

ConnTact

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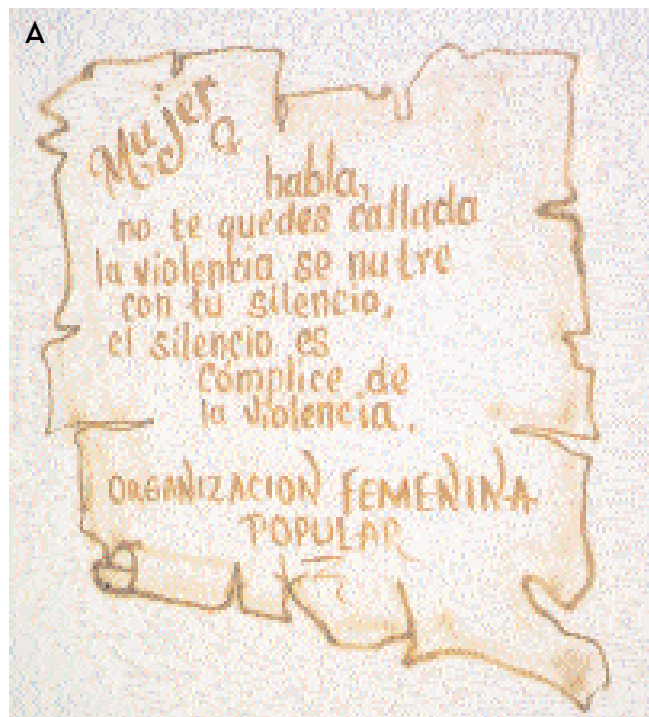
Journey to Ibagué

Deborah Blood, the Chair of our Connecticut Conference Colombia Partnership Committee, traveled to Colombia last January with a Witness for Peace delegation. She spent two days in the city of the city of Ibagué, visiting the Iglesia Evangelica Luterana de Ibague (Evangelical Lutheran Church of Ibague), the sister church of the First Church of Christ, Congregational in Middletown. This story is a combined effort of Deb and Charlotte Shristi, the Sister Church program coordinator for Justapaz, the Colombian Mennonite Justice and Peace agency that is partnered with the Connecticut Conference, written in Deb's first-person voice.

As you read, consider whether your congregation might explore becoming a sister church. There are many Colombian churches waiting for a North American congregation to walk with them as they work for peace and for better lives! Maybe God is calling YOU to this ministry of accompaniment.

Four of us *gringos* (foreigners) boarded a public mini-bus from Bogota to Ibagué on January 27 — Janna Bowman, Charlotte and Micah Shristi and I. The route took us through an area where there is currently no conflict in the country's decades-long civil war. It is beautiful country. Each corner we turned revealed another green mountain peak or a deeply carved valley. From Bogotá, high up in the Andes, we descended, heading west from the Spring-like weather of the mountains to the hot humidity of the plains near the equator. We passed through many climate zones, as well as through many economic zones. We saw both deep rural poverty and the substantial wealth of the resort town of Melgar — playground of wealthy Bogotáños.

Ibague is a provincial capital of about 800,000 people located in the foothills of a
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A) Wall slogan condemning silence as complicit with violence, from Casa de la Mujer (House of Women) in Barrancabermeja

B) Four niñas from Iglesia Evangelica in Ibague

C) Overlooking homes in the Soacha section of Bogotá

My Reflections

by Deborah Blood

Not surprisingly, my recent visit to our sisters and brothers in Colombia provided substantial opportunity to reflect on the idea of "mission." The

following are some excerpts from my journal, along with further reflections since my return. I hope that one woman's experience might help others reflect upon their own!

January 27 — The day started with a stop at an ATM at the Bank of Bogotá that gave me pesos, but refused to return my card. Disaster was averted by using Janna's computer, logging on to my bank's website (where I could have paid my bills or transferred money!) and then calling the bank's emergency line to cancel my ATM card. What a world we live in, where technology can make the solution to a potentially big problem so simple. And what a privileged person I am to have access to such technology. As so many times on this trip, I am struck with stark contrasts. We are so far away, and yet so close. So disconnected and yet so utterly connected. The question of "who is my neighbor?" requires an ever-broadening and changing response.

This brings me to a question that is still with me a month after returning — where do I fit in? In this world of contrasts, where we can move from place to place with such ease (even in a war zone), where a well-educated, upper-middle-class, white woman like me can move between and among so many worlds so freely, how do I — or how do any of us — choose what to do and how to be? What does "mission" mean in this context? I am overwhelmed by a sense of my privilege and responsibility - and by questions of where my real home and safety are.

Consider the ground I covered in 14 days. Two days in Miami for training and group-building. Several days in Bogotá, which included:

- a day in a terribly impoverished Afro-Colombian community of the displaced;
- life in the very wealthy northern end of the city, with upscale shops, restaurants, a brew pub and so on. The mall we went to was at least the equal of our priciest malls in Connecticut;
- a large open air food market with a wide variety of fruits, vegetables, meats and flowers;
- the old section of the city — where I stayed in a gorgeous hotel my last night in Colombia; and
- our hotel and the Mennonite church where we met, in a nice, middle-class area of the city.

Contrast that with our experience going to Barrancabermeja, an oil-refining city that is controlled by right-wing paramilitaries. Or the experience I had in the *barrio* in Ibague.

We were asked during the delegation to reflect on the question of "Where do we feel most comfortable and most at home?" Well, maybe in the middle class neighborhood in Bogotá, or maybe the mall. That is NOT where the folks we met would feel the most comfortable! But from Barrancabermeja, Bogotá felt like home. And in Las Delicias, I felt safe for the first time on the trip, folded into the comfort and love of a Christian community. I think part of the experience of "mission" in this new world is being willing to

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Focus on the Hope in the Resurrection



As we approach Holy Week this year, we do so with renewed attention to Jesus as the suffering servant. The world does need to understand Jesus' conviction about God's intent for the world and his willingness to suffer and die for that conviction. This is good.

What I find myself struggling with in this season is the relationship between faith and suffering, or,

perhaps more aptly, the relation between religion and violence. I freely acknowledge that my faith and my religion are far more focused on the alleviation of suffering and the end of violence than they are on either as the vehicle to faith. I read the scriptures and find within them a devastating record of the human propensity toward war and brutality as a response to conflict. Yet I also read the scriptures and find within them a vision of a renewed world in which faith leads us to eschew such ways and to commit ourselves to "the things that make for peace."

So I struggle with Christ's suffering and death. I believe that in God's transformation of his horrible death into glorious resurrection, God got our attention in a unique and timeless way. We are thick-headed and stubborn; we are indeed devoted to violence and need to be redeemed from this most basic of sins. I struggle. This is good.

