

Old Greenwich Ministry Memories by Thomas Stiers

In the fall of 1973 I received a call from First Congregational Church of Greenwich to be its Associate Pastor. My family and I were thrilled at this opportunity to come to Old Greenwich. After serving for seven years as the Senior Pastor in North Haven, CT, I was ready to step out of the senior pastor role. I was looking forward to being a part of a dynamic staff at First Church. My family was excited about the Greenwich educational system and its opportunities for our daughters. We were looking forward to buying our own home. It was time for me to work on a D. Min. program. I had enjoyed ten years of pastoral ministry in Connecticut.

We had visited the church and were deeply impressed by its tremendous music ministry under Richard Vogt. We were excited about being a part of this vibrant congregation. Paul W. Yinger, the senior pastor, was a graduate of Union Theological Seminary and DePauw University. Dr. Yinger was a nationally known preacher and thinker. He had served innovative ministries in New Jersey and California. He had been a successful fundraiser for the Graduate Theological Union in California. He was a member of the prestigious Aquinas Society. He was writing a play on the life of Thomas Jefferson. We were looking forward to getting to know the congregation.

The Board of Trustees made it possible for us to buy our first home. With the help of Olive Caird, a church member and a real estate agent, we bought a Tudor style house at 147 Lockwood Road in Riverside. The trustees signed a second mortgage for us. It was an easy walk to the church. Both our daughters could attend the Riverside Elementary School. Gretchen was in sixth grade and Heather in third grade. When we arrived in February 1974 the gasoline shortage had begun. Members of the congregation helped us to know John Mackey and the Abbott brothers so we could fill up. When we did run out of gasoline, Bill Fingerle came to our rescue. Our family felt very welcomed by the staff and congregation.

My first sermon as an Associate Pastor was on the theme of hospitality. It was based on a paper by Yale Divinity School professor Henri Nouwen.

My ministerial duties included assisting in worship, pastoral calling, adult education, confirmation, serving as staff liaison with several of the committees of the church, and occasional preaching. Adult education was robust with a strong Second Hour program after the worship service and the coffee hour. Dr. Herman Reissig, Rev. Sam Newcomer, George Fisk, Bob Ferry, Jack Ballard, Fred Pinkham, and Curt Carlson gave leadership to its many relevant programs.

One of great joys of working with the adult education ministry was working with Dr. Herman Reissig, who was Pastor Emeritus. He was a mentor in the development of my social consciousness. He was always available for advice and suggestions of issues to be addressed. His preaching was always stimulating for the congregation. He was a major mentor to my understanding of preaching. Herman said: "If we are to have a living faith, we cannot go on speaking about God in ways that fit an older world but do not fit our world."

As a part of our small group ministry I lead groups studying the prayer life of Thomas Merton and Dr. Gaylord Noyce's book on the suburban church. From 1970 to 1975 I was adjunct professor at Yale Divinity School in Pastoral Ministry working with Dr. Gaylord Noyce. At the divinity school I taught courses on youth ministry and the practice of pastoral ministry. Fran Woodward led a small group retreat on Henri Nouwen's "Reaching Out". Brenda led a woman's spirituality group on Keith Miller's book, "The Edge of Adventure - An Experiment in Faith".

For my installation as Associate Pastor on May 5, 1974, I called upon my relationship with Yale Divinity School. I invited Dr. Colin Williams, Dean of Yale Divinity School to be the preacher. Dr. Gaylord Noyce also of Yale Divinity School and Dr. Herman Reissig gave charges to the congregation and me respectively.

When I began, First Church had a very effective support staff in the office: Lee Fertig, Joyce Field, Anne Stolley, and Beverly Millikan plus volunteers such as Carolyn Colegrove and Emily Lent. Victor Smalley was the sexton. After Victor's retirement Lloyd Cooke became our sexton. Lloyd worked to keep up the building. Many a bride was started down the aisle with a smile by Lloyd.

Over the years many made First Church a great place to work. Mary Boudreau was the very able church secretary. Donna White came as a temp and has stayed for many years. Emily Jostrand became the efficient office manager. Peggy Whitlock, Jean Cardini, and Mildred Madenford were the upstairs crew. Randy Bradham was our first church administrator. George Handley has served faithfully in that position. Mary Babbage and Kirk Young joined the team over the years.

I had only been at First Church for a couple of months when I was asked to officiate at the wedding of a returning POW from Vietnam. Read Blaine McCleary grew up in Old Greenwich. His plane had been shot down in 1967. Flying back to the states after his long imprisonment he fell in love with Margie Ann Sucho, the airline hostess. Their wedding made the front page of the Greenwich Time.

In my first months at First Church I spent time interviewing the First Selectman, the Chief of Police, Ben Davenport, principal of Eastern Junior High, a few of the Protestant, Jewish, and Roman Catholic clergy and the various heads of town agencies. These interviews were to give me a better understanding of Greenwich and its residents. The data from these interviews was to be invaluable to my ministry.

Jack and Phoebe Ballard introduced me to Wainwright House in Rye, NY. This was a place for spiritual growth. The premier program was "Receptive Listening". Richard Pope took the training and brought it back to First Church. It bore many fruits. Walter Wink was teaching a new method of Bible study at Wainwright House. First Church sent a team to be trained in this new method. It resulted in outstanding Bible study led by Fran Woodward and Nancy Ziac. When the Guild for Spiritual Guidance was formed at Wainwright House I was invited to be a member. Through the Guild I got to know John Youngblut, Douglas Steere, and Morton Kelsey.

