

Protagonist Corner

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Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* has always been a favorite book of mine. I now reside in Connecticut a few miles from where Twain lived for many years and wrote most of his books. As a born and bred southerner, I originally thought that living in New England would be as strange and as untimely as "the Connecticut Yankee—the Boss" found it to be in Merrie Olde England. My previous picture of this culture was one of a cold and closed people who were tight-lipped and tight-fisted and who were indifferent to God and to neighbors.

When approached by a search committee back in 1995 about serving as senior minister of the First Church of Christ in Wethersfield, Connecticut, a United Church of Christ congregation, my initial reaction was "Yes, I am open to whatever God's will is for me." At the same time I hoped that he had no plans for me, a Presbyterian, to serve him in a Congregational church, even though it was in "Southern New England." Surprise! Surprise! I am about to start my fourth year here in Connecticut, and I love every minute of it.

Surprise #1: *People are welcoming and warm here!* Wethersfield prides itself on being "The Most Ancient Towne" in Connecticut; it was established in 1634 with First Church being "gathered" the next year. Its illustrious history includes Jonathan Edwards and his grandson, Timothy Dwight, both of whom attended worship services here while they were students. George Washington worshiped (maybe even slept) at First Church at least three times. When John Adams visited First Church he said, "We went up the steeple of the Wethersfield Meetinghouse from whence is the most grand and beautiful prospect in the world, at least, that I ever saw."¹

Appreciation, not arrogance, is the tenor of this congregation's view of its history. What one notices immediately here is how enthusiastic and loving the people are. The four uplifting worship services in a beautiful colonial Meetinghouse, built in 1761, are truly amazing experiences. This is a positive, empowering, and transforming congregation whose motto is "Where the Spirit is alive and miracles happen." My two predecessors, Keith Jones (1943-1978) and Don Morgan (1978-1996) offered visionary leadership and continue to inspire me today with wonderful and loving counsel. Because of them and other leaders, First Church has become the largest UCC congregation in New England, with over 180 ministries reaching out to all of Connecticut and western Massachusetts. Indeed, people are welcoming and warm here, and they will continue to be as they are guided by our recently adopted vision statement: "To be the serving body of Jesus Christ, reflecting His light and love, so that all may personally know Him: the Way, the Truth and the Light." The most frequent comment of the growing numbers of new members is, "First Church feels like home."

Surprise #2: *The kingdom of God transcends boundaries here like no other place I've ever experienced.* Being steeped in Presbyterianism, I have stayed close to its order and traditions. Though I have always been interested in ecumenical relations, this has been more in theory than in practice. Coloring outside the Presbyterian box seldom happened for me. Yet these past three years of ministry with this congregation have introduced me to the exciting opportunities of doing ministry with others beyond

my tradition.

Vision New England is the largest and most dynamic networking of churches I know of anywhere. Vision New England brings together Christians from all six New England states for experiences in cutting edge ministry, seminars, and conferences that promote strong, healthy churches. Their annual “Congress” in Boston has 10,000-plus in attendance with top world speakers and music groups. First Church’s participation in this incredible experience has been valuable for our leaders and for me.

Besides having a foot in the Presbytery of Southern New England and one in The Connecticut Conference of the UCC, I have been active in Churches Uniting in Global Mission (CUGM). This is a network of large Protestant and Roman Catholic churches across the nation founded by Robert Schuller and my predecessor, Don Morgan. Seeing and being with some of the most creative ministries going has made me appreciate how marvelously God is working today through all stripes of Christian traditions. I believe that the paradigm is shifting such that ministry now takes place beyond denominational and traditional lines that once separated us. At one time I was suspicious of para-church groups and non-reformed theologies. Now I am discovering the joy of uniting with all those whose hopes, efforts, and prayers are to witness to Jesus Christ as Lord. Among those groups are Prison Fellowship, Samaritan Purse, Young Life, Campus Crusade, Promise Keepers, Alpha, Habitat for Humanity, Community Bible Study, Youth with a Mission, Christian Activities Council, and Capitol Region Council of Churches.

In the greater Hartford area, three new incredible areas of partnership in ministry are beginning to have a huge impact. The first is happening as five senior ministers of the largest congregations in the area and our wives gather every month for lunch, prayer, and fellowship. We are from different denominations, located in different locations (north of Hartford, east of Hartford, west of Hartford, south of Hartford, and one in the heart of the city). We have different congregational membership makeup: one is ninety-nine percent African-American, presently building a worship center for 5, 000; one is one hundred percent Hispanic; one is equally mixed black, brown, and white; and two are predominantly white.

In the second partnership, these congregations, along with six others, have recently launched Noah, a sidewalk Sunday school outreach to the children of Hartford. Noah is based on Bill Wilson’s phenomenally successful Metro-Ministries of New York, a program in which more than 20,000 children participate each week. The third area of partnership with others is the Growth Council of the Millennium Project of metro Hartford. One of First Church’s members, Dr. Tony Giorgio, the Executive Director, has convened a group of us to serve as spiritual consultants to implement this statement: “Our mission is to gather and energize those who share a spiritual perspective which provided common ground to embrace a regional vision.” As a result of these various partnerships in ministry, Hartford, Connecticut, and New England are beginning to experience rebirth. Easter’s message certainly contains the message of new life, the reason for hope, the power for revival, and the guarantee for renewal. I believe we are in the first days of another great awakening.

Mark Twain attended the Asylum Hill Congregational Church in Hartford where he often heard the Gospel story. In *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*, “the Connecticut Yankee—the Boss” persuaded King Arthur to join him in disguising himself so as to walk among the people of his land. Without being recognized, they

could then see and understand how others really lived and suffered. As a result, King Arthur initiated ways to help his subjects and with acts of grace and mercy.

However, in real life, Mark Twain was not so ready to share his beliefs. At a dinner party, the subject of eternal life and future punishment came up for a lengthy discussion. Mark Twain took no part in it, so the woman seated next to him asked: “Why haven’t you said something? Surely you must have some opinion about this?” “Madam, you must excuse me,” Twain replied. “Of necessity. I have friends in both places.”²

I like Twain’s sense of humor. I, too, have friends in both places, but unlike Twain, I am now more ready to share the Gospel story with anyone who has not yet entered eternity. I have friends in the south and enjoy spending summers in Black Mountain, North Carolina, reconnecting with them and renewing my accent. I now have friends in Yankeeland and am having the time of my life enjoying this place with Joan, my wife of thirty-five years. We have been grateful recipients of many blessings of our God who likes to surprise.