In my theological pondering of God's ways with the world, I find a pattern. For me, Christ's passion is linked to the suffering of others. It is not just that Christ suffered and died and all would be well with the world if we would only believe. Rather, both personal and systemic suffering are transfigured by Christ's. I do not mean that suffering in itself is made holy, but that Christ walks in a special way with those who suffer, and in their suffering his is made real for

us today. In his passion, we find a transformed vantage point on those today who are violated by power run amuck. Their suffering becomes our cause – not our only cause, but an important one, because in it we see Christ's witness to the world once again, if we will only look through the eyes of faith. This too is good.

When we advocate for justice and peace, it is a means of speaking a word of hope to a world weighed down with war and brutality. I cannot help but think of our Christian partners around the globe with whom we are one through Our Church's Wider Mission. Whether they are in Colombia, Bosnia, Korea, the Middle East, or parts of Africa, whether they are in violent homes right here in Connecticut, in neighborhoods where poverty is devastating, or in lives laced through with racism, their suffering becomes ours because we are Christ's. His suffering and passion have changed us so thoroughly that what matters to us is not we ourselves, but all who suffer. We struggle. This is good.

May Holy Week be a journey of renewed conviction for all of us as we face the reality of Christ's crucifixion and turn our faces toward the glowing sunrise of resurrection hope for the world. In Christ's Name.

Important Legislative Agenda Work in 2004

by Kim Harrison

Public Policy Advocate for the Connecticut Conference of UCC

As the 2004 Connecticut legislative session opens, lawmakers are not facing the enormous pressure of a \$1.5 billion deficit, state layoffs and grim economic picture of a year ago. This year, the state starts with slightly more than a \$90 million deficit and an economic forecast that looks much brighter.

However, the Conference has identified several critical issues the General Assembly must address during the four-month session. Foremost among them is the need to reverse policy decisions that threaten to harm the health care system for low-income residents.

Changes made to the Medicaid and HUSKY (Healthcare for Uninsured Kids and Youth) programs have drastic implications that could mean the loss of health insurance coverage for 86,000 state residents. Co-payments for prescription drugs and visits to physicians were either increased or newly imposed for all of these individuals. In addition, new premiums were imposed on families whose incomes range from 50 - 185% of the federal poverty level (FPL). The net effect has been to reduce benefits and increase costs for those who most need support from these programs.

As more of Connecticut's citizens become uninsured, these changes will cause more children to suffer preventable illnesses, pregnant women to delay prenatal care, and the elderly and people with disabilities to delay treatment for acute and chronic illnesses. Emergency rooms, community health centers and primary care providers will be strained even further,

requiring more state money for uncompensated care. These budget cuts will realize little if any cost savings to the state, while severely impairing the health of our most vulnerable citizens. Legislators must make repeal of these changes a top priority.

There are several other social justice efforts that our legislative agenda will focus on, including:

- Restoring medical and cash assistance for legal immigrants - A casualty of last year's budget battle, the program providing this help ended July 1. This program assists legal immigrants who have been here fewer than five years and who have fallen on hard times; most of the current beneficiaries are children and frail elderly individuals.

- Opposing vouchers for private schools - Governor Rowland is again proposing vouchers that would use \$1.5 million of state money and \$500,000 of local education money to give 500 students a voucher of \$4,000 each. Students in the 42 elementary and middle schools that did not make "Adequate Yearly Progress" and had whole-school academic deficiencies in math and reading under the federal No Child Left Behind Act could apply for these new vouchers. Localities will also be obligated to transport children who take advantage of these vouchers, as long as their new school is in the student's town or abutting town.

- Including gender identity and persons with disabilities in the Hate Crimes statute - While Connecticut passed ground-breaking legislation with our Hate Crimes statute in 1990, neither gender identity nor persons with disabilities were included at the time. As other states have followed in our footsteps, 17 have included both categories. We recognize that hate crimes against individuals in these groups have a special psychological and emotional impact that extends beyond the original victim. We will work for the expansion of this statute.

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Conference Moves to Include Five Regions

The Connecticut Conference has announced plans to realign into a five-region structure, effective January 1, 2005. The changing needs of the Church have been discussed during the past year by the Conference's Board of Directors, Regional Ministers and Associate Conference Ministers.

In a letter sent in February to ordained ministers, as well as key local church, Association and Conference lay leaders, the Conference Minister, Rev. Davida Foy Crabtree, said there was unanimous agreement that the move from three to five regions affords many benefits. The move was approved by the Board at its February meeting.

"This shift to five regions is designed to be budget-neutral. In a time of financial stress, that means there have to be other changes in our life and ministry," she said. "Yet, even anticipating those changes, the Board and staff believe unanimously that this is the right step to take at this moment in history. It's all about relationships, and this will strengthen our ability to build strong partnerships of mutual support among our churches and our clergy, and together as a Conference."

This realignment is expected to be welcomed by a great many in the Conference. Over the years, dialogue with local church leaders and careful observation of work of the ministries of the Conference have identified five regions as a desirable way to best contribute to the overall health and well-being of the local churches and to engagement together in mission and outreach.

Rev. Crabtree's letter said this strategic move will help achieve the following goals:

- Reduce the size of the regions, allowing the Regional Ministers to focus their attention and level of care on fewer churches, clergy and associations
- Uphold the original dream of the Conference in 1994-95 and fully orient the work of the Conference toward relationship, believing that the best program and mission grows out of healthy relationships
- Assist churches in identifying the challenges and opportunities before them and discovering ways they can collaborate in stepping up to both
- Help churches move toward being transformational ministries for both their members and their communities
- Develop closer work with the churches in mission engagement and justice work, with particular (but not exclusive) attention to the cities

After study and analysis of demographics, transportation corridors, natural relationships, and urban centers, these five will be deployed to regions consisting of the following associations:

- Eastern:** Tolland, Windham and New London (51 churches/53 parish clergy)
- South Central:** Middlesex, New Haven East, New Haven and Central (63/83)
- Southwest:** Fairfield East and Fairfield West (41/56)
- Northwest:** Naugatuck Valley, Litchfield South and Litchfield North (49/47)

North Central: Farmington Valley, Hartford and Hartford East (45/69)

In this new form, the five Regional Ministers will continue their emphasis on consulting with congregations and pastors in times of search and stress. In addition, they will also seek opportunities to develop programs and ministry responsive to needs identified within their region. The five RMs will nurture cooperation across regional lines as well so that we remain one Conference.

With Judy Hjorth's retirement in June as Northern Regional Minister and an interim lasting until about January 1, 2005, the Conference expects to undertake a search for three new Regional Ministers for the Eastern, Northwest and North Central regions during that same time frame. The Rev. Susan Townsley will serve the Southwest Region, and the Rev. Kent Siladi will serve the South Central Region and as Coordinator of the Regional Ministers.