When I arrived at First Church I was almost ten years out of seminary. I felt deeply the need to go back to school and get a D. Min. degree. The context of ministry had changed. There was much to be learned about pastoral ministry and the role of the church. The Church Council approved my dream and I was

accepted in the D. Min. program at Princeton Theological Seminary. There was great joy at 147 Lockwood the day my letter of acceptance came. I would take the train to Grand Central Station and there be picked up on 42 Street by two colleagues and we would then drive together to Princeton. So for the next two years each Tuesday September through May I would follow this routine. The first year Dr. James McCord, the President of Princeton Seminary was my teacher. During my second year Dr. Seward Hiltner, a renowned leader in the pastoral counseling field was my teacher. Dr. Hiltner would also become my thesis advisor. In my study group of twelve there were three Roman Catholic priests, and an Episcopal priest who would later become a future bishop. Each of us had to prepare eight papers analyzing our respective congregations. These papers were then critiqued by the class and the professors. The writing of these papers and the following critique enabled me to deepen my understanding of the congregation.

One of my early goals was to build a stronger relationship between First Church and the Connecticut Conference of the UCC. First Church was led in this relationship by Harry and Betty Woodman and Richard and Ruth Pope. I was a member of the Church and Society Committee of the Conference and I worked closely with the Rev. Arthur Higgins and the Rev. William Indestrodtt. Various groups in the church began to use the facilities at Silver Lake on a more frequent basis. When Sally Colegrove joined the staff in 1978 this relationship with Silver Lake was made even stronger.

The tensions of culture wars of the late 60 were carried into the 1970's. First Church struggled to speak on issues of social justice and peace. There was great disagreement over the continuation of the Vietnam War. The struggle for civil rights was still being waged. The use of drugs was debated. There was the issue of boys and men wearing long hair. Women's issues were being debated. Gay and lesbian issues were being hotly debated. The question of divestiture of stock in companies doing business in South Africa was contentious. The congregation was struggling to deal with these. The new pastoral staff and lay leadership tried to deal with these. Dr. Yinger's preaching, wide ranging Second Hours on controversial topics, Dr. Reissig's teaching, the monthly business persons' luncheon in Manhattan at the Williams Club, and many pastoral conversations dealt with the issues of the cultural wars. First Church worked for social justice and peace through the Connecticut Conference of the UCC and the national offices of the United Church of Christ.

In early 1975 I was awarded one of the Rockefeller Brothers Awards for Outstanding Young Ministers. Because some many members in First Church were employed by multinationals I believed it would be important to visit American business men and women living in Columbia and Venezuela about how their faith supported them. The issues of corporate ethics were another important topic of interest. With a great deal of help from First Church members Jack Ballard of Mobil Oil and Cecil MacDonald of International Paper I developed a number of contacts. In both Bogotá and Caracas I stayed with members of the Jesuit Order. In Cali, Columbia I stayed at the Rockefeller Agricultural Center. Prior to leaving I studied with Professor Chuck Powers at Yale Divinity School to prepare my questions. Upon my return I gave a paper summarizing my findings on corporate ethics to the Greenwich Clergy Association.

Worship at First Church was inspiring Sunday after Sunday. Richard Vogt's leadership of the choir with special musical guests and Dr. Yinger's imaginative preaching filled the meetinghouse. Ray Harrington

worked to help us be on WGCH 1490 radio each Sunday morning. Mr. Edmund Sickels was the official greeter at the door before worship. The church school was growing. The youth ministry was growing.

During the spring of 1976 Dr. Yinger was admitted to St Luke's Hospital New York for open heart surgery. The surgery was successful. But in June of 1976 he submitted his resignation as Senior Pastor. At that time in the Connecticut Conference of the UCC it was felt that if the Senior Pastor resigned, it was important for the Associate to begin looking for another situation. So in July I visited with Avery Post the Conference Minister in Massachusetts and Nat Guptill the Conference Minister in Ct. about possible new situations.

In late August the senior officers of First Church came to me and said that I should stop looking as they were going to recommend me to the congregation to become the new Senior Pastor. Our family thought this was a confirmation of God's call for us to remain at First Church. It was a joyous celebration for my family in October 1976 when I was elected Senior Pastor.

The trustees invited us to move into the parsonage at 22 Shady Brook Lane. With the help of a large group of laity we were moved from 147 Lockwood to 22 Shady Brook in time for Thanksgiving 1976. Each of our daughters now had their own bedrooms. They were very happy about that. We sold 147 Lockwood. In December of that same year we invested our earnings in a second home on Cape Cod. Beginning in 1977 for twenty-two consecutive years we celebrated Thanksgiving as a family on Cape Cod.

My first sermon as Senior Pastor was entitled: "Nothing will prove impossible for you". It was based on the parable of the mustard seed. I thought it would be clever to glue small mustard seeds to the front of Sunday worship bulletin. So much time was spent on Saturday gluing mustard seeds to the worship bulletin. When I arrived for worship on Sunday, I found that the ushers were busy scraping the mustard seed off of the bulletin cover. It was hard to convince them that the mustard seed had something to do with the scripture lesson and the sermon. There was much laughter.

