

Interview of Rev. Dale M. Greene, September 24, 2012

by Pat and Tad Larrabee

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Dale: I think that the whole time that I was there, in the 80's, that it was a consciousness raising time, because we went through all kinds of the social issues that are still prominent today. But we had women's liberation, and we had a new woman minister - I was the first woman to come on (the staff). And the story of the whole 80's was dealing with topics where there was a great deal of controversy. And we had people very much for moving ahead with change and others who were "That's not Christian. We're not going to do that "type of thing."

I came on in an interesting way in that the ad was for a new Associate Pastor. And I fell in love with the ad because I wanted to come where there was a shared ministry for the staff. I was not prepared to be the lead pastor. I wanted a group to work with. And so I really wanted this. I had been called to a couple of other churches and said no to them. I was holding out for this church.

Tad: What were you doing at that time?

Dale: I was just out of seminary. So in a way, you could say that's a strike against me in that she's not experienced in a church. I was also divorced. I wrote a letter to Tom and to the Connecticut Conference. And a cover letter for the profile that I sent. And I said that at least half of your congregation are women, probably half of your congregation are middle aged and over 50. I was 53 when I came on. And a number of them are divorced or are going through a divorce. And I said that I am absolutely confident that I can fit in. I always thought that that cover letter helped. Because divorce kept me out of two other positions - in Pennsylvania and Maryland. Because they couldn't think that any Christian person who had been divorced would dare to be a minister.

So it was an interesting time. Times were changing. The search committee had two top candidates; one was Dave Taylor and one was Dale Greene. We both came to preach and we both came for the search committee to talk to us. The upshot of that, as Tom told me, was, "We have chosen Dave Taylor as our Associate, but the search committee wants you also." And he said, "Could you possibly hold off on making a decision for another church and see if we can get the money to get you here for your first year?" So he set about trying to get people to donate for that first year's salary. How that went, I don't know and I never wanted to touch it. I never found out just how that happened. It was a long wait for me and my daughter, but it was well worth the wait. So in 1980 I came on as the Assistant Pastor and Dave Taylor was the Associate. We worked well together.

On January 11, 1981, I was ordained by the Potomac Association of the Central Atlantic Conference at the First Congregational Church of Washington, D.C. where I had made the decision to study for the ministry. After my finally receiving a REV before my name, a grand celebration was planned for the Installation of both of us, here at First Church. It took place during morning worship on March 1, 1981. The Rev. Dr. James D. Glass, president of Lancaster Seminary, gave the sermon. Rev. Arthur E. Higgins, Minister of Church and Society of the Connecticut Conference, gave the charge to ministers and congregation; Betty

Woodman, moderator, Fairfield West Association declared us installed. Our staff was complete.

However, after two years, Dave Taylor left for a different ministry in the Connecticut Conference. Sad, at Dave's leaving, my daughter Jenny and I were happy to move to the parsonage at 15 Forest Avenue. My title was raised to Associate Pastor and Sally Colegrove was ordained and became Assistant Pastor. We were fortunate to have the Rev. William Hart join our staff in 1983 as part-time Interim Associate. Again, our staff was complete.

I started in right away with trying to make people more aware of the women's role in life – that it wasn't the old patriarchal system. And I immediately talked to them about this silly directory that they had given me. The silliness was that the directory of the church members listed the men and women as "Mr. and Mrs. So and So". It gave me no idea what the women's first names were. So that was the first thing that I talked about. In that period of time they finally dropped the board of Deaconesses and the men and women all became Deacons. Inclusive language was something I had worked on for years in seminary and in churches before I had come to seminary. And so I was pushing that, and you know, there was a great deal of push back against that. People didn't want to change language. Well, why? "We've been saying that for years. Why can't we just keep saying it. You know that 'men' means 'men and women', too." And so I was trying to raise awareness.

Tad: I like to hear the Lord's Prayer with "our mother who art in Heaven." (Laughter.)

Dale: Well, it's easier if you say "our mother and father" or it goes against the inclusive language. You've got to include both sides.

I worked with the Women's Fellowship and worked on most everything, except on a smaller scale than the Senior Pastor, of course. I did not preach as often as I did a few years later. But I did preach and did pastoral care working with small groups, and worked with the Women's Fellowship and with the Deaconesses. I was asked to lead certain small interest groups. At first I was assigned mainly to women's groups, and that was good. But when the Women's Fellowship began to work on revising their by-laws, I sat in on their meetings. I can remember all of us sitting around this huge table in the lounge going through the wording of the by-laws. And it was not inclusive. It was "men", "he", "him" all the way through it! I said, "You're women. This is the fellowship of women. This is your by-laws – why do you have all these masculine pronouns?" And they changed it. So that was good change.