Several sessions in each of the new regions are planned as a prelude to the necessary search process. They are designed to ensure that our churches' clergy and lay leadership fully understand the many facets of the transition plan and so the search committee and Conference staff can understand the unique needs and perspectives of each region.

The changes in the regional structure will be accompanied by restructuring in the Ministries within the Conference office itself. The offices of Local Church Ministries and Justice and Witness Ministries will close. The Rev. Kathy Peters, Associate Conference Minister (ACM) for Local Church Ministry, will seek a new call, and the Rev. Gordon Bates, ACM for the Justice and Witness Ministry, will retire. Both participated in this process and are supportive of this new staff design. The Rev. Carole Carlson, ACM for Clergy Concerns and Jim Morgan, ACM for Wider Church Ministry, will continue in their respective positions, with slight modifications. Support staff needs will be reassessed in light of the changes and the resources necessary to be effective in our work.

One change is already clear. Amy Beveridge, who currently serves as Coordinator for the Ruth Dudley Resource Center and as Stewardship Specialist, will work specifically in the area of Christian Education as well. She will focus on providing consultation to local churches and Christian Educators. This transition also will occur on January 1, 2005.

Beveridge, who is married to a minister, has a master's degree in Adult Education. She will bring a wealth of experience to this new aspect of her work, having served as a Director of Christian Education, camp counselor, Sunday school teacher at many grade levels and public school teacher for first, second and third grade students with learning disabilities. She currently coordinates K-5 church school classes in her local church, and is part of a teaching team that uses a modified Workshop Rotation model.

"Change is never easy, but without it we stagnate and decline," said Crabtree. "Our hope and commitment is that these new relationships will result in increased faithfulness to Christ's clear call to us to be his body in the midst of the world – vital, exciting, committed to the gospel and dedicated to sharing God's love, justice and mercy with the people of Connecticut."

A Day in the Life

by Rev. Susan Townsley

Western Regional Minister

It 10:30 pm., and I am halfway home. I've spent the evening with a Church council, working together on the vision and mission of their church, given the challenges of their setting and our time. I heard faithful people witness to the life of this church - how it has touched their lives, provided glimpses of healing, moments of transcendence, opportunities for service, and visions of God's grace.

Most nights, on the drive home I blast my musical favorites - Mary Foster Conklin or Lynn Miles or Rachmaninov. This night the music will not penetrate my thoughts. I am reviewing my work.

There are two search committees I need to get back to about technical questions or with reference information. There is a call from Michigan - a pastor interested in hearing about pulpit vacancies in my region, another call from a pastor whose voice reflects a stress that he will not name in the message. There are several pastors whom caring clergy colleagues or church leaders have mentioned might need a pastoral visit. There is a sermon to prepare on the Transfigurations texts, requests for program resources from four churches, correspondence unanswered and filing yet to be done.

The work of a Regional Minister is—no less than the work of a local pastor—never-ending. Priorities shift with every phone call. Still, as I drive the dark backroads home, I am far from disheartened.

That morning, I met with a Committee on Ministry, where concerns for my well-being were kept in prayer along with prayers for the well-being of 32 churches and 60 clergy. At noon, I had lunch with an old and trusted colleague to talk about building issues and capital campaigns. He ministered to me as much as I to him. Later, I met a minister in her office to consider a particular challenge in her setting, even as we laughed at the personalities and patterns that are so much a part of parish life.

The particular privilege of my work is that I live in the connections that churches have one to another. Every time I visit with one pastor or preach in one church, I bear the commitment of the 256 churches in Connecticut to offer mutual support and aid. My work enables me to be part of the network of clergy support, nurture and accountability, a means by which all the constituent parts of the conference care for churches and church leaders.

Immediately apparent to me, however, is the discouraging ratio of congregations to Regional Ministers - an average of 85 to 1. Over the course of a year, I will preach in about 30 churches, work with 15 search committees, meet with 10 church councils, lead events or studies in 5. I would love to meet with more church councils, lay leaders and bible study groups. There are many ways to be present, but not enough time.

As I reach the familiar streets of my hometown, I measure my day by the yardstick of statistics and accomplishments, and I find my work wanting. Then I measure my day by the yardstick of fellowship and humor and I find my work adequate. Arriving safely home, I find the grace to be satisfied with this day.

Journey to Ibague

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branch of the Andes, about 120 miles from Bogotá. It is an area that has enjoyed relative political and economic stability during Colombia's civil war, so we were able to travel there safely using public transportation.

Pastor Henry Martin Gonzalez, of Iglesia Evangelica Luterana de Ibague, and one of his church members met us at the bus station. After a short cab ride, we reached the barrio (neighborhood) of Las Delicias ("the delicious things") and were served lunch in the home of Aura Norena, whose family is one of the most involved in the church.

After a delicious meal of traditional chicken and potato soup and bread (one of the good things about traveling in Colombia is that the food is not challenging. It is wholesome, not spicy and easy on North American palates.), a bit of chatting with church



Unidentified residents of Soacha

members, and playing with the children and babies, we walked a block up the street to the church, a rough, three-storey cement building.

The pastor and congregation were eager to show us all the programs they have and all the work they are doing to improve their community. We were impressed with their high level of organization and their zeal for moving forward.

They first showed us their community pharmacy, which takes donations of medicines to distribute for free, and also buys wholesale medicines to sell at cost. We then settled into a meeting with the church steering committee — their equivalent of our Church Council. We realized afterward that we had moved too quickly into business talk without enough culturally-mandated small talk, but our hosts seemed to tolerate our lack of manners!

The meeting went well, and we left with the clear understanding that Las Delicias is committed to maintaining a sister church relationship with First Church Middletown. We heard the committee's desires for the relationship, talked about logistics of communication and ideas for ways of interacting in the future. Janna also spoke about the vision of the "Sanctuary of Peace" church program and affirmed the Ibagué congregation for carrying out this vision. Communication has been a challenge, and the Ibagué church cannot afford to buy a computer. They are, however, going to open an account at a local internet café, so communication will be easier soon.

We had lots of ideas for strengthening the relationship between the two churches, including having a

worship service on the same day around the same theme or Bible passages. We agreed that each congregation could have a candle to symbolize the relationship and light it during worship services and pray for the other. They presented me with a red candle in the evening worship service, to take to Middletown.

Both churches will share personal details about members of the congregation and their daily lives, challenges, celebrations, and successes. They told us there was to be a wedding at the church of two young members that Saturday, and lamented that we couldn't stay to celebrate it with them. We talked about common celebrations such as Mother's Day and Father's Day and church birthdays. Theirs is February 10.