During the cold winter of 1976-1977 daughters Gretchen and Heather were able to ice skate on Binney Pond with Riverside's own 1976 Olympic Gold Medal Winner, Dorothy Hamill.

Ann Suzedell joined the ministerial staff in 1976 on a temporary basis as we reorganized for the coming church year. Sally Colegrove stepped up to help in the youth ministry along with Rev. Jim Fung. Alice Berry was CE. Mary Ann Chidsey and Beverly Harrington were a tremendous help in the Church School. Rev. Suzedell left to follow a call to a church in Pennsylvania. A search committee was organized and the Rev. Paul Frasier was called to be the Associate Pastor.

For my installation as Senior Pastor in February 1977, I invited Dr. James McCord, President of Princeton Theological Seminary to preach. Dr. McCord had been my teacher in the D. Min. program. Rev. Arthur Higgins of the Connecticut Conference gave the prayer of installation. The Rev. Irvin G. Thursby, with whom I had worked in Milford, Ct. gave the charge to the congregation. Father Edward M. DePaoli, a classmate of mine from the D. Min. program gave the charge to me. Dr. George Pera, Senior Pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Greenwich gave the right hand of fellowship.

One of my first decisions was to ask the Church Council and the Board of Trustees to create a "Pastor's Advisory Committee" to strategize and coordinate the work of the two boards. It only had authority to recommend and its members to be made up of the senior deacon, the vice chair of the Church Committee and the chair and vice chair of the trustees, a member at large, and me as senior pastor. It was chaired by the Senior Deacon. I believe that this form of creative governance aided the congregation over the years. My administrative style was that of a pastoral administrator.

Over the years "a senior deacon and chair of the trustees club" was created. All of those officers who had served during my ministry were invited to meet annually to hear an update on the state of church from the current senior deacon and current chair of the trustees. This annual event was very supportive to my ministry.

One of the wonderful gifts of the 1970's was the editorial work of Wake Hartley at the Village Gazette. Week after week he covered events and worship at First Church with great generosity.

Paul Yinger's advice to me when I was elected Senior Pastor was to attend the annual meeting of Senior Pastors of large UCC congregations each January in Florida. This annual meeting with UCC peers was very fruitful in keeping my ministry vital year after year. Here began my deep friendships with Dr. Ralph Ahlberg, senior pastor of Garden City UCC, Rev. Richard Ryder, senior pastor of First Congregational in Chappaqua NY; and Rev. Charles Calcagni, senior pastor of the Manhasset Congregational Church.

Louise Guy, a church trustee, began to educate the board about the possibility of a columbarium. She brought models from a congregation in the midwest that had just built one. Years earlier when I-95 went through Stamford, CT, and the First Presbyterian Church was torn down, Percy Letts, trustee of First Congregational Church, purchased some of the stone for a future project. The stone matched the stone of our meetinghouse. The trustees approved the project. They sold two houses that the church owned on Rockland place to help with the expense of the columbarium. Ben Menegon negotiated with the Miracle Temple Congregation of Norwalk for additional stone to match the stone we already had in the cemetery. They had just bought out a burned Episcopalian church and didn't want its stones. Mr. Menegon found the stone masons that built the lovely columbarium. That section of the cemetery was barely above a rock ledge. So it made sense to build it in the back corner of the cemetery. As the excavation began, they found a large stone. It became the center of the columbarium. Harold Prunner analyzed the large stone and found that it contained some 80 plus minerals. It became our "Rock of Ages!" Steve Boudreau and Randy Bradham suggested that benches could be built so loved ones could come and meditate in the columbarium. These were added over the years. The columbarium has become a place of rest and peace for many families.

The Trustees and the Church Committee decided that the organ installed in 1962 was outdated and the church needed a new organ. Music was one of the strongest ministries of First Church. It was important to keep it strong. There was a healthy debate in the congregation about whether the church should replace the old organ with a pipe organ or an electronic one. The congregation approved a "Three-in-One" capital campaign in 1975-1978 to buy a new pipe organ, the United Church of Christ 17/76 College Fund, and the First Church Deferred Building Maintenance. Led by George Fisk and Fred Pinkham, it was

successful. Carlton Gisborne suggested that we clean out the church attic. Some valuable paintings were found and sold for a handsome sum. Whit Hobbs ran two successful auctions to raise funds for the new organ. Under leadership of the music committee and Richard Vogt a lovely new organ was installed in a new chancel. Giff Reed was invaluable in the process of designing the new chancel.

First Church had a heritage of holding a period of strategic planning every ten years. The congregation had held one in late 1960's before I arrived. So in 1979 with the help of the officers of congregation and special help from Whit Hobbs and Phyllis Freeman we held an amazing weekend. Whit Hobbs organized the topics and process for our time together. Phyllis Freeman secured the help of the Greenwich Junior League to lead us in workshops of how to run meetings, set agendas, and set outputs for our work. Dr. Nathanael Guptill, the Connecticut Conference Minister of the UCC addressed the event on the importance of First Church's relationship to the UCC.

