

The N O R T H E R N Light

Featuring the people and events of First Congregational Christian Church of Anchorage

August 2019

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Minister's Message

Camp Here: Occupy to Overcome Homelessness

This month I want to share about one thing I have been up to over the last couple of weeks. It is long, so I hope you have a place to sit.

It has not been an easy moment for Alaska or Anchorage. I have seen my

new home begin (continue) down a path that I fear will cause great harm to the people of our state and will have significant impacts on our congregation and the people I serve. In response, I have begun to explore how I can help uplift the voices of the people most impacted and help shift some public conversations back to the human impacts of our collective decisions.

The Back Story

A couple of weeks ago I was part of a sleep-out event to draw attention to the 90% cut in state funding to homelessness services in Alaska. I assumed that particular event would end on Sunday the 14th of July. However, something happened that I did not anticipate. Over the weekend a group of about 20 unhoused (homeless) citizens began to form together as part of the

larger group of mostly housed people. They decided that they wanted to help with the event by keeping the park clean, helping serve food, and share about their experiences of being unhoused in Anchorage. They created a short set of rules for themselves and the event. It included things like no drinking/drug use, no stealing, no violence, no name calling/labeling, no weapons, and everyone participates.

On Sunday evening those who were unhoused decided that they wanted to stay together but didn't know how to do that in Anchorage. As you are likely aware, any gathering of more than a couple of tents in Anchorage draws a lot of attention and is scheduled for abatement (cleared) by the municipality. However, once the state budget cuts to homelessness services was scheduled to go into effect and Brother Francis shelter space reduced, the abatement process would stop completely. That is because there must be enough low barrier shelter spaces available for people before any abatement action can go forward.

Over the days following the 14th the camp asked the municipality if there were any options for the group to stay together. The only answer we received was simply, no. But for many of us, we couldn't just walk away from people wanting to stay together to support each other and provide safety for one another, while still experiencing homelessness, as they worked to find more permanent solutions. We also knew that as Anchorage heads into a crisis there would have to be significant community involvement or the issues we already face around homelessness would balloon out of control. That includes dangerous camps and illegal activity in our parks and greenbelts that affect everyone. It also includes significant dangers for already unhoused people who are scattered, isolated, and exposed to illegal activity and crime in our public spaces as they attempt to find a place to sleep and survive.

The camp began to have conversations about what they wanted. So, it was decided by the campers that they would stay together. It was then decided by a few housed community members that we would help them do that. The camp moved from the park-strip downtown to a couple different parks. The police followed, and in one case 50+ showed up. Fortunately, they were not physically aggressive. The camp finally settled in the edge of the woods, east of Valley of the Moon park. It is not ideal, but it is at least a short-term place where they can avoid immediate eviction and to collect themselves as they continue to develop their community model.

Life in the Camp

Each day the camp gathers for morning and evening circle meetings to discuss issues and make decisions. They have shared things such that this camp was the first real restful sleep they have had in months while unhoused. They have felt a sense of safety in numbers and more than a couple people even stopped or significantly reduced their drinking/drug use (an AA group just formed). They also felt visible and not tucked away where they are vulnerable to crime and violence.

What has happened in the two weeks since then is something like I have never seen. The community of unhoused people in the camp, with community support of food and basic supplies, is beginning to thrive. They are electing elders and councils to help make decisions. They take turns staying up at night for safety. They continue to organize the camp and clear trash in the park. They vote to welcome any new campers, and collectively ask people causing problems to leave. They sign an agreement that they will follow the rules of the community. They are even beginning their own meal planning and preparations, using their own food to help support the whole camp.

The local community has even begun to stop by for the meetings and offer financial/food/supply support. Neighbors, who can be skeptical for good reason, have stopped to talk and are often amazed at what they see. Assembly members have stopped by. The camp even represented itself in the recent Assembly meeting on the invitation of Christopher Constant (Valley of the Moon is in his district). The camp is beginning to work with the Municipality to help advise future efforts to support people as they move out of homelessness. It may seem strange to hear, but this is one of the few times unhoused people have participated in initiatives organized to address and end homelessness.