During the evening worship service they asked me to share news of the Middletown congregation and presented me with many gifts to take back to them. They also gave me a Colombian Lutheran Hymnal, and all of us received various pieces of memorabilia. Pastor Gonzalez invited me to help give the host during Communion. Janna said this was very significant, as I am a woman and not yet ordained. It was a lively, spirit-filled worship, with much laughter and also much gravity. Although the service was in Spanish, the liturgy is familiar so it was not difficult to follow along.

I was struck by the fact that the church is literally open to the community. Its back "wall" opens on the street, and is nothing but a gate. There are about 34 full-time members of the congregation, but 70 to 80 people routinely come to worship. All of the church's programs are open to the community. It reminded me of the Amistad chapel at the UCC National offices in Cleveland, where one whole wall is made of glass, and looks out onto a dreary city street, while the rest of the space creates a sense of being on a ship. The whole world is included in worship and the church community is the whole community where the church is located. This idea was further heightened when Pastor Gonzales preached a beautiful sermon on *amistad* (friendship), evoking memories of the UCC's historic link to the Amistad event here in Connecticut. Wouldn't it be astonishing if our churches could live their lives with one wall open (at least metaphorically) to include their whole communities — local, national and international!

"The House of God is the house of the people." This is the motto of Iglesia Evangelica. While this may seem to us a beautiful motto, and hardly radical, it is radical in a country where society is heavily stratified and where equality under the law, and even within the church, is not the norm. One of the hymns in their worship song sheet is titled "God, make me a Radical!" This from a church that was started 20 years ago by a missionary who first held worship among and on top of the huge rocks that characterize this area. Pastor Gonzales makes a joke about his church having been "built on the Rock" — and it is a good joke because it speaks a truth about this congregation.

After a traditional supper of bread and hot chocolate (Yum!), with more sharing and making of friends, we were welcomed into the homes of church leaders for the night. Each of us experienced wonderful hospitality. Being in the barrio was the first time I felt truly safe in Colombia, even though we experienced no overt threats. For all of the problems and intense challenges that our sisters and brothers face, they have created a community of faith that wrapped us in welcome and comfort.

The following day, we went to see the congregation's other projects, accompanied by members of the steering committee and many children. They are especially proud of the water filtration and delivery system that the church, along with a committee of the barrio, has organized. We had an idyllic walk farther up into the Andean foothills, criss-crossing a stream and passing through a bamboo grove, to reach the place where they have built a filtering system and a water storage tank. With the fee that community families pay to receive water from this system (about \$1.10/month), they have purchased land with a stream and have built a house so that a caretaker can live on the plot and maintain the system. They aspire to raise enough money to purchase adjacent land that contains a more reliable stream, and to build another storage tank. This would enable them to supply all the water the community needs.

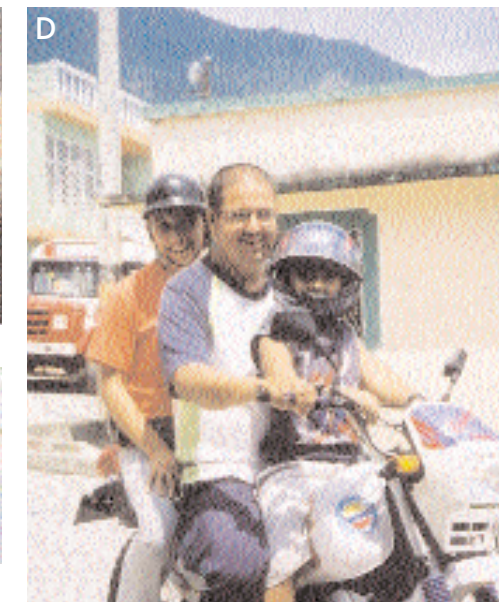
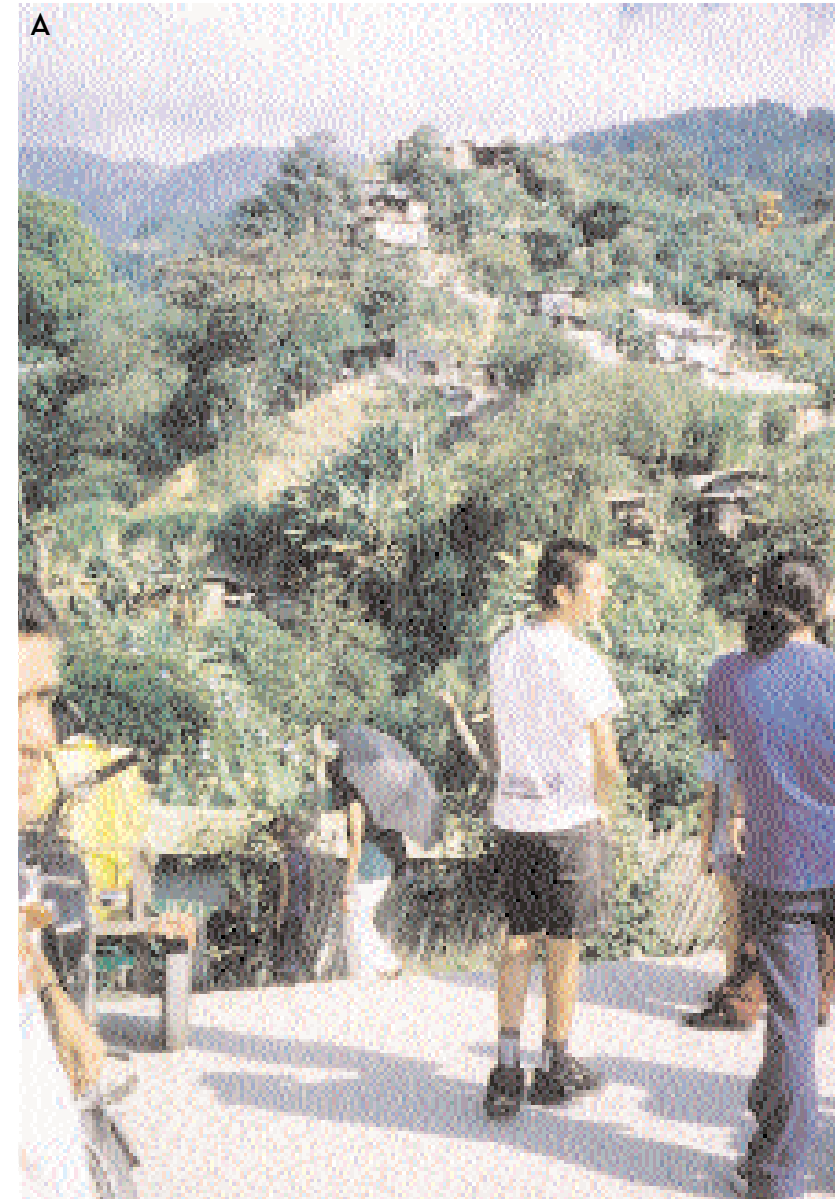
They also have a rotating fund, funded by Lutheran World Relief, which gives loans for house improvements. They take a great deal of pride in their homes, and 320 people have benefited so far from the loans. There also is a small loan program for micro-businesses. As we walked upstream, we visited a man along the trail who had leather out and was preparing to make several horse saddles as a result of this program.