The purpose of the 1979 Planning event was to set our hopes for the next three to four years of ministry and mission. There was consensus that the congregation needed to work hard on stewardship, work closer with interfaith and ecumenical groups, deepen the congregation's understanding of the Bible, improve our pastoral care, and explore the possibilities of world mission partners.

With the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 the Congress soon made the decision to cut back on the funding of social programs. Churches and synagogues felt the call to help with the social network. With coordination by the Council of Churches and Synagogues the faith committees in lower Fairfield County began slowly to respond. The Rev. Gary Brown and First Congregational Church, Stamford began a feeding program for the homeless.

The Council of Churches and Synagogues worked with government agencies and soon established a more permanent feeding program. A large warehouse was founded in south Stamford and converted into a permanent homeless shelter. Many members of First Church gave hours of valuable labor to make these ministries successful.

The Christian Outreach Committee and the pastoral staff felt the call to develop partner congregations who were international through the guidance of the United Church Board for World Ministries. In a series of three year rotating relationships we developed partners and projects in Togo, Honduras, Turkey, Zimbabwe, and Hungary. With the exception of Togo each year a small group of laity and clergy would visit these partner situations. For a number of years the Church Committee and the Trustees approved the annual Lenten offering to go toward these partnerships. Over the years strong friendships developed between First Church and our partners in mission.

We wanted to improve our pastoral care. We learned of a program called "Parish Nurse". It had been started in Illinois by Dr. Granger Westberg. By coincidence his daughter was living in Old Greenwich. One Sunday Dr. Westberg attended our worship service. As he left he asked, "Tom, why don't you have a parish nurse?" On Monday I mentioned this to Adele Crawford, was our administrative assistant in the church office. Her home Presbyterian Church had a parish nurse. She researched this project. The Church Committee asked me to go Chicago to take Dr. Westberg's course. When I gave my report to the Church Committee, Sally Jones, wife of the CEO at Greenwich Hospital, said that I should speak to her

husband about the possibility of a shared effort with a parish nurse. The hospital agreed to pay 2/3 of the parish nurse salary and make the parish nurse a member of one of the hospital teams so that the parish nurse would have benefits. This relationship lasted for many years. The parish nurse also became a part of the church team that worked in training the various generations of Stephen Ministers.

In 1979 I represented the Connecticut Conference at national meeting La Foret Conference and Retreat Center in Colorado Springs, CO. This conference issued the first warning of the rise of the religious right – We were told of the establishment of the Christian High Schools and Christian Colleges whose faculties were organized to teach and spread the message of the far right.

Late in the 1970's Brenda's mother became terminally ill. She moved in with us at 22 Shady Brook. This was an amazing time as the congregation befriended her and gave her spiritual support as she struggled with her illness. Martha Fingerle came daily to help her with her meds. At this time daughter Gretchen was at DePauw University in Indiana. Daughter Heather was a student at the George School in Newtown, PA. Brenda continued to work toward her seminary degree at Yale Divinity School. When Brenda's mother died on October 2, 1980 each of us was able to hold her hands. That moment is one of the deepest spiritual moments of my life.

When Paul Frasier resigned to become assistant pastor of a church in Fairfield County, the Church Committee and the Trustees authorized a national search for a new associate minister. The search committee brought two names to the Church Committee for a decision. One was Rev. David Taylor, pastor of a congregation in Weston, CT and the other candidate was Dale Greene from Lancaster, PA. The Church Committee chose David Taylor, but recognized the special gifts of Dale. So with a heavy heart over her candidacy we went home. About midnight my phone rang. It was a member of the Church Committee who said that he and his wife had been praying about the Church Committee decision. They believed that First Church needed both David and Dale. They offered to pay Dale's salary for three years to see if the congregation could step up at the end of three years in stewardship to cover her salary. There were tears of joy. What a sacrificial gift this special couple made to First Church. At the end of the next three years stewardship had increased enough to cover the third clergy salary.

David Taylor through his excellent preaching and prophetic teaching enabled the congregation to understand Jesus' teachings on social justice and the issues of the day. David encouraged the congregation to write letters to those in government about social issues. Dale Greene brought her considerable spiritual gifts to the congregation. Through her preaching, teaching, and offering spiritual guidance, she enabled many in the congregation to grow in spiritual depth.

One of rewarding aspects of ministry at First Church was the spiritual power of Sunday morning worship. The quiet dignity of the small 8 am service in the chapel provided a prayerful way to begin the Sabbath. In the summer the 8 am service was at the beach at Greenwich Point. It was a favorite service for many. For many years beginning at 9 am there was a small discussion group in the lounge to talk about the theme and scripture of the morning sermon. 10 am worship began on time because we were live on WGCH. Each week the staff of clergy and Richard Vogt carefully planned each service. I always asked Richard to choose the hymns. 10 am worship was followed by the very popular coffee hour. Many

important conversations for me took place over a cup of coffee. At 11:30 am began the Second Hour on many important topics. At 12:30 it was time to go home for a good lunch and rest.

In May of 1981 Richard Vogt led the congregation and Greenwich in a month long British Festival. This was very high energy event. Many wonderful happenings made this month so special. Carol Farn was Richard's right arm planning and executing the various events.