So this is why I really think this was a transition ten years in the 80's, moving us toward being more open to inclusiveness in the 90's. We had actually a very vocal man who was an active member. His whole family were active members. He was very much of the religious right. He belonged to Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker's 700 Club.

Pat: We have a great big Bible from the PTL (Praise the Lord) Ministries in the church's collection.

Dale: He was obviously against my inclusive language business. Against the fact that I was a divorced minister. He and his wife did a lot of good stuff for the church. Eventually, as I understand it, they were asked to leave because they made so much trouble for Tom and for different groups that wanted to get together in the church. So it was a time for going between

the very liberal side and the very conservative and the clashes and resentments that come within that.

The AIDS crisis started in 1981. It was advertised, talked about in the churches, but not to the congregations, because the congregations didn't believe that it was a fit topic for church. And I went to a number of sexuality seminars in the Connecticut Conference, and then one at Judson Memorial down in New York City in 1986. There was a gay men's crises seminar / convention / meeting, what have you. And it was eye-opening. The gay men's health crisis is still working to support AIDS and HIV folk. But I and other clergy from CT, NJ, PA and NY had our eyes really opened to the prejudice and the homophobia and the terrible, painful discrimination. I also have always believed in the UCC's credo that we are all welcome in God's church and that we are all God's beloved people. ALL of us. I pushed for that all the way through seminary and when I came to First Church. The Connecticut Conference asked, through the different associations in CT, to have pastors preach on AIDS sometime in April of 1986. I was one of those. There were three of us in the Fairfield West Association that preached on that. Tom said we have to inform the congregation, and you must talk about it in a Pastor's Column and say that you are going to preach on AIDS, and why, and what lead up to that, so that people who came to church would be well aware of that. So I preached that sermon and two people walked out even before I got through the first couple of paragraphs the minute that I said there are two diseases which kill – AIDS and homophobia. And then the rest of the sermon talked about how it kills and how it destroys lives and how we need to realize that ALL of us are loved by God.

Tad: Was this a sermon that you wrote, or you wrote with the other pastors?

Dale: No, I wrote "That You May Regain Your Sight" and delivered it on April 13, 1986. I found a wonderful passage in Acts where the scales fall from Paul's eyes on the road and he regains his sight. In the passage, Ananias who comes to Paul, says that you may regain your sight - do such and so. It fit in perfectly. What I was saying to the Congregation was come on, wise up, regain your sight, know how homophobia kills and hurts and destroys families, and destroys people. So that's another part of the consciousness raising because we had the women's issue and we had the gay issue, the homosexual issue. We had a sexuality task force through the Christian Education and through Sally's youth group, where they knew that there needed to be good sex education so that people got over the myths and the terrible misunderstandings of just plain old sexuality as well as homosexuality. It was aimed at the high school age, not the whole congregation, although we did have seminars where adults came (I can't remember all the different things that happened), but we really were talking about sexuality at First Congregational Church. Some people were aghast at that; this isn't what the church should be talking about.

I did a service for a very fine teacher up at the Junior High School who died of AIDS, but it was not widely known that he was gay. It was a beautiful service. The place was packed. All his junior high students were there and the parents were there. He was well loved. The newspapers for the next couple of days highlighted the fact that he was gay and that this service had taken place at a Christian church. The service itself was just a beautiful memorial service and it had nothing to say about his sexuality. To have the students who loved him read those articles in the paper not outing him as gay, but to have it in the headlines that this person has died and blah, blah.... that was one occasion that I really stood on my hind legs and wrote a letter to the editor. I did that quite often. I came up against a beloved local pastor

who was very much against the whole gay community and against the whole idea that homosexuality could be accepted as a regular life style, and he wrote letters. There was a Connecticut Conference annual meeting in 1986 that I took part in where each church was allowed to send in suggested proclamation that they wanted people to discuss. This conservative pastor and his church came up with a suggestion that homosexuality was a sin. This was voted down and he was very upset about that. The conference came to a compromise not as explicit as that, but not anything that was really accepting, but it was better than condemning it. So I did a few letters to the editor in the papers with him.