Our Colombian sisters and brothers are full of dreams! They have purchased a lot in back of the church where they will construct a community center to house all of their programs. Their plans include an alternative school for children whose families cannot afford the public school, a small library, a soup kitchen for children and much more! And if their achievements so far are any indication, they will find a way for those dreams to come true.

We learned a lot from our sisters and brothers in such a short time. The barrio Las Delicias from which the church gets its name saw its beginning in 1985 when many people arrived after fleeing a nearby volcanic eruption. Others, displaced by the violence in the south of Tolima and the region called Valle, have arrived as well. It is a barrio of persons without many resources, and the government provides very little. But the community, despite suffering from hunger, broken families (particularly few fathers in the home), drug use, and a lack of secure work, has organized itself to find its own resources.

It was a blessing to visit First Church Middletown's sister church, even for such a short time. The groundwork for a rich, mutual, spirit-filled relationship has already been laid, and it even seems possible that there could be visiting back and forth. As the relationship deepens, the potential is also there for the two churches to participate in a project in Las Delicias that would be supported by the Middletown church. There are so many possibilities! It is easy to feel the clear presence of the Spirit in this beautiful work of reaching hands across cultures to our sisters and brothers in Christ.

For more information about the Connecticut Conference's Colombia Partnership Committee, or becoming a sister church with a Colombian church, contact Deborah Blood at djblood@earthlink.net or call Jim Morgan or Cecile Gilson at the Conference Office, 860 233-5564, or toll-free at 866-367-2822.



My Reflections

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ine our assumptions about our place in the world.

January 29 — I'm in an Asian restaurant in the Philadelphia airport, sipping a martini that will probably cost the equivalent of 20,000 pesos, a significant sum in Colombia. (One can eat a fine meal in a nice restaurant in Colombia for the same amount — about \$7.50.) I walked through what seemed like miles of upscale shops just moving from gate to gate. This doesn't feel like "home." 48 hours ago, I was in the church at Las Delicias — worshipping and helping to serve Communion — reaching out, forging bonds of trust and hope, giving and receiving gifts of friendship. We were making the first warp and woof of a tapestry of *amistad* (friendship). Now I feel like I am surrounded by "anti-friendship." I would be embarrassed to host our friends here. The cost of dinner alone would do so much toward improving their water system, providing food and education to their children, more medicine for the community pharmacy. This is almost more culture shock than in the *barrio*. I think it *is* more. At least, this seems more shocking. Perhaps "mission" is allowing ourselves to enter another culture sufficiently that our own culture becomes shocking — to step into other shoes and see through other eyes in ways that transform our vision and move us — propel us — toward new paths on our faith journey.

I realize that the TV in the restaurant is tuned to a Democratic Presidential debate and it occurs to me that, in Colombia, it is quite likely that one or more of the candidates would have been threatened, kidnapped, or even murdered by now. I like our system better. Having been to Colombia, I am more appreciative of what we have, and more critical, and more activist about exercising the constitutional rights that we have — and too often take for granted.

The analogy that comes to me is from the safety presentations I've been seeing on successive airplane flights. If the oxygen masks drop down, one is urged to put on their own mask before helping the person next to them. If the Americas are an airplane, then the United States has its oxygen mask permanently in place. It's time that we turn to the other passengers in the plane and render assistance that gives life. Right now, most of

be thrown off balance and to examine our assumptions about our place in the world. what we are sending to Colombia is military aid that serves only to pour kerosene on the flames of the violence and terror that is the daily lot of the poor. Perhaps "mission" is knowing and accepting that we are privileged, and that our blessings carry with them responsibilities. Can we share our safety with others? Even give up a bit of it from time to time to accompany those whose lives are threatened?

I am much more conscious of how my privilege allows me freedom to accompany our Colombian friends as they work for peace and justice and as they endure threats and danger. The idea of "accompaniment" means much more to me now that I have personally heard and seen the impact of this work. Simply put, our witness to the lives and struggles of our Colombian friends can literally save lives. Because the only thing the current Colombian administration will listen to is international pressure, my decision whether or not to call or e-mail my congressperson in response to a request for urgent action is potentially a life-or-death decision. My presence, and the on-going presence of Witness for Peace in Colombia, provides a measure of additional safety to human rights workers. More and more, they are under fire from the Colombian government, labeled "terrorists" simply because they are effective in exposing the human rights violations that are a constant reality in Colombia, and in which the government is often complicit.

It does make a difference when people go to Colombia to witness and accompany. And when churches agree to become sister churches and accompany their Colombian partners with prayer and support as they work to make better lives for themselves. Witness for Peace has safely taken more than 500 delegates to Colombia since 2001. I guarantee that you will feel more alive and less afraid when you return.

"Mission" is accompaniment and witness. It is being willing to see the world as it really is and to speak the truth to power — in whatever form it presents itself. We can help our sisters and brothers by our presence, whether in prayer, friendship, letter writing, advocacy or being there to physically walk with them. So, think about this — who are *you* called to accompany? What are you called to witness? What does "mission" mean for you, your family and your congregation in this new world we inhabit?

Photos, this page:

A) Vista of hills and homes on the walk to see the water system in the Las Delicias barrio of Ibague

B) Looking down a street in Soacha

C) Deb Blood, in Ibague

D) Getting around in Ibague — Church leaders Luz Enid Salsedo, William Vidales and son, Cristian

E) Some of the Witness for Peace delegation, with four members of AFRODES, a human rights organization established for Afro-Colombians in 1999

A (Brief) Dialogue with Dale Bishop

by Jim Morgan



Your position is Director of Relationships and Resources for Interreligious Understanding. Can you talk about some of what you'll be doing? It's a new position at the Seminary. One of the things I'll be doing is assisting in the recruitment of students from overseas, particularly Christians who live in relationship with Muslims. The Seminary has done a superb job in attracting Muslim students. We're hoping to provide Christian counterparts. Of course recruitment of students is impossible unless we are able to identify sources of support for them while they are here, so that's part of my job as well. In addition, I hope to be in conversation with other seminaries about the kind of interfaith resources Hartford has available. Many of them are unable financially to do programs on interfaith relationships, but in cooperation with Hartford Seminary and other seminaries, we hope to make the resources here available. Finally, I expect that I will be nurturing relationships with UCC churches in New England.