April and May of 1981 was the time when eighteen members and friends of First Church went on a trip to China. Seven UCC missionaries who had been expelled from China in 1949 were going back to visit churches and friends in China where they had worked. Brenda and I were a part of the group. The communist government was allowing a few churches to reopen. It was thrilling to be with our missionaries as they greeted longtime friends. When we returned to the states Time Magazine was running a cover story on the re-opening of churches in China called: "A Thousand Flowers Blooming".

In June of 1981 I received my D. Min. degree from Princeton Theological Seminary. My thesis was entitled "Deepening Lay Attitudes toward Ministry of the Laity". Anne Stolley and Brenda were my editors. Betty Ficker produced several copies for me to meet the requirements of the seminary.

Later that summer the congregation held a celebration of my D. Min. degree. It was held at the Arboretum. My Father and Mother arranged for me to be given my white Doctor's robe. With deep gratitude I thanked the congregation for its support of me in one of my major life goals.

On September 25, 1981 I received word that my mother had died suddenly of a heart attack. The Stiers family gathered back in Rushville, Indiana for her funeral service. The suddenness of her death was difficult to handle emotionally. I am deeply grateful for the support and comfort I received from the congregation and the staff. The loss of Brenda's mother and my mother within a year took us time to recover. I would often return to the farm to visit with my Dad and my brothers. These two losses deepened my understanding of grief.

Winnie Downes, a member of the congregation had arranged for me to help lead a tour group to the Middle East. It was organized in 1982 by David Meyers Holy Land Tours of Fort Worth Texas. Bud and Peggy Dodge and Warren Dennison and his new bride Elizabeth went with me. I served as a chaplain to the group. Bud often played the piano. We flew to Athens, Greece for a few days of touring Biblical sites in Athens and Corinth. Then we flew on to Cairo, Egypt to tour various sites in the Nile Valley. We went by bus from Cairo to Jerusalem. There we also visited Christian sites in the Galilee. The final part of the tour was by ship in the Mediterranean visiting Ephesus, Santorini, and Istanbul. This was my first trip to the Middle East. It gave me a whole new appreciation of the geography of the Scriptures. It was my introduction to the complexities of the worlds of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. This visit has led to a life-long learning about the Abrahamic Faiths and more trips to the Middle East.

In December 1982 Brenda graduated from Yale Divinity School. Her service of ordination was held at First Church in January 1983. Dr. David Colwell, retired pastor of Plymouth Church in Seattle was the preacher at the morning worship service. The Reverends Ann and Arthur Higgins, the Reverend Gaylord

Noyce, and the Reverend Ed Dobihal took part in the service. Newly ordained, Brenda continued to work at the Council of Churches and Synagogues.

When David Taylor left the staff of First Church in 1983, Bill Hart was called as Interim Associate Pastor. David Taylor had challenged the congregation to take both the Bible and the issues of our time seriously.

Sally Colegrove was also ordained in 1983. She became a strong team leader of ministry and pastoral care. Her many gifts bloomed in our youth and young adult programs. She was an excellent preacher. She and Susie Craig developed an exciting family life ministry. Each year there was inspirational family weekend at Silver Lake. Sally also introduced and encouraged a strong link between First Church and the H.O.M.E. ministry in Maine. She was a gifted colleague. Many new and vital programs of First Church originated with her.

On June 28, 1983 we awoke to the sound of helicopters circling. The Mianus River Bridge collapse killing three people and changing traffic patterns from I-95 into Greenwich streets with much chaos for months.

From July 24 until August 10, 1983 the 6th General Assembly of the World Council of Churches was meeting in Vancouver, Canada. Brenda's boss Mel Hoover, director of the Council of Churches and Synagogues, arranged for the Stiers to be official North American observers. Mel's wife Rose and Doug and Lyn Baer joined us at the Assembly. Doug is a United Presbyterian pastor. We carefully studied the pre-assembly Bible Study entitled: "Beyond this time: Living Stones and a Chosen People." This was based on I Peter 2:1-10. The observers were housed at the University of Western Washington in Bellingham, WA. We were present for the opening address by Jean Vanier, the founder of L'Arche. Dr. Vanier was the founder of L'Arche, French for Noah's Ark, a network of homes for people with developmental disabilities, volunteers, and staff living in community. We also heard Dr. Dorothee Soelle, a German theologian. Mel arranged for us to meet Robert Runcie, the Archbishop of Canterbury. The Archbishop had recently celebrated the royal wedding of Prince Charles and Princess Diana.

We participated in the great closing Eucharist under the great white tent. It was an amazing spiritual experience to be a part of this gathering of world Christianity. The colorful assembly of many ecclesiastical robes was spectacular, especially the robes of the various Orthodoxy clergy. The World Council of Churches launched "Justice, Peace, and Creation". I came away with a much deeper commitment to the world - wide ecumenical movement.

The major take away was the "Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry" document. This was a revolutionary document between the Protestant, Episcopal, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox traditions. The decision that "re-baptism" was not necessary if one moved from one tradition to another was amazing. In Lent 1984 St. Catherine's Roman Catholic Church in Riverside and First Church spent several weeks in combined small groups discussing this document. Father Vincent O'Conner and I were invited by the Council to give a report of our joint discussions.

On November 13, 1983 we were privileged to have the well-known author, Frederick Buechner as a preacher at First Church. His aunt, Lorna White, arranged his visit. Donald White's late father had been

President of New York Theological Seminary. In the early 1900's Rev. Dr. Wilbert White was a leading proponent of what was known as "the inductive method of Bible study". This method was a predecessor of the Bethel Bible method.