Some people in the congregation didn't like my outspokenness, and I think that some people never really liked this woman minister too much. I had one member of the church who went to Tom and refused to have his wife talk with me or to permit me to come to visit his wife. It got as bad as that. I knew that somebody was very much against me. Actually, I had a darn good ministry there and I enjoyed it. We had our conflicts and compromises and what have you.

After the service, I had people come up to me to shake my hand, and most of the people that came through said "you've really started me to think." That's what I wanted, I wanted to raise awareness, there again is that consciousness raising business. We did have sex education classes and we used the Unitarian curriculum called "Our Sexuality." We had the directors and writers of that curriculum come and talk to us, all of the parents that were interested in having these classes. There was a big turnout for that. Fran Becker came through as the first teacher of those classes, but they were frowned on by many people. They didn't like the church doing anything about sexuality. So it was something that was good that was going on, but you knew that the whole church wasn't for it. Sally with her group of young people knew that young people were struggling with their sexuality, and some of them gay and not out at all and all of the fear behind that. So I think that everything that we did in the area of sexuality and raising awareness was something in transition, moving us in to being open and affirming, which took a while in the 1990's, with long study for many years, two or three years at least, studying it before you became open and affirming.

Gay ministers and staff are accepted today in our church. The church has come a long way; the congregation has come a long way. But it's taken many of these consciousness raising events.

As far as women were concerned, I was diagnosed with breast cancer in the end of 1983. In 1984 until June or July, I was in chemotherapy. When I had my mastectomy, I took the full month of October off. Then I worked full time and figured out my schedule for working and meetings with the chemotherapy treatments and how I couldn't come to the church for a couple of days after. I worked out a good schedule and everybody was just so supportive, so wonderful.

During that period, Joyce Carlson came to me and asked if I could put together an interesting, different women's group to be sponsored by the Women's Fellowship. I can remember sitting on the beach at Greenwich Point (I did that a lot when preparing sermons), I thought what are we going to do with women; and I thought of "Hat's Off." They could take off the hat that they wore as a mother, a wife, a gardener, a chauffeur, or whatever and meet together as women, just the essence of women. It started out that first year reading some books about finding our own identity in the midst of our family situations, our heritage. It's still going and I think that is

just great. We had a group of very wonderful, responsive women. That was part of consciousness raising and self awareness and inclusive language. We would bring in articles and cartoons and we read "The Last Temptation of Christ," "A Room of Her Own," and Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale." That is very much the ultra conservative religious right in that book and we read it thinking that this is what we, what our society could become, if we don't pay attention to the essence of who we are. Actually the stuff that we read in the third and fourth year of that was sort of on the edge. It was a group that was willing to be on the edge. I felt that I was pulling them toward that edge. But, oh boy, did I get responses. They were with it. They really were with it. Some asked "What do you mean? We're going to read "The Last Temptation of Christ!" It came to me when I went to see the movie in New York. Across the street from the line of us waiting to go into the movie were all sorts of people with bull horns, praying in the street, telling us we were sinful, horrible creatures for going to see this movie which blasphemed Christ. So I guess part of Dale Greene really fights against, I'll confess, the religious right. So that was part of that. I know - "I'm so radical".

When Bill Hart (an Interim Associate after Dave Taylor left) came on, we did a lot of spirituality work together and had small groups of prayer and retreats and talking about different kinds of prayer. The two older ministers on staff were good ones to work with on prayer and spirituality. Prayer life and Bible study was not a big part of my ministry, but when Bill came on, it just worked so well together. We had a couple of retreats and prayer meetings. I miss him; we worked well together and I enjoyed working with him a lot.

One of the parts of my job description was to work with singles because I was single. There already was a First Church singles group that was quite small and did not meet regularly. Soon we became the "Springboard Singles." That brought in community people as well as our church membership. This was a small group, a dozen, sometimes 8 to 18 people and it would fluctuate. We just did things together and talked about our journeys; it was both men and women. They called it "Springboard" because they were springboarding from where they have been before they became singles and they needed to move on. This was not a huge part of my ministry. Hats Off was a major part. Hats Off started at about a dozen people and grew to about 25 people. The people who came were eager to talk and to converse and to argue – it was a delight.

So, the 1980's was a "consciousness raising" time and I was proud to be part of that.

I learned later in these last few years as I've come back, I took part in a service for Betty Ficker and they asked me to do a prayer during the memorial service. Dave Ficker came up to me afterwards during the reception and he thanked me for several things that I put in the prayer. He said that he had been on my search committee and he was one who had not voted for me. He said: "You know I didn't vote for you?" I knew it wasn't unanimous. And he said: "I've changed my mind!" That was a delight to hear.