Do you see this as a continuation of your ministry in the UCC national office? Not in the narrow sense. But in a broader sense, I see this as an avenue of service to the United Church of Christ, which is very dear to me. Throughout my time of service with the UCC, I have been particularly interested not only in the Middle East, but in the broader issues of Christian-Muslim relationships. Hartford provides a well-established, albeit somewhat different, venue for pursuing this interest, this cause.

In the area of Christian-Muslim relations, what is lacking in our mutual understandings of one another, and how do we address those issues? This is a big question, too big to answer at all adequately here. As a kind of teaser, though, I would say that we, Christians and Muslims, are both burdened by dehumanizing images of each other, and by a tor-

ture history. We address the dehumanization by being human with each other.

Can you share some special memories of time spent in foreign countries, people met, missions undertaken, etc.? That's really too much for this interview. I have become famous (or infamous) for my stories, but what makes them meaningful to me is not their value of entertainment, but the context in which they had an impact on me and on my faith. Over a period of 20-plus years, I visited the Middle East on an average of three or four times a year, during some pretty tumultuous times. If there weren't interesting experiences, I would have had to be unconscious!

In my role as Executive Minister of WCM, I had the opportunity to expand my experience to include China, the Philippines, India and Indonesia. Each of these experiences had an impact on my understanding of the church, and of my own faith.

You've taught before. Do you plan to speak or teach in other Connecticut settings as well? I love teaching. I felt that much of my work in the national setting of the UCC was teaching, and I hope to continue to teach in the forum of the local church as well as in the seminary.

What is your hope for the UCC in coming years? First and foremost, I hope that the UCC will continue to strive to be a faithful part of the universal body of Christ. My years of dealing with Middle Eastern Christians, who are a small minority, doomed to obscurity by the world's standards of success, have convinced me of the virtue of faithfulness. When we abandon our calling to be faithful to Christ for the sake of some momentary sense of success, we have become something other than the church.

The UCC brings special gifts to the ecumenical movement—our history of commitment to issues of justice, our strong history in mission, our openness to people who have felt left behind by the church or excluded from it. I think that we will get there by holding fast to the fundamentals of the faith with a strong sense of our own tradition within the faith. Whether this means that we will get bigger or smaller is not something that we can determine. What we can determine, however, is our steadfastness in the faith.

Bishop Talks of Mission in the 21st Century

by Jim Morgan

"We often don't want to know of others' humanity and goodness, or our own role in the injustices of the world order."

"Mission is problematic. It requires recognizing that the U.S. is part of the world, much as this administration wishes it weren't."

"Human interaction in this age of interfaith diversity is something the churches ought to grab."

These were just a few of the remarks offered by Dr. Dale Bishop in an evening talk at Hartford Seminary on February 12. On a cold winter's night, he had the rapt attention of the audience of more than 50 people as he addressed his topic, "The Rehabilitation of Mission: The Interfaith Context."

Bishop, a Middle East expert, holds the newly created position of Director of Relationships and Resources for Interreligious Understanding at the seminary. He was introduced by Prof. Jane Smith, co-Director of the MacDonald Center for Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations. Bishop is here, she said, "to work to better the cause of Christian Muslim relations on the basis of long-standing relationships and dialogue in the Middle East."

Bishop began by speaking of the extensive travel he has done during his career. One of the advantages of that, he noted, is "lots of places feel like home. Hartford is one of those places." Bishop shared that as he has traveled, he's found most any mention of religion or mission to be a good way to guarantee that conversation was over, so unlike the accounts of Jesus and his deliberate engaging with strangers to discuss politics and religion.

Mission today, he said, cannot be conducted with the sort of manifest destiny methods that characterized 19th century American Protestant missionaries. They were "human beings who partook of the limitations of their age, imperfect vessels of grace," he said. In our modern world, settings are more geographically, politically, culturally and religiously different than ever before. Mission must be relevant to the context of the world of globalization if it is to be rehabilitated.

Bishop said the *process* of globalization is inevitable, while calling the *project* of globalization "the most difficult of the 21st century." Globalization, as a project, brings people

together as the exploited and the exploiters. Into this world of "wonderful and perplexing diversity, of togetherness and radical division, mission must be rehabilitated," he said. Bishop sees the frank exchange of dialogue as an essential component of this rehabilitation. "Mission must become something that will free us from the bondage of history, the creation of a world order that reflects God's love for all creation."

Bishop suggested that perhaps mission isn't even the right word for what it is we need to do. "Witness," he said, "is more reflective of Jesus' own life and ministry among "distant, peripheral strangers and outcasts," and "might be a better word of inclusiveness," with its implication of seeing and observing, of being called to speak truthfully of what we have seen, and to name injustice when we have witnessed it. "We are called to witness God's work in the world," he declared.

To this sense of witness, he brought the idea of accompaniment as the way of bringing witness to "the goodness of God's creations, including those whose religious traditions are different than our own." "It may be the most important thing missionaries can do today," he said. "Just be there. Traveling together, being on that road together."

His dialogues with people from these different traditions have confirmed for him that there are many paths to God, with radically different set of assumptions. "We need to accompany each other on the way," he said, adding that "the most eloquent word is the word that arrives in the flesh."

We are called to tell others about humanity's essential goodness, to know them as human beings as we meet one another in truly counter-cultural situations. "Missionaries who are in distant communities are already part of a dialogue," he pointed out. "We need to have the same direct contact in our churches, synagogues and mosques...and our modern world affords that opportunity. It's the modern reality."

"There's a preponderance of love and inclusion in the Bible," Bishop concluded. "The overwhelming witness of Jesus' life and ministry is one of radical openness and inclusion. Together, we travel the road of God's grace, and God's love. Traveling together, we may experience the joy in God's world."

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Endorsed by the Commission for Mission and Justice Ministries

PILGRIMS & PARISHES

EDITED BY JEAN HAMILTON

Vernon
First Congregational Church has been hosting Fidelco Guide dogs in training. Their first graduate has been placed with a woman in New York. The members of the church community are pleased to be a part of the socialization process for these dogs, and to be a part of an outreach process to the wider community.

Union
Congregational Church held a two-part Christian Education series on Worship. The mini-course studied what happens in worship, the Congregational tradition, worship in the UCC, the role of music and a look at other traditions.

Glastonbury
Buckingham Congregational Church invited two Silver Lake Camp counselors to talk to their church school children about the Silver Lake experience, learn songs and play games.

South Windsor
The youth of Wapping Community Church have participated in a Youth Service Challenge. Over the last two years, they have helped with filing, painted, washed and cleaned, providing much-needed service to the church. The challenge has been issued to adults as well, and it is hoped that the adults will help with the service projects.