In 1984 some members of the congregation surprised Brenda and me with a pre-paid trip to Bermuda to celebrate our 10 years of pastoral ministry at First Church. This was a wonderful "second honeymoon experience". We were very grateful for this thoughtful surprise.

In the 80's we moved from 22 Shady Brook to our own house on Old Orchard in Riverside. The church was able to rent 22 Shady Brook and therefore pay for the upkeep of the property and provide a housing allowance to the Stiers.

A dozen congregations including First Congregational Church, Greenwich participated in rotating an evening shelter for homeless. About every twelve weeks beds and blankets would arrive at First Church and the Daniels Center would become a shelter for a week. Before the first week for the First Church, volunteers were recruited. Some 60 members of our congregation volunteered their time. After a week the staffing and the beds would move on to another congregation.

Tom and Sally Sawyer and I led a small group from First Church on a journey to Honduras. Sally Colegrove had gone the year before. We joined with a group from Christ Church in Silver Spring, MD. Their pastor Jim Todhunter had been a classmate of mine at Union Theological Seminary. We went to Yoro where we had water one hour per day in our hotel. Because of the Contra War in Nicaragua there was large US military presence in Yoro. The Illinois National Guard was present. We worshiped at the local Reformed Church. The local pastor insisted that we listen to Jimmy Swaggart on TV before service. Our project was building a church school addition.

Daughter Gretchen graduated from DePauw University and enrolled in the Ph. D. program at University of Massachusetts in Amherst, MA. Daughter Heather enrolled at Smith College.

In 1985 the congregation voted me a sabbatical leave. I lived for a month in St. George's Cathedral in East Jerusalem, Israel. This enabled me to visit various holy sites of Jewish, Islam, and Christianity. Dr. Weber, a New Testament scholar from Wesley Theological Seminary, was also on sabbatical and living at St. George's. We spent many days together touring especially the various parts of Jerusalem and especially the ancient walls of Jerusalem. When my month was up in Jerusalem I had been invited by the archaeologist Nan Broeder, a member of First Church, to join her for a week in Jordan. We met in Amman and then went to Petra for an amazing visit to this ancient site. She was the guest of the local Sheik who was also the Minister of Tourism for Jordan. I was able to enjoy a very special visit with his family. The Israeli government wouldn't allow me to return directly to Jerusalem from Ammon so I flew to Cyprus for four days before I could return to Jerusalem.

I met Brenda in Naples, Italy and we continued to visit Greece (sites of St Paul's visits) and Turkey where we met with UCC missionaries and visited the sites of several churches mentioned in the Book of Revelation. We had a very inspirational visit to the ruins in Ephesus.

When we returned from our sabbatical the World Board of UCC was meeting in Hartford. Brenda was the chair of the event. She invited Richard Vogt to lead the music for final celebration. The music was spectacular.

In 1985 at the General Synod of the UCC, I was elected as a member of the Executive Committee. This is the administrative group that provides leadership to the UCC between Synods. I served until 1991.

1986 was the year that my youngest brother Jim died as the result of an accident on my brother's farm in Indiana. My father died the following year on August 7, 1987. Again I learned the depth of grief. Now I was the oldest in our family.

In the summer of 1987 Brenda began the program for the D. Min. at Princeton Theological Seminary and daughter Heather graduated from Smith.

Brenda was named Executive Director of the Council of Churches and Synagogues. It was the year of the 50th anniversary of Council of Churches and Synagogues. The Council invited The Reverend Dr. James A. Forbes, Jr. as the keynote speaker.

In 1988 David Fountain had been serving on the staff of Harvard Memorial Church in Cambridge, MA. David brought many new ideas to our congregation. He was the first to begin to use media for our message. He helped make videos for use in our stewardship campaign.

In 1988 the Trustees remodeled the church offices. The effort to raise funds ran from 1984 to 1988 under the Leadership of the Long Range Development Committee. Bill Porter played an important part of this effort.

After leading a trip of members of the congregation to the Middle East, Sally Colegrove and I spend a few days in Turkey exploring a possible international mission opportunity for the congregation. We came back to Old Greenwich and recommended that the congregation engage in a mission project with our UCC missionaries and the Development Foundation of Turkey.

A major leadership change happened in 1989 when the deacons and deaconess voted to become one body. Over the years there had been good spirit in each of the separate meetings. Frequently the deacons met for breakfast. The deaconesses met and did the pastoral care for many in the congregation. But the times had changed and there was a new feeling that there would now be equality of effort.

At the January 1989 annual meeting the new Daniels Center was dedicated. Instead of the atmosphere of a gym it was now a multi-purpose space.

To better understand the new emerging relations between the church and synagogues Brenda and I attended the Jewish-Christian Conference in Charleston, SC. In lower Fairfield County the relationships between the churches and the synagogues were very strong.

In 1989 the church committee decided to bring the well-known Church planner and author, Kennon L. Callahan for a weekend of strategic planning for the next five years. With great help from Al Reams and Jim Sotzing we worked through the methodology outlined in Callahan's book Twelve Keys to an Effective Church. Through this process we were able to discern our strengths and weakness as a congregation. We were given guidance for strategic planning for the future.

