

Rev. Eugene Ostendorf

Born into a Southern Illinois farm family with two sisters, I will always remember those growing years in the farm community as the very best I could imagine. Our family attended St. Peter's Evangelical and Reformed Church, which, of course, became a United Church of Christ. It was during my confirmation years with the influence of my home pastor that I began to feel the call to ministry, resulting in my ordination at St. Peter's UCC in 1968, a profoundly important day for me and the congregation.

Upon graduation from Okawville High School I attended Southern Illinois University in Carbondale where I earned my Liberal Arts Degree. Upon graduation, I immediately continued my education at Eden Theological Seminary of Webster Groves, Missouri. Here it was that my real journey in faith and toward ministry began. As I have described to many through the years, Seminary was that place where loving and passionate teachers helped me unpack my luggage in order to fill it with exciting new learning and understanding of ministry. During my third year I served full time as an Intern Student at Bethany UCC in North St. Louis. This experience enabled me to return to Seminary in my Senior year with a new perspective on the church and its mission. It was also at the Seminary that my appreciation for the United Church of Christ and its deep passion for welcome and inclusion for all became a part of my personal mission statement.

My first call upon ordination took me to a rural congregation at Hamil, Illinois, a congregation of 200 souls where with my farm upbringing I could easily connect to their life and issues. I then received a call as Associate Pastor to Immanuel UCC in Ferguson, Missouri, sharing that ministry with their Senior Pastor Gerald Bock. In 1972 I would hear once more the call to a new place, Kirkwood, UCC in Kirkwood, Missouri where I would serve for 29 years. There I would know the joys and sorrows, the celebrations and challenges, and perhaps most importantly the pure mercy and grace of a wonderful congregation until the time of my retirement in 2007 after 39 years in ministry. While involved in the full life of the congregation, an important part of my ministry was to youth, which meant many backpack trips in the mountains of Colorado, ski trips also in Colorado, and mission trips basically to many parts of the country. To this day when I meet a person from one of those years, more often than not, their life shaping memory is of one of those outdoor experiences.

Since 1972 I have found myself a part of the Missouri Mid-South Conference. During those years I directed camps at MoVal during two summers, led a Missouri Mid-South Conference week-long Youth Backpack trip to Colorado. I was pleased to serve on the St. Louis Association committee then named Council on Lay Life and Ministry. I also served on the Association Church and Ministry Committee for 6 years, the last two years as Chair. I had the tremendous joy of serving as a delegate from our Conference to two different General Synods, serving as the delegation's chairperson at the second. I was honored to be elected to the Conference Council where I first served as Secretary and then as Conference Moderator from 1995-1997 as the Conference experienced a transition time.

When the tragic shooting occurred in Kirkwood in 2008 I became part of CFUH (Community for Understanding and Healing) in an effort to confront and heal the divisions and hurts that had become newly exposed. I also became part of a Kirkwood based Community Gospel Choir, with emphasis on African American spirituals and performing in numerous venues including Powell Hall at a Martin Luther King Jr. Day Celebration. The purpose of that choir was to build bridges across the numerous divisions that separated our community. The Choir, now known as the Community Gospel Choir of St. Louis, continues even stronger today with ever increasing diversity among its members. Among one of my fond memories of building bridges came as a result of many lunches with an Associate Professor in Comparative Religions, herself a Muslim at Meramec Community College. Our conversations would lead to a shared worship experience at Kirkwood UCC in which 40 Muslims were in attendance, a truly remarkable event in the church's life. I am so grateful to be part of a faith community that welcomes the stranger and seeks to include all in the ongoing journey of life every day building new bridges but not fearing the bridges yet to be built.

In retirement, my wife, Christine, and I continue to live in Kirkwood thereby keeping us close to our family, especially our grandchildren. Together we deliver meals every Wednesday to folks in Webster Groves. Chris is a classroom volunteer at Keysor School in Kirkwood and I serve as an OASIS tutor in the same school.

Retirement has given us the opportunity to be full-time grandparents, to travel, garden, play golf, meet new friends and neighbors, find a new faith community and truly enjoy the many blessings that have come our way by God and who knows from where else. My closing thought... retirement... highly recommended.