Torrington
Center Congregational Church invited members of their community to a "Renew Your Vows" celebration on Valentine's Day. The ceremony was held in a romantic, candlelit sanctuary and was followed by a reception featuring gourmet canapés and sparkling punch.

Suffield
First Church of Christ, Congregational invited The Stonewall Speakers to share their stories with the youth, their parents and

all others in the church. The Stonewall Speakers are a non-profit gay and lesbian group, dedicated to the sharing of personal stories as education and healing in a broken world. First Church also offered a Re-Confirmation Experience for Adults, a time to explore how their adult faith may have changed and to deepen their self-understanding as a person of faith.

Bristol
The First Congregational Church has chosen to spend a year studying the United Church of Christ, how it began, what it means, why it works and what is the relationship with the local church.

Hartford
Asylum Hill Congregational Church created a Nature Art Wall consisting of framed photographs taken by members, enhanced by phrases or quotes that were favorites of members.

CLASSIFIEDS

Positions
SEEKING - Director of Music Ministries Position. 30 years of eclectic church music/arts experience. Relocating to CT in mid-to-late May 2004. • Contact: Carol Hoyt, 358 Chalmette Drive, Hazelwood, MO 63042; 314-972-9417; bpmusica@yahoo.com

CHESHIRE — The First Congregational Church seeks a part-time (20 hours/week) Associate Minister for Parish Care (ordination not required). The Minister will build and nurture a network of caring ministries that will connect pastoral care being done by clergy with a broad spectrum of lay ministries. Salary \$20,000 to \$25,000. • Contact: Parish Care Search Committee, First Congregational Church, 111 Church Drive, Cheshire, CT 06410; office@cheshirecongregational.org

COVENTRY - Attention Singers! Please join the First Congregational Church of Coventry in a new, volunteer chorus, the "Coventry Festival Chorus," directed by Jonathan Richter and accompanied by Mary Wilsted. They will be singing a wide variety of sacred and secular music. Rehearsals are Tuesday nights from 7-9. The performance is Sunday, May 16th at 4 PM. • Contact: Jonathan Richter at 781-789-6100 or 860-427-4056; jonathan.richter@ucomm.edu.

GLASTONBURY — Vibrant UCC congregation seeks a committed individual to provide quality care to the children in the infant and toddler rooms during Sunday morning worship. Responsibilities include providing a safe and loving environment for the children, overseeing parent and teen volunteers who will provide

child care support, ensuring toys in the rooms remain age appropriate and clean and that the room has adequate supplies. Experience working with children is necessary. First Aid certification, or willingness to obtain, required; CPR training is also preferred. • Contact: First Church of Christ, Congregational in Glastonbury, 2183 Main Street, Glastonbury, CT 06033, Attn: Kate VanDerzee; Firstchurch@glastonburyfirst.org; 860-633-4641.

HADDAM — The First Congregational Church seeks a part-time Director of Christian Education (avg. 20 hrs/wk) beginning August 1, 2004. Applicant must have strong leadership skills. Be part of a friendly, progressive and collaborative staff. ACE graduate or willingness to complete ACE program preferred. Salary competitive, based on experience and education. • Contact: P.O. Box 215, Haddam, CT 06438, attn: Valerie Williams; 860-345-2742, 860-345-2879 (home) or 860-345-3807 (fax); haddamcong@aol.com.

HARTFORD — Immanuel Congregational Church seeks a Minister with Families and Children, 15 hrs/week - 43 weeks/year. They are a multiracial and multicultural UCC church of about 350 members, looking for a dynamic, outgoing Christian adult (ordination not required) who will interact with children and families within the congregation, and reach out to new families with children, with an emphasis on the church neighborhood. • Contact: Rev. Ruth Martz, Associate Minister, at 527-8121. Please send resume to: Rev. Ruth Martz, Immanuel Congregational Church, 10 Woodland St., Hartford CT 06105. [4/04]

NEW CANAAN — The Congregational Church seeks two full-time Directors of Youth Ministries for high school and middle school youth in the church. Directors of Youth Ministries develop programs for all youth groups, manage a youth ministries budget, recruit and supervise a staff of seven part-time advisors, plan and lead four annual mission trips, and serve as community liaisons. • Contact: The Congregational Church of New Canaan, 23 Park Street, New Canaan, CT 06840, attn: Kelly Morrissey; kelly@godsacre.org. [6/04]

TALCOTTVILLE - Talcottville Congregational Church is looking for a person or couple to do youth ministry and Christian Education part-time, in exchange for rent-free occupancy in a Cape Cod house in Vernon, CT. • Contact: Talcottville Congregational Church, 10 Elm Hill Road, Vernon, CT 06066, 860-649-0815 Mon-Fri, 9 to Noon. [5/04]

WEST HAVEN — The First Congregational Church seeks a Director of Christian Education. The church is a family-oriented, welcoming congregation in search of a person with strong leadership capabilities and a vision for CE work. Experience in Christian Education is preferred. The position is 20 hours per week, with flexible hours. The salary is competitive, based on experience and education. Membership of 400 with a Sunday School of 100 children from age 3 through 8th grade. • Contact: Christian Education Search Committee, First Congregational Church of West Haven, attn: William Ewry, 1 Church Street, West Haven, CT 06516; fcofwh@ctconnect.com [6/04]

EVENTS

Journeys Toward God • April 7, 21, 28, May 5, 12, Oct 27, 7-9 PM • First Congregational Church Woodstock • "How My Relationship with God Has Been Shaped by the United Church of Christ" is an interactive program with leaders of the UCC, CT Conference, and other church settings. Speakers include Rev. Jose Malayang, Apr. 7; Dr. Dale Bishop, Apr. 21; Rev. Kathy Peters, Apr. 28; Rev. Dr. Elizabeth Nordbeck, May 5; Rev. Susan Foster, May 12; Rev. John Thomas, Oct. 27. • Cost: Free • Contact: Rev. Jamie Harrison at 860-928-7405

CT Conference UCC Youth Mission Day • April 17 • A variety of mission opportunities will be offered around Connecticut, including Bridgeport, Hartford, Waterbury, New Haven, and maybe your town, too. If you are interested in sponsoring a particular project or have some ideas for projects, contact: Kathy Peters at kathyp@ctucc.org or Sarah Annis at saraha@ctucc.org; 866-367-2822

Spring Pastoral Relations Workshop • April 17, 9 - Noon • Congregational Church of New Fairfield • Join Esther Shoup and find out what a Pastoral Relations committee is all about and how to start one in your church. • Cost: \$10 per person • Contact: Sarah Annis at saraha@ctucc.org; 860-233-5564 or 866-367-2822.