Tad: Why did you leave?

Dale: A difficult question to answer. Physically I was wearing out. (Later diagnosed as myopathy due to 1983-84 intense chemotherapy and progressive arthritis.) I came to First Church in November of 1980 and left in November of 1989, so I was here for 9 years. I left the area, unfortunately, because I could not pay the rent for anything around here and I had

no money to buy a house; it's a high priced area. I had gone to seminary in Lancaster, Pennsylvania and I loved the area, loved the seminary, and had good friends there. And there were opportunities for me to work with groups of seminarians there. So I went back to the land that I loved and worked as a pastor preceptor in collegiums which are gatherings of seminarians that stay together for two years where you have a pastor and a faculty advisor. I worked with those groups and then became very active in church ministry there. I chaired the Church and Ministry committee for six to eight years, working with seminarians, clergy moving back and forth, clergy conflicts, clergy this and that. So I kept my hand in. Finally I took a PART-TIME Interim for about a year and a half with Grace United Church of Christ. That was not an Interim where I had been trained as an Interim. It was just: "Dale, would you be willing to fill in for a while until we can get another pastor?"

I remember how wonderfully our sexton, Lloyd Cooke, helped me. When I had weddings with tons of bridesmaids and ushers and families who weren't members of the church and would talk all the way through the rehearsal and they would just be so confusing. I would look at the back of the church after rehearsal and say: "Now, Lloyd Cooke will help you with your places, where you are to stand and how you are to come down the aisle." With memorial services, he was always a great, great help with getting the people who are attending and people who are part of the grieving family, taking care of them.

He was a great help to me as a minister, as a pastor. He moved me from one apartment to a house and to another house; moved and lugged all my stuff. He was just terrific. When I started out it was Lloyd and Harold, but Harold wasn't there that long. Lloyd was in charge. It was Lloyd especially at the weddings. He took care of keeping everybody in line which was wonderful. He was sexton when I came on and well into the 90's. I don't know when he left, but each time I came back, Lloyd would still be there doing something. For every memorial service, even when he was no longer on staff, he would come back and take care of the movement in those memorial services. Thank you to Lloyd!

Follow-up interview: I have three other special memories from the 80's when I was on staff. The first one is of my very good friend, Herman Reissig. I absolutely revered that man. He was feisty and he spoke the truth and he would comment and he would talk back. Any discussion that we were in, Second Hours, he was great for. He would get pinned to the wall and he would pin right back, and I loved him because he spoke the truth. I was very much behind him.

When he died, Tom was in Europe on vacation. This whole part of Herman's dying and preparing his memorial service was actually the heaviest responsibility that I ever had at First Church in those years. It was not saying that I did not enjoy it. It was heaven reading his sermons, his prayers, his letters. He had written quite a few to me. He had treated me like I had just come out of seminary, which when I came on staff, I had.

Preparing this worship service, first was pastoral care, as I visited him often as he was dying and I visited his wife Florence often. Those were visits of love. It wasn't a duty. When he died, I went to the hospital and his body had been propped up against the pillows. Shortly after, his son and the son's wife came in. I met them for the first time there as we stood and talked. It was a powerful experience. Also, the very fact that the Senior Minister of the church was not at the church to take care of all of this became a heavy responsibility for this Associate Minister. It was the most wonderful thing I had done for years – researching that.

I checked my old calendars (I had saved all these old calendars for years) and it has a line drawn on the time that he died to the worship service, which was only a week after he died. I had drawn a line and said "Herman's Preparation". There were no other appointments in the whole time that week. I lived and breathed Herman's words in preparation for that service. I tried to weave many of his words into the prayers, into the introductions, into the Call to Worship, into the Pastoral Prayer. Also in talking with Florence and planning what she wanted and getting in touch with the sons and getting to know the family better.

The service itself was the biggest I think I had ever seen at First Church. People came from near and far, literally, because he had such a history going back in the early Congregational Church before it became the United Church of Christ. He was a great leader and activist. It was a joy doing this service. It was a heavy responsibility. And we accomplished it. The funny thing about it is, Avery Post and his wife came, and he was the Head of the UCC. I didn't recognize him when he came in the door. I welcomed him, not realizing who he was. I didn't know some of the bigwigs in the church who came. It was a great experience for me and I feel it as a fine accomplishment. I didn't know at the time that there was a video being taken of the service, so that's something else you should look up (in the church archives).