First Church held a wonderful celebration of the 25th anniversary of my ordination.

In August 1989 our daughter Heather became engaged to Jon Dorn in Paris.

In 1990 the church held a vibrant celebration of its 325th anniversary. The highlights are noted in detail in The Last Quarter Century.

I felt strongly motivated to develop a spiritual, Biblical, and theological understanding of the mission of congregation to be involved in these ministries and missions of pastoral care and outreach. A Bible training program was offered by Bethel Lutheran Church in Madison, Wisconsin. In the early 1980's the church committee sent me for two weeks of training in how to teach Bethel Bible. This was a very challenging study. With great enthusiasm I returned to Old Greenwich and recruited a dozen lay persons who were willing to commit to two years of Bible study to prepare them to teach Bethel Bible. I can't remember all the names but Julie Jones, Bonnie Keith, Al Reams, and Sally Sawyer were excellent teachers. When the teachers were trained they offered Bethel Bible for the next two years to over 140 members of First Church. These Bible students became the next generation of church teachers, deacons, trustees, and a laity that felt called to serve the needs of our community and the world.

The church committee believed that we should strengthen our pastoral care of the parish. We discussed various alternatives and decided that a Lutheran program called Stephen Ministry* was right for us. (*This is a one-to-one lay caring ministry to people going through tough times.) Four of us went to Baltimore to Loyola University to have a week of training in this care program. We returned and with a lot of help from Judy Goodchild found about a dozen volunteers to take the 44 weeks of training to become a Stephen Minister. After this extensive training program we matched members of the congregation one on one with a Stephen Minister. Carolyn MacLea was very helpful. Brigitta Remole was able to mature this ministry in many significant ways. The Parish Nurse was one of the main educators of this group. This has been a very effective care program for the congregation.

The Christian Outreach Committee involved the congregation for many years in "Christmas in April". This was a program sponsored by many corporations, religious congregations, service clubs, and non-profits to rehab individual homes on a given weekend in April. Wendy and Harlan Reynolds gave countless hours facilitating First Church's involvement. Wendy spent a year studying how this program worked in a neighboring town. Bob MacLea would visit the sites and estimate what materials were needed. Giff Reed, Ben Menegon, and Bob Goodchild often lead the First Church teams. Many members took part in this very successful project.

Ken and Erna Olson began a program with various banks to help low-income home owners.

After several years of successful Bible study using the Bethel Bible method, we asked the question: what could we do next with Adult Education? We invited Gabe and Dodie Fackre to visit First Church. They had written Christian Basics - a primer of our basic Christian beliefs to be used in study with the laity. We used this wonderful little book for a few years.

With so many of our members involved in business, especially multi-nationals, we invited Max Stackhouse, a professor at Princeton Theological Seminary to lead discussions of Business Ethics. Over the next few years we were blessed to have several inspirational preachers including Walter Brueggemann, Leander Keck, James Washington, Paul Sherry, Avery Post, and Lloyd Van Vactor.

During Lent small discussion groups were formed using the Pilgrim Project. Groups reflected on major points in their spiritual journeys. With permission Brenda used these sessions for research for her D. Min. thesis at Princeton Theological Seminary. In June 1990 Brenda received her D. Min.

On a rainy Saturday in October 1990 daughter Heather and Jon Dorn were married at First Church. Women's Fellowship sponsored the reception in Daniel's Center. In spite of the rain it was a glorious day.

The Board of Directors of the Connecticut Conference elected me as its chair. The board had the opportunity to enlarge the Silver Lake property. After a successful fundraising campaign additional property was purchased enabling the expansion of the waterfront.

Sally Colegrove, Susie Craig, Brenda Stiers and I provided leadership for the 1991 UCC Florida Consultation for UCC clergy. We were responsible for introducing former UN Ambassador Andrew Young and the well-known spiritual teacher Henri Nouwen as featured speakers

After much soul searching the congregation voted to raise funds for a new organ and to remodel the choir area.

ABC-TV invited me to participate in a TV wedding. ABC-TV would select a couple from Greenwich and another couple from inner city Philadelphia. Since the congregation had voted to remodel the meetinghouse a different location was needed. So the wedding was held and filmed at Round Hill United Methodist Church. The Reverend Avery Manchester gave permission for this event. The program was repeated many times on ABC-TV.

During the remodeling of the Meetinghouse, worship was held in the auditorium. This space became sacred as we worshipped there week after week. Just before the opening day of the First Iraq War, the Greenwich Fellowship of Clergy held a prayer vigil in the sacred space of our auditorium.

Every four years the congregation and the community were blessed when Richard Vogt led a wonderful "Noye's Fludde" with Ara Berberian as Noah. First Church was blessed by several visits of Dave and Lola Brubeck. Richard Vogt and the choir help with the premier of "La Fiesta de la Posada" at First Church. Richard and the choir often sang his lively Christmas piece, "God's Love Made Visible".

After David Fountain left in 1990 to become a senior pastor in Longmont, CO, William Federici was called to join the staff as Associate Pastor. Bill enabled First Church to reach out to many former Roman Catholics. With decision of the Roman Catholic Church to move away from the liberalism of Vatican Council II, many Catholics felt that First Church would be a good new home for them. Bill led a significant healing ministry for the congregation.