Chanticleer • Wednesday, April 21, 2004, 8 PM • Immanuel Congregational Church, 10 Woodland Street, Hartford • With its seamless blend of 12 male voices, Chanticleer will perform vocal literature ranging from Renaissance to jazz, gospel to venturesome new music and popular arrangements. Praised by The New York Times for its "precise, pure and deeply felt singing," Chanticleer will make its ninth appearance on the Woodland Concert Series. • Cost: \$25 for general admission, \$20 for seniors and students • Contact: www.woodlandconcertseries.org

Spring Action Weekend for 9th grade-Post High • April 23-25 • Silver Lake Conference Center • Action weekends are a time to see old friends, make new friends and work together to prepare Silver Lake for the coming summer. You will be raking, painting, hauling wood, cleaning cabins, washing windows and doing other outdoor work. Put on your work boots & gloves

and enjoy a weekend of work, fellowship and community. • Cost: \$25 • Contact: Silver Lake Conference Center, 860-364-5526

6th Annual Youth Gathering • Sunday, April 25, 10 AM • The Congregational Church in Killingworth • A youth event for Middle School and High School youth to connect youth from area groups, to excite the youth of our churches, develop fellowship in a safe and invigorating environment and to provide a network for youth groups. Music Workshop, Yoga, challenge course, Labyrinth and Taize worship, leather craft, kick boxing, non-violent self defense, spiritual "journal" writing and more. • Contact: Rev Ed at 860-663-1789 or Karen at 860-663-3866; reved@rcn.com

Ministry to Parishioners with Emotional and Personality Disorders • Wednesday, April 28, 9-4:30 • First Baptist/South Congregational Church, 90 Main St., New Britain • Presented by the Center for Career Development and Ministry's Institute for Ministry Leadership. • Enhance your Pastoral Care skills and learn about treatment protocols and resources for persons with emotional and psychological disorders and how these disorders may affect faith, theology and spirituality. • Cost: \$90, program: \$10, lunch. Six CEUs offered; register by April 14 • Contact: Center for Career Development and Ministry, 30 Milton St., Suite 107, Dedham, MA 02026; 781-329-2100; ccdmin@aol.com

Roundtable Discussion • April 30, 10 - Noon • First Church of Christ, Congregational, 12 South Main St., West Hartford • The Ruth Dudley Resource Center and the John P. Webster Library offer "Building the Good Society: Politics Informed by Faith." Should the church address political life? What are appropriate and beneficial ways to engage church members in political life? How will upcoming CT Conference staff changes affect ministries related to political life? Pastors, CE staff and interested laypersons are invited to discuss these and other questions. Facilitator: Rev. Kent Siladi, South Eastern Regional Minister, CT Conference, UCC. An informal lunch will follow; confirm by e-mail or call. • Contact: jpwebsterdir@snet.net; 860-232-3893

Walk Against Hunger • Sunday, May 2, 1 PM • The Hartford, 690 Asylum Avenue, Hartford • A three-mile walk with refreshments, music and fun to benefit FoodShare. • Cost: Pledges • Contact: www.foodshare.org

The New England Association of United Church Educators 33rd Annual Conference on Christian Education • May 4-6 • Craigville Conference Center on Cape Cod • "Keeping the Boat Afloat/Trusting in God's Navigation." Rev. Mary Luti will be the keynote speaker and worship leader. This conference is designed for Pastors, Associate Pastors, Youth Ministers, Christian Educators, Youth Leaders and Sunday School Teachers. • Contact: Sarah Annis, 860-233-5564 or toll-free, 866-367-2822; saraha@ctucc.org

Serving as Moderator • Saturday, May 7, 8:30 to Noon • Saugatuck Congregational Church of Westport • A workshop for moderators in a UCC Church. All current moderators, vice moderators, soon-to-be-elected moderators or persons who would like to learn more about moderating a UCC church are invited to attend a workshop on what it means to be a moderator in the UCC tradition. • Cost: \$5 • Contact: Sarah Annis, 860-233-5564 or toll-free, 866-367-2822; saraha@ctucc.org

Safe Church Training • Saturday, May 8, 8:30 to Noon • First Congregational Church of Cheshire • For churches with or establishing policies and for those just exploring. Introduction to the who, what, where, why and how of Safe Church Policies for churches just beginning or training for staff and volunteers in those churches with safe church policies. • Cost: \$10 • Contact: Sarah Annis, 860-233-5564 or toll-free, 866-367-2822; saraha@ctucc.org

Clergy Misconduct Prevention Training • Thursday, May 27, 9-4:30 PM • Rocky Hill Congregational Church, 805 Old Main Street, Rocky Hill • Misconduct Prevention Training for Authorized Ministers. Basic course to meet Association requirement • Cost: \$50 • Registration Contact: Sue Furness at susanf@ctucc.org; 866-367-2822

Annual Meeting of CT Women of UCC

By Sue Waldron
President, CT Women of UCC

Make your plans to attend the 76th Annual Meeting of Connecticut Women of the United Church of Christ. The meeting takes place on Saturday, May 1 from 9:30 to 3 at the First Congregational Church of Guilford. Keynote speaker will be Angela Balfour, former missionary to South Africa and current U.C.C. Program Associate for Africa.

The theme, "From Southern Africa to Connecticut," will help create a mission-focused day. The day will feature four breakout sessions, as well as a special program for young women, 6th-12th grades. Previously nominated women will be recognized during the

short business meeting. The offering will go to support Wider Mission.

Come early to view the many displays and bookstore from Hartford Seminary. New yarn will be collected for use by the inmates at York Correctional Institution, as well as Campbell's soup labels. The day will close with installation of new officers, including Betsy Work as new CT Women's president, and worship with communion.

Registration is \$10, which includes lunch. For more information, or to request a registration form, call Pam DiDio at 860-233-5564, or toll-free at 866-367-2822, ext. 101.

Recent Pastoral Transitions

New Calls

- **Dahlberg, Hilary** from Associate Pastor Minneapolis, MN to Associate Pastor, Storrs Congregational Church. April 1, 2004
- **Guerrera, Jody** from In-Care Naugatuck Valley Association to Associate Pastor First Church of Christ Congregational, Sharon, CT. February 1, 2004
- **Hoyt, Ken** from Pastor, St. Louis, MO to Pastor Buckingham Congregational Church, Glastonbury. June 1, 2004

Resignations

- **Bagnol, Linda** Pastor, Wilson Congregational Church, Windsor to North Carolina. June 1, 2004

Retirements

- **Ashby, Lyle** from The First Congregational Church of East Haddam. February 1, 2004

Correction

- **Harwood, Paulette** from Leave of Absence to Pastor, Federated Church of Christ, Brooklyn, CT