

A Proposal for Agape UCC: A New Church Start

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Agape United Church of Christ: Where you don't need to leave your Mind or Heart at the door!

Note: On February 23rd, 2014, the Congregational Church of Westborough voted to officially become the “parent” church of Agape. I am very grateful!

WHY A NEW CHURCH START?

The beauty of a new church start is being able to start fresh without hearing “We’ve never done it that way before.” Worship in almost all New England UCC churches does not resonate with young people and young adults. As long-standing churches slowly creep along the continuum of change, mainline churches are dying. Every year in Massachusetts, several UCC churches close, with no new churches taking their place. From 2000 to 2010 alone, the UCC as a whole encountered a net loss of 696 congregations and 318,897 members.¹

Twenty and thirty year-olds are mostly absent from the progressive church. It is interesting to note that congregations organized from 2000 to 2012 experienced growth in the last five year period (2007-2012) at an average of 6 new members per congregation. Churches organized in any time period prior to 2000 experienced a net decline in membership within the same five-year period, at a total average rate of 20 members per congregation.²

The progressive Church needs new church starts because we need a fresh start. We need a clean slate where we can create communities of Jesus followers who feel excited and inspired about churches and spiritual communities that speak to them, and that they can be excited about co-creating without the significant resistance to change often met in modern mainline churches.

AGAPE UCC: A Progressive Christian Community of Embodiment and Practice

Agape new church start will be a place where you don't need to leave your mind OR your heart at the door. Praise God! From this place, Agape will:

- Have **devotional, heart-centered music** and worship that fills your spiritual cup. Music is one of the centerpieces of a transformative worship, and so excellent and devotional music will be made a priority in the worship life of the church.
- Seek to **live out and embody our faith**. People, and young adults don't just want the talk, they want the living.
- Have a **progressive Christian theology**. “Agape” is the Greek word for unconditional love. **Agape is the love that God has for us-** a love with no conditions, that we can't do anything about. **Our calling as a spiritual community is to receive and embody that love in the world.**

¹ UCC Center for Analytics, Data, and Research, *The United Church of Christ: A Statistical Profile*, (United Church of Christ, 2013), pdf p. 2.

² UCC Center for Analytics, Data, and Research, *The United Church of Christ: A Statistical Profile*, (United Church of Christ, 2013), pdf p. 3.

Agape begins from a progressive theological place, yet also a firm foundation of faith:

- As an **Open and Affirming** congregation, Agape is welcoming to all people, and in particular persons who have been marginalized or outcast by church or society. Agape affirms that LGBT persons are created wonderfully and beautifully by God just as they are.
- As a **Pluralistic** Christian congregation, we affirm that Jesus is our way, but not “the only way.” Agape is centered on the life and person of Jesus, and the Christian scriptures, while affirming that there is beauty, wisdom, and life found in all religions rooted in love.
- As a **Just Peace** church, Agape works for peace and justice and seeks to live out God’s reign on earth through service to humanity, charity, education, and systemic change.
- Agape seeks to build a **strong spiritual foundation** rooted in **embodying our faith**. As embodying our faith comes from practicing it, Agape is a **community of spiritual practice**. Agape is intentional in its life and membership about **small groups** that provide opportunities for a number of spiritual disciplines to be practiced in community.
- Agape is a **Multicultural and Multiracial** church. The diversity of human life and culture is a beautiful thing that we are called to affirm and cherish. Our goal as spiritual community is to **live out Oneness in the midst of our diversity**.
- Agape lives first and foremost **not by a set of doctrines, but by a desire and commitment to follow in the way of Jesus**. Agape seeks, in the UCC tradition, to encourage **testimonies, not tests**, of faith. We honor belonging over beliefs.
- Agape seeks to live into being **Accessible** to people of all ages, abilities, and needs.

Agape’s practice is as a living tradition, where we continue to discern what gives life and what doesn’t. Some other characteristics of Agape will be:

- Agape as a community of “**contemplatives in action**.” Agape seeks to fully live out Jesus’ greatest commandment to love God and to love our neighbor as we love our self.
- Agape strives to **live out “The Beloved Community”** (a phrase popularized by Martin Luther King Jr.) by first **being the change that we wish to see in the world** (Gandhi).
- Agape is about **embodying Christ’s reign here and now. At the heart of that is practice**. All will be welcome to attend weekly worship services. Those who commit to covenanting with Agape commit to intentionally engaging in spiritual practices as part of small groups.
- Agape envisions a church that truly lives into the affirmation that **God is still speaking**, and not only through Christian spiritual practices, but through practices such as yoga and mindfulness, and through wisdom from different spiritual traditions like the chakra system.
- In the UCC tradition, we are to be a “**covenantal**” community. Our main priority is not correct dogma, but **living, embodying, and practicing the way of Jesus in our lives**. Our common life involves making a covenant for the type of behaviors we wish to create and live into in our community.
- In areas where **conflict** arises in the church, the “**Matthew**” **principle guides our collective life**. This is based on Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 18: 15-17- first talking with someone individually, then bringing in an outside facilitator, and then bringing in the larger community.
- Agape lives into the biblical notion of the “**priesthood of all believers**.” Each of us in the Body of Christ has different gifts. Our call as a church community is to affirm those unique gifts, while empowering our membership to use and live out their gifts in the church and the world.

- Agape is a Christian community that is intentional about **listening to its calling**, and **seeking to express and live out its vision**.
- Agape seeks to be **open and transparent about money and stewardship**. When we share our time, talent, and resources, we build up the kingdom of God. Our call as disciples is to be good stewards of the gifts God has given us.
- Agape seeks to be an **eco-friendly community** that lives out sustainable practices for the earth, and for future generations.
- Agape encourages and supports people in **living healthier and natural lifestyles**. As a community, we support people in caring for their soul, their mind, and their body.
- **Note:** This list is only a beginning. It is not exhaustive!

Starting a new church involves a lot of uncertainty. One spiritual practice that the Agape leaders are intentional about is being at peace with the uncertainty, and living into the questions.

PRACTICAL STUFF

In 2013-14, I completed two online courses taught by The Center for Progressive Renewal (CPR): “Church Planting 1.0.” and “Church Planting 2.0.” I am currently visiting other new church starts and learning from them. I have never planted a new church before, so am learning a lot, and am excited to begin the process of getting this new church off the ground. In 2014-15, I will be part of a “New Ministries” cohort in the Massachusetts Conference UCC, which will receive support, coaching, and training from CPR.

Agape’s vision is to be a thriving church with an exciting vision and vibrant opportunities. It is this vision and these opportunities that are creating such great energy around this new spiritual community!

Agape will live out a healthy form of outreach rooted in love, not in fear or scarcity. A central Agape belief will be: **God loves us, and there’s nothing we can do about it!** Excitement and sharing is a natural outgrowth of one’s experience of a living, unconditionally loving God in a transformative community. Let’s share that amazing good news with others!

Our church today truly needs excited, passionate, and called leadership to be renewed. It is my vision and prayer that Agape embody this. I have had many conversations already with people who are very excited about joining this vision and project. I hold many exciting potential opportunities in my heart once Agape begins to grow and expand.

It is a true blessing to have the Congregational Church of Westborough as the parent church of Agape. I am looking for other church partners in this venture also. Most new church starts take at least five years to become financially sustainable without outside assistance. My hope and prayer is that mission-minded UCC congregations in Massachusetts would be interested in being a partner with Agape in helping to get it launched into the world.