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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
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Reflections on Ministry with Rev. Carleen Gerber

I remember meeting Carleen for the first time many years ago when my mom and I were new to FCCOL and I was becoming a student at Yale Divinity School. There was a church meeting in Sheffield that we attended, and I heard Carleen's voice before I saw her…She was standing up in front of me and speaking out on the unjust treatment of human beings and how **we** must stand with them no matter what…
Then, as now, the power of her prophetic voice rings with clarity, truth and compassion.

I've had the privilege of working side by side with Carleen for the past 8.5 years here at FCCOL. Her mentorship, friendship and ministerial leadership has often been a guiding light for me.

Her gifts are multifaceted. She contains multitudes as the poet says and brings her whole self to whatever task is called for. Be it a pastoral prayer shared just at the right time, or filling in on the organ some Sunday, or whether sitting at someone's bedside holding their hand long into the dark night, or preaching a word we need to hear or coaxing just the right volunteers to plan and implement a church dinner. She's also exactly the person you want to sit next to on a bus while traveling on a long partnership journey through the West Bank!

The power of her voice
The power of her presence
and the power of her heart.

These are the three of the keys to her ministry, to her life's ongoing work. Carleen's is a richly lived theology. Rooted in the South African ethic of Ubuntu meaning, "I am because we are!" Ubuntu is among the teaching words in her spiritual vocabulary. "I am because we are" …her South African spirit infuses her life and heart.

Four years ago, our youth group travelled to Georgia and Alabama to walk in the footsteps of civil rights heroes. I remember Carleen's suggestion about what to do as we crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma:

Read Wendell Berry's poem as a prayer for your steps:
Give everyone a candle to hold as they cross the bridge and
Encourage them to keep it lit as long as possible!

Berry's poem is a prayer, and one Carleen carries in her heart…

"I know that I have life
only insofar as I have love.

I have no love
except it comes from Thee.

Help me, please, to carry this candle against the wind."

It was raining in Selma that day as I recall, but the kids, all of us, held our candles against the wet wind cupping our hands to protect the tiny flames as we made our way across that holy place walking in the giant footsteps of greatness and bravery.

As a holy troublemaker herself, Carleen encourages us always to keep those candles lit through the darkest of nights and to savor, too, the most glorious of mornings.

Carleen, You are like the biblical sheroes from Genesis, Shiprah and Puah, those midwives of justice who knew just how to use their smarts and strategy to defeat the Pharoah… and to not be afraid to get arrested to do it!

With your grace and strength and humility, Carleen, I'm so grateful for your example and ministry, as we keep trying to cross more bridges of injustice together, step by step, candle by candle.
You help us to keep fanning the flames of the spirit of ubuntu as we go.