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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Reflection on Rev. Carleen Gerber on her 50th Anniversary
November 1, 2026

"The Long Beautiful Journey of Love"

I will begin my reflection with a quote from Henri Nouwen. "We choose love by taking small steps of love every time there is an opportunity. A smile, a handshake, a word of encouragement, a phone call, a card, an embrace, a kind greeting, a gesture of support, a moment of attention, a helping hand, a present, a visit – all these are little steps toward love. Each step is like a candle burning in the night. It does not take the darkness away, but it guides us through the darkness. When we look back after many small steps of love, we will discover that we have made a long and beautiful journey." This reflection is in honor of Carleen's 50-year-long and beautiful journey of love.

Through the 40 years of knowing Carleen, I have witnessed and experienced her wearing "many hats." I first met her as the mother of my daughter's friend, Emily. Five years later, when Ted and I joined the church after our marriage, I became a member of the choir. Carleen at that time was the organist, choir director, and Director of Music. Joining the choir was a welcoming and wonderful experience for me, a family of new friends, and Carleen nurtured all of us with loving leadership, humor, and prayers after each rehearsal. During that time, I admired her as a seminarian as she pursued her path to ordination through the University of South Africa. She inspired me toward the pursuit of a career in ministry. Years later, I joined the staff as an Associate Minister in 2007 and worked very closely with Carleen, always listening and observing as she and David Good quietly taught me how to be a minister. Every time she prayed, I would listen carefully as she wove her thoughts beautifully into a tapestry of love and hope. I witnessed her passion for mission and social and earth justice and that spoke to my heart too. Most importantly, I watched her as she gave pastoral care to so many in the congregation. Carleen has a gift for being present with a parishioner in need of support. She listens, truly listens, and speaks with encouragement that feels as if she is a conduit for the Holy Spirit. I will share one experience when I was the one in need of her care.

In 2008, I had surgery that fused several vertebrae in my back. After several days in the hospital, I came home to the parsonage, where Ted and I were living at the time. We had a bedroom set up on the first floor, and Ted helped me to bed and then headed to the pharmacy to fill my pain medicine. From all the movement and the ride home, I was wracked with pain and alone. Carleen just happened to be at the drugstore when Ted was there waiting for my meds. She raced over to the house to be with me. I remember lying in bed close to tears, and Carleen walked through the door. It seemed as if an angel had come to visit me and reassure me. She sat next to me and told me God was with me, that I would get through this, that everyone was praying for me, that I was surrounded by love. She held my hand and that was what I needed the most. It sounds like a simple act of love, but at that moment it felt like a miracle... there is nothing like the human touch. When I think of Carleen, one of the first images that comes to my head is this moment together in the parsonage. Since that moment when I make pastoral visits, I always hold the parishioner's hand when I pray with him or her.

I have heard from many of you, your stories of Carleen's visits when your loved ones were dying, or you were grieving a loss, when you were in the hospital, or wracked with pain in your bed. Carleen was there, giving prayers of encouragement and love to soothe your struggling body or soul and most likely she was holding your hand.

Today we honor her ministry and her newly published book of prayers. I believe her prayers are so insightful and beautiful because of her experience giving pastoral care and her love for the environment. Carleen embodies the understanding that the Earth is a divine creation of love, that unites our body and spirit into one. Walking in the woodlands, kayaking on the Connecticut River and its tributaries, finding peace and solitude in the quiet beauty of our surroundings, carrying in her heart this experience and sharing this love with us through her prayers. This poem by Chief Dan George of the First Nation Tribes reminds me of Carleen:

The beauty of the trees, the softness of the air,
the fragrance of the grass speaks to me.

The summit of the mountain, the thunder of the sky,
the rhythm of the sea speaks to me.

The summit of the stars, the freshness of the morning,
the dewdrop on the flower speaks to me.

The strength of fire, the trail of the sun,
and the life that never goes away, they speak to me.

And my heart soars.

In June 2012, David Good retired after 37 years of ministry. It was decided that instead of hiring an Interim Senior Minister, Carleen would step into this position, and I would be at her side. At this time Simon Holt was hired to relieve Carleen as Director of Music, organist and choir director, because she needed to be a full-time minister, including a constant presence on the search committee that found Steve. What a great choice!

Carleen has been with us for 50 years giving this church her dedicated devotion and hard sincere work –-taking many steps of love that have made her long journey to this point today. We have experienced a lot together and our bond of friendship is strong. Thank you, Carleen, for all that you have given me through the years; you are like a sister to me, and I cherish our relationship. Congratulations on your 50 years! We are all so very proud of you and grateful for all that you have given to this church community!

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