

**At the Edge of Some Crazy Cliff  
Reflections the Fortieth Anniversary  
Of my Ordination  
Larry Reimer  
May 31, 2009**

**Luke 4:14-30**

Forty years ago, at the age of twenty four I was ordained in to the Christian ministry by the New Haven Association of the United Church of Christ at the Yale Divinity School Chapel. One of the few people still in my life who was present at that ordination is Sandy, who taught English at West Haven High School to put me through Divinity School. I can never sufficiently thank her for this, which is one of the many reasons I was so grateful to be able to be part of her ordination on February 22 of this year. The second was Sandy's mom, Evelyn Sebastian whom I especially invited to attend this service today. For the eight years after my ordination, Evelyn's mother, Sandy's grandmother, Lillian Reynolds sent me a card every year on the anniversary of my ordination. After Grandma Lillian died, Sandy's mom, Evelyn became the person who has continued that tradition every year, and I thank her.

I still have my ordination paper, a carbon copy, since of course that was before copy machines. In that ancient looking manuscript I used a story from J.D. Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye to illustrate my call to ministry. In this book the fifteen year old Holden Caulfield has the words to the song "Coming Through the Rye" stuck in his head, but he has them wrong. Instead of "If a body meet a body, coming through the rye," he thinks it's "If a body catch a body coming through the rye." His little sister Phoebe tells him he's got the wrong words, but the wrong words are the ones that are in his head, and he's sticking with them. In his very confused and directionless life, he finds a good vision in his version of the song, to be standing in a big field of rye at the edge of some crazy cliff and catching all the little kids who are running toward the edge of that cliff. "That's all I'd do all day," he says, "I'd just be the catcher in the rye and all. I know it's crazy."

That was my essential vision of ministry when I was ordained, and it had two elements. The first was in the realm of social justice. I would be out there working for the causes I believed in that would keep our society and world from going off that cliff. These were racial justice and peace.

The second was pastoral care. William Sloane Coffin, Jr. the chaplain at Yale at that time said that a minister couldn't be a decent prophet without first being a good pastor. I would be a minister who cared for people who were facing the edge of their own cliffs in life, trying to catch them before they fell off.

I learned this balance early in my first church in New Milford Connecticut. That congregation often did not agree with my social justice positions. But they knew that I had visited them in the hospital and prayed with them when their dear ones had died. I stuck with them through their divorces and talked with them when they were lonely. And when others in the church challenged my social justice positions, they stuck up for me.

Being a catcher in the rye was the image that gave birth to my ministry. The image has stayed, but its meaning has changed constantly over the years. That's what I want to share with you today, five things I have learned in the forty years since I wrote my ordination paper.

First, I realized early on that I needed a deeper spiritual center. This came to me clearly in a peacemakers' group here at UCG. We discovered that if we were going to work for peace in the world, we had to spend an equal amount of time going inward to discover peace within ourselves.

I saw this same experience happening in this church. Like me, many folks came to UCG because of our commitment to social justice. But most of us have stayed because of the deep spiritual growth that happened here. I began to let myself spend more time in contemplation of the spiritual journey. I learned of soaking prayer from Sandy's work with Flora Wuellner, understanding God's will to always be for our wholeness and healing. I learned that prayer is opening myself to God who is always present, rather than beseeching a hiding God to hear me. I experienced Native American spirituality and discovered my spirit animal. Taize' music and prayers filled my life, and Celtic Spirituality opened me to blessing and nature.

I realized that God was my catcher in the rye, gathering me into loving arms and unconditional love when I was in danger of heading over the cliff myself.

The second discovery in my journey of ministry was that while I would never abandon my commitment to social justice, I would encounter issues and causes to which I had been completely blind throughout my life. It started with language.

Feminist writers revealed the narrowness of our language in the early 1970's. Here's a sentence from my ordination paper that I considered quite radical and inclusive in 1969. "Man is a unique creature, and it is difficult to make generalizations about his nature. To say that he is fallen and sinful may be correct... But I would rather say that man has within him the capacity for creation and destruction..." I go on and on like this. Isn't it amazing how narrow that constant use of "man" sounds, especially when I was trying to be more inclusive? Remember, however, even the compact of this church originally concluded with the words, "to act in Christian concern for the welfare of all men," until Sandy moved that it be changed at a congregational meeting in 1975.

The change in language showed me that in every era of human history there is an injustice that we are blind to, and when our eyes are opened, we are stunned at the injustice right before us the whole time.

The same moral blindness was true of gender and sexual orientation. I thought that the challenges of justice in my ministry would be in terms of race and war. Gender discrimination, not only in language, but in breaking down barriers limiting the role of women became an important issue during my ministry. In terms of sexual orientation, I had no idea of my blindness, ignorance, and prejudice in this realm until the issues were put before me courageously and caringly by the gay and lesbian members of this church.

I have always kept my commitment to social justice, but I learned that God would continue to open my eyes to new truth in every chapter of my life. At my ordination service, I never imagined that I would be called to visit death row here in Florida. I never imagined that I would be called to stand for women's reproductive rights in founding the Gainesville chapter of Planned Parenthood. So I've learned about awareness of blind spots.