This is not a camp for all unhoused people. Some need the emergency services of shelters, as limited as they can be. Many people are still facing any number of challenges, some from no fault of their own, and others by their own making and choice. However, for the people who are ready to move forward and need a little stability and support along the way, the camp has been a temporary place where people can begin to advocate for themselves and support each other as they climb out of homelessness. While in the camp, three families have gained more permanent housing, others have secured their IDs and voter registrations. Others are connecting with services to help their next steps. Others have filled out permanent housing paperwork.

Next Steps

I do not know how long the camp will remain, or where it will move if the concept of a small sanctioned camp is further developed. I do know that it is anticipated that there will be roughly 800 additional unhoused or marginally housed people in Anchorage over the next year when services begin shutting down (currently there are 1,100). This community crisis will not just go away if we ignore it or shuffle it further back into the woods.



Members of our congregation have stepped up in many ways to help. Multiple individuals and families have made food and given financial support for the camp. I have been surprised and humbled over and over by the drive of our congregation to take risks and serve others in tough situations both bravely and boldly. That is more than rare in churches than many of you might realize.

But Congregationalists are inherently action-oriented people. Because there is no other organization to tell us how to engage our community, we have to take it upon ourselves to address local problems and struggles with faith and actions that seeks positive results and offer a chance for everyone to thrive.

There are a lot of raw emotions and fears around homelessness right now. No doubt it is one of the biggest issues facing our city. Unfortunately, many fears and bursts of anger are blankly directed at all unhoused people. For that reason, public interest, media coverage, your neighbors, and the general discourse around the camp has not and will not always be positive. But just like all of us, unhoused people are varied and different. So will be the response of the community.

Also, elected officials, the media, and the public know who I am and of my involvement. That reality is not without the potential for raised public attention. With all of this I am asking for your trust. I am attempting to serve our community as best I know at this

difficult moment in Anchorage. I will not always get it just right. I ask that you communicate your concerns whenever they arise and ask questions often. And if you are curious, I would love to have a longer conversation with you or even introduce you to the camp. I pray that from this low moment for our city/state we are able to arise knowing that we gave everything we had to the continued creation of a place we are proud to call home; a home that sees all of us as worth the time and effort to care. First Congregational can be a part of that work. We are already a part of that work in so many ways.

I am so proud to be your minister and to continue to follow in the Way of Jesus with you. I would never be able to step out in acts of faith and take risks without a congregation like ours that participates and gives feedback. What I can promise is that I will not take your trust for granted, even if I might press a little from time to time.

See you around the life and work of faith together.
Rev. Jacob Poindexter

Moderator's Message



-Louise Smith, Moderator
(Marilyn Hanson shared this article with me)

Build Your Capacity to be Kind

"Take a moment to think before you act so that you are in control of yourself, your emotions and your responses. It is easy to justify unpleasant or rude behavior with excuses of being tired, overworked, or stressed. Sometimes we take out the irritations of the moment or the day on our family, children, co-workers, or even the family pet. What is the emotional tone of your family or your life? Is it harsh, cold, unforgiving, withdrawn, or warm, loving, open and embracing?"

Take time each day to build and generate new verbal and non-verbal responses that will allow you to build your capacity to be a gentler, kinder, more compassionate, peaceful and loving person. This is a skill set that takes intentional rehearsal and practice – just like playing sports or working out. If you find yourself acting often out of irritation, anger, or even rage, reflect on what excuse you use to make someone else the brunt of your bad attitude or worse – your bad behavior. Decide that no excuse is worth the cost of emotional venting in public or in private – especially on those you love. Do the hard work and the heart work to hold yourself to a higher standard. Raise the bar on yourself, your attitude and your behavior!"

by Jon (last name unknown)

Remember that no one, and I mean NO ONE, deserves to be used as your own personal punching bag; emotionally or physically. Hurt people, hurt people. Let's stop that cycle.