Brenda was called by The Riverside Church in New York to be their Executive Minister in 1994. For the next six years she would commute into the city for her ministry there. Our family decided to simplify our lives, so we sold the Old Orchard house and move to the Gables condos near the church.

At its St. Louis Synod the UCC voted to develop a new hymnal. Richard Vogt already had developed a very useful supplement hymnal for First Church. A major controversy developed in the UCC because many of the familiar hymns were re-written for the New Century Hymnal. Richard recommended that First Church keep the Pilgrim Hymnal in pews to sing the traditional Advent and Christmas hymns but at the same time also use New Century Hymnal. The Music Committee and the Church Committee agreed.

While I was attending daughter Heather's graduation from law school in Boston I received the sad news of Richard Vogt's death. I took the train back to Stamford and was met by Bob Goodchild who drove me to the prayer service in the Meetinghouse. Richard would have retired one Sunday later. Richard had been an extraordinary "minister" to the congregation and the whole community. His 27 years of music leadership blessed the congregation again and again. His weekly leading of the choir and congregation in praising God was a spiritual blessing. Hundreds joined each year in singing Handel's Messiah as a part of their Advent spiritual discipline. His special musical programs stretched all of us. In the cold months of winter he established "Sunday Afternoons Live", a time of charming music, tea and hot chocolate.

After Richard's death the congregation called Dr. John Stansell to lead the congregation in music ministry. John had served with Richard as our gifted organist. John responded to the challenge and grew his own powerful music ministry. We learned more and more of his gifts.

On New Year's Day 2000 Greenwich celebrated the beginning of a new century. I was invited to give the invocation at the party at the Hyatt Hotel. Sally Colegrove, Eileen and John Reynolds held a large party for the congregation at the Reynolds' large home in Cos Cob.

One of the gifts that First Church exercised was its decision to be a training congregation for seminarians. We were blessed by being a part of the training of Dean Ahlberg, Robin Jensen, Dennis Calhoun, Sue DeSimone, Adele Crawford (she served as an Administrative Assistant but was later ordained by the Presbyterians), Jean Simpson, and others.

First Church began its study of O&A - a discussion of whether the congregation would be an open congregation to all. Dale Greene had prophetically preached about this many years before. But the official three year journey started under the leadership of Chuck McConnell and Chuck Ainsworth. There were a series of Second Hours. Dr. David Bartlett, Dean and Old Testament professor at Yale Divinity School gave a series of presentations on homosexuality and the Bible. The committee invited a gay couple shared their journey in joining a UCC congregation in Hartford. There were many other events

that helped the congregation be involved in the discussion. After three years of discussion, the Church Committee asked the congregation to vote. The meeting was lively with speakers from many points of view. A large number of the youth members of the congregation spoke in favor of the motion to approve O&A. All was done with charity. Finally the vote was taken. The motion to become open and affirming carried by a 74% vote. One long term member of the congregation resigned. But a year later that member was back in regular worship. This action was a landmark event in the life of the congregation.

Later in 2000 Brenda was recruited to be Executive Director of Greenwich YWCA.

On September 11, 2001 during our regular Tuesday morning staff meeting someone called the office about a plane hitting the World Trade Center. The staff went over to Sally's apartment to watch TV. We knew we had to provide an opportunity for people to pray. Sally and Susie organized a worship service for 7 pm that evening at First Church. No members of First Church had died. Rabbi Mitch, Brenda and I organized a town wide service at Temple Shalom for 8 pm. Several members of Temple Shalom had been killed that morning. We were concerned about our friends in the Muslim group in Stamford. – Prill Meyer took food to the Muslim center. Worship services were held each evening at First Church on Wednesday and Thursday evenings. On Friday noon a town wide worship service was held at First Church. In October 2001 the local Imam and the woman lay leader of the Stamford mosque participated in Sunday morning worship at First Church. On Christmas Eve a Muslim group arrived before our 11 pm Christmas Eve service with chocolates for everyone. This was the defining moment for America.

The roof of the Meetinghouse needed repair. So on the advice of UCC fund raising group we elected to have a 30 day Capital Campaign. It was led with great enthusiasm by John Reynolds and others. One of the goals was to pay back some of the funds that the congregation had borrowed from the Endowment Fund. Our effort was successful because of the wonderful generosity of many.

As I approached spending thirty years of ministry at First Church, I felt it was time to retire after only spending a total of twenty-nine years as pastor of First Church. So I announced my intention to retire in August of 2003.

It has been the greatest privilege of my life to serve 29 years as a pastor at First Church. So many life milestones were shared with the congregation. Many cherished friendships were enjoyed. Good congregations make good ministers and so do good colleagues. Preaching and teaching the gospel year after year was an energizing process. The deep involvement in baptisms, weddings, and funerals over the years enabled me to bond with many families. God generously blessed our time together.

The officers, friends, the community, and the congregation held a three day party to celebrate my ministry. It was a great joy to have a party to remember the good times.

On September 1, 2003 I retired from First Church and the family moved to Macungie, PA.

Retirement was short lived, as I began a series of interim ministries at The Riverside Church in New York City, Church of Beatitudes in Phoenix, AZ, and Plymouth UCC in Seattle, WA. Then in 2012 Brenda and I retired to Boulder, CO, to be near our younger daughter Heather and her family.