

Moment of Stewardship

Good morning, I'm Janie Peterson. I remember standing in the Essex Meadows mail room shortly after we arrived from Long Island knowing no one – complete outlanders - and asking the folks collecting their mail, "Isn't there a church somewhere around here that is known for its commitment to social justice?" Yes, said a long-time Old Lyme resident, "That's the First Congregational Church of Old Lyme."

This was good news to a life-long Congregationalist, so I crossed the river and started to attend. And the many deep riches of this congregation began to unfold for me. Most inspiring are the constant messages of inclusion – as each of our ministers each Sunday in various ways reminds us that in this church "we pledge to honor each other." All voices are sacred. What a liberating testament! And I love that we affirm that we learn from so many sources -from the arts, from the sciences, from various wisdom traditions. Our various world-wide partnerships and explorations widen my understanding of God or whatever name for the divine each one of us feels comfortable using.

Our services each Sunday seem miracles of inspiration and loving care. I confess that initially singing all verses of three or four hymns each Sunday and accepting that a Congregational minister's sermon could exceed the customary 20 minutes were big challenges to this old Congo, but... but I have come to glory in the artistry of each service: the way that all aspects – the music, the prayers, the readings, the children's message, the greetings, the sermon – contribute to something I'll call "the living word." I leave each Sunday filled with gratitude and hope.

On October 5, Laura spoke about Bishop Maryann Budde's book, *How We Learn to Be Brave*. This church is teaching me how to be brave, to move beyond the isolating fear and despair our present world engenders. The Immigration Ministry, for instance, invites me to move out of customary comfortable paths of involvement.

In my professional life I was a secondary school English teacher and writing center director. In those roles, my most gratifying achievement was nurturing a coffee house where all varieties of students and teachers shared their own poetry and music. I cherished that generous community. So, you can imagine my joy when I realized that poetry enriches so many of our services at FCCOL. To be part of a community that celebrates the sacred wisdom of poems and novels and all art forms energizes me. I have loved for three years reading a canto of the Divine Comedy, adding my voice to all the others on those long, nurturing nights.

I have been thinking about what I would say to someone who might ask why I so relish being a member here. Here is what I would say: This church makes me *larger* – quite a gift to an 85-year-old woman who is in fact shrinking.

by Janie Peterson