The third discovery - humor. About fifteen years ago I was invited back to the First Congregational Church in New Milford as part of a retirement celebration for Russ Ayre, who had been my senior pastor and mentor in early ministry. I told some funny stories as I showed old slides on Saturday night and started off my sermon on Sunday with some good jokes. One of the elder deacons who had been there in my early years said to me afterwards, "You know you've gotten a lot funnier since you left here."

That surprised me. I thought I had always been a funny guy in New Milford. I once managed to rig a phone call on one line to my senior minister on another line where he picked up his phone and was greeted by his own daily devotion that he recorded each morning. I thought it was hysterical. I don't know exactly how amused he was. But I realized I didn't put a lot of humor in sermons.

Somewhere along the way, I heard a lecturer tell a group of pastors that our church members would have a harder time getting angry at us about a tough sermon topic if they had already laughed with us, so I started including more jokes and funny stories in my sermons. And of course, in 1996 one of my greatest breakthroughs occurred, my first "Humor Sunday" sermon. Sandy, actually, got the idea at a workshop at Pacific School of Religion and decided this was right up my alley. I have learned that we all need laughter all the time. As a result there's not a congregation anywhere more ready to laugh than you are.

Fourth I've learned a lot about the arrogance of making grand pronouncements, especially when they were statements about things I claimed I would never do. When I graduated from Divinity School, I was all fired up about a paper I had written as part of a senior seminar on

The Church and the Black Experience. In it I proposed a moratorium on all church building until the race problem was solved.

How's that for youthful arrogance? I did truly believe that there were more than enough church buildings in White America, most of which were empty most of the time. But I also have a hunch I simply didn't want to be mired down with church building programs and figured since it would be a long time until the race problem was solved, I was safe. In God's great irony, I've been involved in four building projects here, and there's a small fifth project going on now, as we add a new office.

A fifth learning experience involves understanding why and how I stayed here for thirty-five of those forty years. Hardly any minister does this. I believe I have the longest tenure in one church in the Florida Conference and probably in Gainesville. When I arrived at UCG, I figured I'd stay five to seven years. But this church became my home, and I found I could no more leave it than I could leave my family. One reason I believe that it's worked for both you and me to be together so long, is that UCG has actually been many different churches in the past thirty five years, small medium, and large. After every sabbatical I took, you and I both changed.

Another reason I've stayed is that I found my true self here, and I was not sure I could be my truest self as a minister in a church at all. Conventional wisdom says that ministers have to hide their real inner selves away. Obviously I do things at home, like run around in my red shorts with a blue towel as a cape and goggles calling myself "Super Larry", that I don't do here, but there's not a huge disconnect. I am pretty much who you see here. You are my dear friends. You are where I can play my music, tell my jokes, share my stories, work out the questions of faith, and find support for issues of justice. You trust me with your pain and joy, and I trust you with mine.

Another reason I think I've been able to stay here so long, and that you've been able to welcome me so long is that I've increasingly shared leadership and ministerial power. When I first came here, I preached every Sunday. Sandy didn't do much preaching when she first started working as the youth director and then program coordinator. She now preaches one Sunday a month. Andy now preaches about one Sunday a month as well.

This is not typical senior ministerial behavior. Most senior pastors hold on to preaching like Charlton Heston said of his guns, "Until they pried it out of my cold, dead, hands".

In case you didn't know, I don't do that with my preaching.

I looked back at my sermons when I preached every Sunday. And here's a secret you may already be aware of. These days, with more time to prepare, my sermons are much better. And the boards and committees of this church are working much better with Andy, Sandy and I sharing the responsibilities for them.

This summer on August 16, another minister, Vince Amlin, comes on board. By November, Sandy and I will be working half time. At one level, letting go is hard to do, but I've been on this journey of letting go for most of my ministry. I'm still out in the field, being a catcher in the rye, but now I'm far from all alone out there. The cliff is crazy, but in fact we're all out there walking the cliff, we ministers, Sandy, Andy, me, and soon Vince, and we this whole church. We're standing for justice and we're catching each other. We're all catchers in the rye.

In the scripture I read today the crowd tried to run Jesus off the cliff. In this church today, we realize that like Jesus, we're all walking the edge of the cliff, the edge of faith, challenging the powers that be and hugging the lost to our breasts lest they fall. I can think of a better way to live our lives.

Thank you for thirty five of my forty years of ministry.

Prayer – by Bill Hoppe

*Thank you for Larry Reimer. Thank you for Larry Reimer's ministry. He has taught us to treat each other fairly, equally, and compassionately without regard to whether we live in a penthouse or on death row. He has comforted us when we were troubled, and you taught him to trouble us and call us to action when we became too comfortable.*

*You have given him the gift to inspire us, counsel us, laugh with us, cry with us, and most of all love us. Bless his past, his present, and his future, for we know that he is a child of God in whom you are well pleased.*

*Amen*