Sadly, there are those in life that will never change their ways, regardless of how wonderfully you treat them. Treat them with kindness anyway. People will not always reciprocate or acknowledge your love and goodness. They may be the same jerks that they have always been. That is not your concern. It is no reflection of you. You have done your best. Let it go and move on.

None of us are perfect. As much as I may seem kind and gentle on here; I do have my moments of anger that are, in my eyes, ridiculous. I don't often take them out on anyone but myself, or in the car swearing at some bad driver, but the feelings can bring about bad attitudes. Even if the attitude is only short, it still drives me nuts. So, when I read the above article, I wanted to share it with everyone.

It is so true that practice makes perfect. Especially in thought and in action. When you remind yourself to think positive, to act kindly and follow through; it becomes habit.

“Give freely.

Collect moments.

Listen carefully.

Strive for grace.

Love unconditionally.

Speak humbly.

Be kind.

Express gratitude.

Always...”



If you have been around someone who does this; someone who is positive, kind, and gentle in all they do; it is a breath of fresh air. Why not be one of these people yourself? Some of you already are! I love you for that!

By Marilyn Hanson

It's Election Season – Who Do You Trust?

By Kate O'Dell

On NPR this morning, Shankar Vedantam reported on some research that, to me, correlates strongly with an article from the *New York Times* by Yuval Noah Harari, “Why Fiction Trumps Truth.” Both the article and the NPR interview provide us with some points to ponder in this time when, if we choose, we are immersed in a 24-hour “truth” barrage. Even if you try to limit your consumption of media, just by getting out of your house and socializing you are participating in a uniquely human exchange – storytelling – through which your brain constructs your belief system and establishes social trust relationships. The Vedantam interview and the Harari article have challenged me to think about what I can do in the coming months until the 2020 election to test my beliefs and examine my truths, preferably in respectful and spirited discussions with other people.

[Excerpt from the Vedantam interview: He is describing the experience of a woman who went online with a query about the link between vaccination and autism. She got involved in a group of, mostly mothers, who had made the decision not to believe the science and leave their children unvaccinated.]

DYNDA: To me, it seemed so clear. It seemed like I had just found this secret information that only some people come across, and I thought, why would I not use this information?

VEDANTAM: What DYNDA was experiencing was something researchers call social trust.

CAILIN O'CONNOR: Social trust is a really important aspect in understanding how people form beliefs.

VEDANTAM: Cailin O'Connor is a philosopher and mathematician at the University of California, Irvine. She studies how social networks spread information and how they shape our core beliefs.

O'CONNOR: No other animal has this ability to sort of transfer ideas and knowledge dependably from person to person, over generation after generation.

VEDANTAM: Now, you might think, "I don't just accept what people tell me; I look for proof." - not so, O'Connor says.

O'CONNOR: Ninety-nine percent of the things you believe, probably you have no direct evidence of yourself. You have to trust other people to find those things out, get the evidence and tell it to you.

[To listen to the interview and view the transcript, go to <https://www.npr.org/2019/07/22/744023623/when-it-comes-to-vaccines-and-autism-why-is-it-hard-to-refute-misinformation>]

From the *New York Times*, June 4, 2019
<https://nyti.ms/30Gu4Fk>

Why Fiction Trumps Truth

We humans know more truths than any species on earth. Yet we also believe the most falsehoods.

By Yuval Noah Harari

Mr. Harari is a historian (This article was contributed by Kate O'Dell)

Many people believe that truth conveys power. If some leaders, religions or ideologies misrepresent reality, they will eventually lose to more clear-sighted rivals. Hence sticking with the truth is the best strategy for gaining power. Unfortunately, this is just a comforting myth. In fact, truth and power have a far more complicated relationship, because in human society, power means two very different things.

On the one hand, power means having the ability to manipulate objective realities: to hunt animals, to construct bridges, to cure diseases, to build atom bombs. This kind of power is closely tied to truth. If you believe a false physical theory, you won't be able to build an atom bomb.

