as fragile as our commitment to our Compact's vision and to one another.

So next time you feel the tension, between your path and some part of what is going on here at UCG, the very first thing you need to remember is that you are not alone. I wager all of us have felt that tension, that discomfort, at some time or another. I encourage to talk not only to someone whose understanding is similar to yours, but also to seek out someone in this congregation whose understanding is different. Have a conversation that doesn't seek to find the answer, but a conversation that is open to exploring the differences, that is open to hearing one another, that is open to sharing the elastic and finding a place of personal involvement with one another.

When I hear people drawing lines in the sand in the name of dogma or throwing labels around to categorize someone's beliefs, I look at our Compact and I know we don't have to be that way. I know that it is possible for us to join together and be a spiritual community. I know that if I took the words "however known" out of the Compact or if I took the words "Christian concern," we wouldn't be the same church. We might alleviate some discomfort for one group of people or another, but we would lose the tension, we would lose the mix, we would lose the seemingly impossible mission that we live: to be a spiritual community, a church, that is rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition and is at the same time open to all manner of new truth, belief and unbelief – and that is our success story. And that success is not a destination; it is and will always be a journey. I, for one, wouldn't want to be in any other kind of spiritual community.

In his annual report as the Moderator of this church in 1965, Bob Atkins wrote, "May we always be a church in transition, growing in understanding of one another. But may we always remember our early selves and remain a church for the unchurched who are seekers and to those in religious poverty, the spiritually starved."