

“Why in God’s Name Are You Here?!?”

Texts: Jeremiah 29: 4-7 and Matthew 14: 13-21

Salisbury Congregational Church – January 12, 2014

Reverend Sara D. Smith – Guest Preacher

Four plus years ago,

I was called to a 319 year old church In Bridgeport.

The largest city in Connecticut – with the worst reputation.

Most people have given up on it – deserted it – and its people.

Sitting in the middle of the gold coast – wealth all around it
and sweltering poverty within it.

People say – get a job – but all the factories are gone.

People say – get an education – but the schools are in shambles.

It is a deserted place – with thriving villages all round it.

United Congregational Church –

the oldest institution in the city - formed in 1695

and its 22,000 sq feet magnificent building.

sits right in the middle of it.

United had been THE WASP church

in the 1950s – big, wealthy, important,

mirroring the city it had helped build.

But like the city – it had declined in the last decades.

Our members are from the suburbs –

And had circled the wagons out of fear of the change in the city.

I was brought it to revive it.

Well I knew the only way to make this church vital again

Was to swing the doors open wide

And see how it could serve the city.

Rather than worry about our own survival.

I believe - like BBT says - we are to spend ourselves generously in the world;

Trusting that if the church does what it is supposed to

and seeks to follow Jesus,

God will take care of the church.

In the United Church of Christ, we say "God is Still Speaking..."

I have always thought – if that is so – what must we do?

We must listen – dream – respond.

So I did – I listened:

And I heard sobering statistics:

*In Connecticut, nearly one child in five is hungry .

*75% of the households that receive emergency food assistance in CT
live below the poverty line.

*Prior to the recession, 42% of food pantry clients
had to choose between food or utilities;
34% between food and rent.

*Less than 1/3 of Bridgeport's 3rd graders are on track academically;
only 56% will graduate high school, only 3% complete college.

*45.8% of Bridgeport residents speak a language
other than English at home.

*That several areas of the city – including our own,
there are no grocery stores –they are known as food deserts.

*I got to know our neighbors –
saw their emptiness, hopelessness.

Then I started dreaming . . .

How can we bring our neighbors hope?

How can we change our corner of the world?

How can we be a mission magnet?

Pulling in faithful people from all over the state,

To give them a place to put their faith into action.

How can all of us together seek the welfare of the city?

Because if it does better – we all do better.

Then we responded...

And the Urban Outreach Initiatives Inc. was born in 2010.

The Norma Pfriem Foundation

Was our initial benefactor.

Norma Pfriem – owner of CT Post

And member of our church.

And so we named it after her.

The Norma F. Pfriem Urban Outreach Initiatives, Inc.

Offers Volunteer Powered, Food Centered, Community Anchored

Outreach Programs

Committed to Bringing Hope to Our City

It is United Congregational Church's - 501 c 3 not for profit –

We have 11 outreach programs.

In 2013:

*132,624 meals delivered by our FOOD PANTRY

– with an average of 118 households each week;

*7608 meals served by our SOUP KITCHEN

-with an average of 138 eating each week;

*280 articles of clothing given each week by our CLOTHING CLOSET

*26 children tutored by our PROJECT LEARN – 5 days a week.

*350 meals, 500 articles of clothing, 170 volunteers (including Salisbury)

through our THANKSGIVING FEAST

*CANCER SUPPORT GROUP

*COMMUNITY GARDEN -providing fresh produce, and hands-on education;

*ENGLISH as a SECOND LANGUAGE CLASSES

*100 youth involved in URBAN WORK CAMPS - connecting suburban youth with service work in our urban neighborhood.

And we are making a difference in the lives of thousands of people . . .

But I have to tell you a secret . . .

The mission is back to us.

It has changed our lives, our church.

We feel more alive,

more connected to God and one another.

We are growing.

We know our purpose

And why we are here.

In fact – I am dreaming of our next project

Because we sit in the middle of a food desert

No assessable, affordable, healthy grocery stores.

I'm dreaming of a not for profit grocery. It's just crazy enough to work!

I love our food pantry and soup kitchen –

but they are not the answer to making systemic change.

They are needed but they are not long term solutions.

I want to break the cycle of dependence and entitlement

Give the people dignity of purchasing their own

Give our neighborhood access to fresh food.

Break the cycle.

Be the change I want to see in the world (Ghandi).

But we cannot do any of this on our own...

Our current outreach – or my crazy dream of a NFP grocery . . .

We need you –

So I am here as Founder and Chairperson of the Board of Directors

Of Norma Pfriem Urban Outreach Initiatives, Inc.

And Senior Minister of United Congregational Church

to invite Salisbury Congregational

To be our first MISSION PARTNER.

Covenant with us:

*To make a difference

*Put your faith into action

*To do more together than we could do alone.

*Collect food for our pantry, coats for our closet.

*Support our efforts financially.

*Come and help when its Salisbury's turn to sponsor a meal – Jan 23

*Get to know the people behind the statistics – beyond the stereotypes

*Have the courage to follow Jesus.

*People of Salisbury, You are blessed.

And you are called to use those blessings to bless others.

As Billy Graham said

“God has given us two hands –

one to receive with and the other to give with.”

I will promise you this:

If you make us your mission,

We will give you a place to do the real Jesus thing.

And it will change your life!

Because Jesus does not let us any of us off the hook.

Whether we live here or there – we are called to follow Jesus.

[Quote]:

“What we believe has no meaning apart from what we do about it...

Jesus wants followers – not admirers.”

This is why – every time we go to Jesus with the problems of the world,

He puts it back in our laps.

The disciples came to Jesus and said – this is a deserted place

Send the people away so they may go into the villages

And buy food for themselves.

Jesus said – they need not go away – You give them something to eat!

This story is not a merely a history lesson;

a nice anecdote about Jesus.

It is pointed directly at you – and me.

Right here – right now.

In the desert of Bridgeport –

Jesus says to us.....You give them something to eat.

Not me, but you; not my bread, but yours;

Not sometime or somewhere else but right here and now,” he challenges us.

Stop looking for someone else to solve the problem and solve it yourselves.

Stop waiting for food to fall from the sky and share what you have.

Stop waiting for a miracle and participate in one instead.1 (BBT)

So why in God’s name are you here?!?!

If you are just planning on going through the motions of faith,

But never engaging your hearts,

Hearing the scripture, but not listening for God

Or giving an offering, but not giving yourselves,

You are not doing Jesus – or yourself – any favors.

You do not get points for attendance.

If you are really intentional about worshipping God today –

It will show in how you share with those in need,

Listen to the hopeless,

Treat those across the aisle,

find courage enough to embrace the pain of others,

participate in a miracle of feeding God’s people.

So why are you here?!?!

You are here ---

Because if your faith means anything, it does something.

It changes you- so you can change the world.

May it be so friends and May it be soon. Amen.

(At the conclusion of the sermon Rev. Sara sang “Dream God’s Dream)