On the other hand, power also means having the ability to manipulate human beliefs, thereby getting lots of people to cooperate effectively. Building atom bombs requires not just a good understanding of physics, but also the coordinated labor of millions of humans. Planet Earth was conquered by *Homo sapiens* rather than by chimpanzees or elephants, because we are the only mammals that can cooperate in very large numbers. And large-scale cooperation depends on believing common stories. But these stories need not be true. You can unite millions of people by making them believe in completely fictional stories about God, about race or about economics.

The dual nature of power and truth results in the curious fact that we humans know many more truths than any other animal, but we also believe in much more nonsense. We are both the smartest and the most gullible inhabitants of planet Earth. Rabbits don't know that $E=MC^2$, that the universe is about 13.8 billion years old and that DNA is made of cytosine, guanine, adenine and thymine. On the other hand, rabbits don't believe in the mythological fantasies and ideological absurdities that have mesmerized countless

humans for thousands of years. No rabbit would have been willing to crash an airplane into the World Trade Center in the hope of being rewarded with 72 virgin rabbits in the afterlife.

When it comes to uniting people around a common story, fiction actually enjoys three inherent advantages over the truth. First, whereas the truth is universal, fictions tend to be local. Consequently, if we want to distinguish our tribe from foreigners, a fictional story will serve as a far better identity marker than a true story. Suppose we teach our tribal members to believe that “the sun rises in the east and sets in the west.” That makes for a very poor tribal myth. For if I encounter somebody in the jungle and that person tells me that the sun rises in the east, it might indicate that she is a loyal member of our tribe, but it might just as well indicate that she is an intelligent foreigner who reached the same conclusion independently of our tribe. It is therefore better to teach tribe members that “the sun is the eye of a giant frog that each day leaps across the sky,” since few foreigners — however intelligent — are likely to hit upon this particular idea independently.

The second huge advantage of fiction over truth has to do with the handicap principle, which says that reliable signals must be costly to the signaler. Otherwise, they can easily be faked by cheaters. For example, male peacocks signal their fitness to female peahens by sporting an enormous colorful tail. This is a reliable signal of fitness, because the tail is heavy, cumbersome and attracts predators. Only a truly fit peacock can survive despite this handicap. Something similar happens with stories.

If political loyalty is signaled by believing a true story, anyone can fake it. But believing ridiculous and outlandish stories exacts greater cost and is therefore a better signal of loyalty. If you believe your leader only when he or she tells the truth, what does that prove? In contrast, if you believe your leader even when he or she builds castles in the air, that’s loyalty! Shrewd leaders might sometimes deliberately say nonsensical things as a way to distinguish reliable devotees from fair-weather supporters.

Third, and most important, the truth is often painful and disturbing. Hence if you stick to unalloyed reality, few people will follow you. An American presidential candidate who tells the American public the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth about American history has a 100 percent guarantee of losing the elections. The same goes for candidates in all other countries. How many Israelis, Italians or Indians can stomach the unblemished truth about their nations? An uncompromising adherence to the truth is an admirable spiritual practice, but it is not a winning political strategy.

Some might argue that the long-term costs of believing fictional stories outweigh any short-term advantages in social cohesion. Once people get in the habit of believing absurd fictions and convenient falsehoods, this habit would spill into more and more areas, and they would consequently make bad economic decisions, adopt counterproductive military strategies and fail to develop effective technologies. While this occasionally happens, it is far from being a universal rule. Even the most extreme zealots and fanatics can often compartmentalize their irrationality so that they believe nonsense in some fields, while being eminently rational in others.

NACCC News

-From Sharon Higgins, NACCC Delegate

2020 will be a year of celebration for the Congregation Way. We will be commemorating the 400th anniversary of the Mayflower's arrival in Plymouth Harbor.

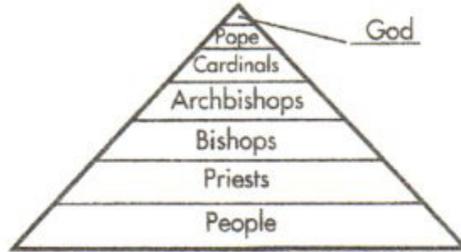
The flowing chart is a "mind tickler" to answer the question: What is Congregationalism?

What Is Congregationalism?