Nancy Fairchild, who used to work in the church office – she was so wonderful – whenever we were assigned to a service, we would work out the worship folder, getting it to Nancy or Mary Boudreau, who would type it up. Nancy worked with me on this and I said, "Nancy, I want the whole service" and I had typed the whole thing out and gave it to her. She had incorporated all of the words from the men who had come to speak about Herman. I gave the final printed program to Florence and probably to the sons and I also wanted Tom to see it. I wanted it to be in the church files. Anyway, that was a high point in my ministry, but a scary point as it started out. "Can I do this?" It came off and I think everybody was pleased and I was relieved. There was a huge reception in the auditorium, just packed with people. It was wonderful and it was a very long service. Each of these men gave almost a 20 minute sermon. His son Daniel Reissig also read scripture at the service. There were then four reflections. Richard Vogt was away on vacation also at this time. So we had Scott Young, our organist, and the choir.

The next one I wanted to talk about was about summer – before air conditioning at First Church. Again, it was vacation time and I was to be the preacher at the 8 am service at the beach and also back at the church. So I was very pleased and gotten the Order of Worship all done, and Nancy had typed that. A day after I had given it to Nancy, I got a call that said "Dale, you have a baptism that morning, also." Well, I didn't know these people – they weren't members of the church. The office staff just didn't get the information in time, but said they would just put the information in the service folder. They said that Tom had talked to these people before he went on vacation and somehow on the list of baptisms it got missed. So the afternoon before that Sunday, I was so pleased with myself because it's usually so hard for me to get a sermon together before late Saturday night. I ironed a crisp white linen jacket and a navy blue skirt and navy blue blouse so I would look in charge and dignified and "this is the minister at this service". Then I went to the 8 o'clock beach service and came home from it and was just bathed in perspiration! It was one of these ungodly humid, deadly hot days where if you just moved your arm, it was bathed in humidity as well as sweat. So I got back to the parsonage. There was no air-conditioning at the parsonage, or at the church. I could barely get my clothes off that I had worn to the beach service. There was no way I could get stockings on. We wore stockings then, and in order to wear heels, I had to wear stockings.

One wore heels in order to look professional and dignified. I couldn't get the blouse on, the stockings on, I couldn't pull up the skirt. So I went to the closet and pulled out an L. L. Bean summer dress that I loved. It was kind of mesh and it was a natural color. Good looking and summery. But it was so sporty it was just not something that you could wear to conduct a church service. We did not wear vestments in the summer. I always wore a summer suit jacket. You can tell this is a woman pastor's memory.

I couldn't get stockings on and I could barely get shoes on – they were the Grasshopper shoes with the rope soles that matched the dress. I thought, "I'm just going to die before I get over to the church." There was no time for a shower so it was just a sponge job. I went over to the church and met this family whom I had never met before. I was so embarrassed to meet them in this sporty dress and still perspiring like crazy. Anyway, the service went off just fine, but that was one of my very low points in ministry.

Pat: Well, if that was a low point, that's not bad!

Dale: Now we'll end with the highest point of these last three stories. That has to do with Music Sunday. Richard Vogt was just the most wonderful musician – intellect – creativity – artist person. With him we had flowers in just the right place and pictures in just the right place. There were beautiful booklets that he would put out. For me, that was wonderful. I looked up to him as this fantastic, creative person. This Music Sunday was May of 1984. I was in the middle of chemotherapy and I had my fashionable wig on and also was puffy faced and puffy bodied. Music Sunday was to be a baptism also, and I was to baptize Katy Derr, Marilyn and Rick Derr's baby girl. It happened over in the chapel because there was a symphony orchestra up front and at the grand piano was Dave Brubeck. At the end of the center aisle was a podium that Richard was standing on to conduct. The only thing I had to do in this service was the baptism. So over in the chapel I baptized Katy and then of course, we always introduced the newly baptized baby to the congregation. So, holding her, I walked and it turned out I almost danced because, as I walked, Dave Brubeck, played "Jesus Loves Me" in a jazzy beat! (laughter) Richard helped me up on the podium and we introduced Katy to that congregation. That is just the most joyous memory. And to follow up on that as I came back to the church years later, now living in Norwalk, I recognized Marilyn Derr, and turning to say hello to her, she said, "And this is Katy". It suddenly hit me, "I baptized you!" to this lovely college age young woman.

It was a good nine years for me. I learned a lot and there were some highs and some lows, but some of the highs were very high. Good memories and much Thanksgiving.