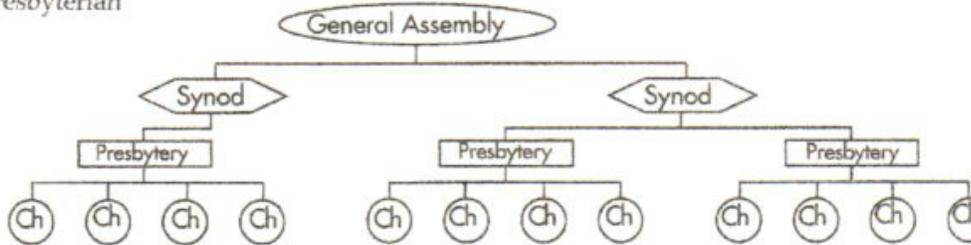
Three Church Organizations

Polity — The structure of a church or organization.

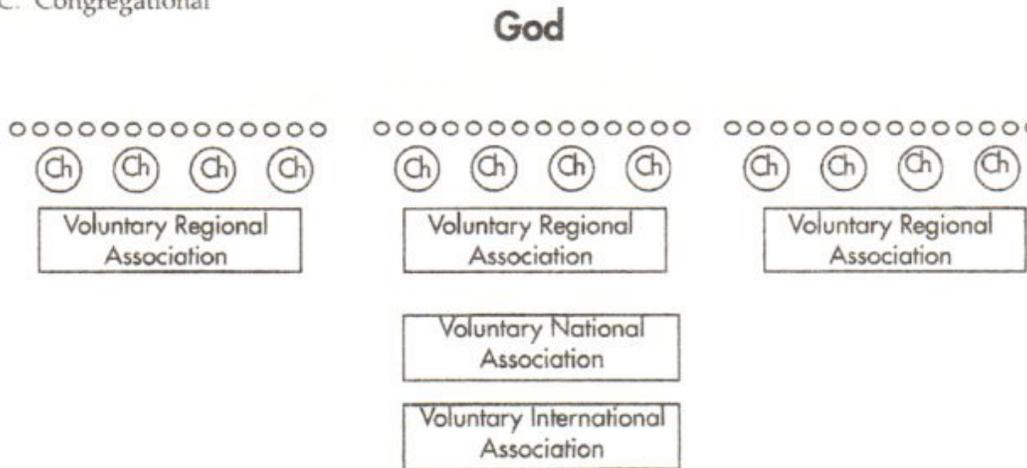
A. Episcopal



B. Presbyterian



C. Congregational



Some Basics of Congregationalism

1. Relationships are based on covenant.
2. Christ is Head of the Church.
3. A gathered fellowship of believers is the Church.
4. The (local) Church is in fellowship with other like-minded Churches.

Covenant — Definition

1. Promise
2. Describes relationship
3. Agreement
4. Statement of purpose

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Serving the NACCC

Sharon Higgins,
Year-Round Delegate

Serving the PNACCC

Claudia Kniefel
2018 Delegate

August 2019 Church Calendar

- Aug. 1** – Thurs., 6:30 pm – Investment Club
- Aug. 4** – Sun., 12:15 – Life & Learning Meeting
- Aug. 9** – Fri., 6:00 pm – Family Game Night
- Aug. 11** – Sun., 12:15 pm – Outreach Meeting
- Aug. 13** – Tues., 3:30 pm – Stewardship Meeting
- Aug. 18** – Sun., 12:15 pm – FCC Council Meeting
- Aug. 21** – Wed., 3:30 pm – Fellowship Meeting
- Aug. 22** – Thurs., 6:00 pm – Worship Meeting
- Aug. 23** – Fri., 5:30 pm – Friday Food & Fun Night
- Aug. 28** – Wed., Handbell & Choir practices start
5:15 pm - Handbells
6:30 pm - Choir

*Note: Monday night Community Bell Choir practice
is canceled until Sept. 4, Labor Day*

Remember...You can find the current monthly calendar on the Church web site (www.fccak.org). It's updated almost daily, so you might want to make checking it part of your daily routine.