

## **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 your heart at the door!

From my heart, I must say how grateful I am to Rev. Paul Sangree, pastor of the Congregational Church of Westborough. I have been talking about the possibility of a new church start for years now. Paul saw something in me and asked me directly if I would be interested in a new church start. As you will see from the outline and explanation below, I do indeed feel that God is calling me and the church as a whole in this direction.

### **WHY A NEW CHURCH START?**

I cannot speak to why every planter feels called to start a new church, so I will only express why I feel called to this task. Please allow me to give a bit of helpful context with my own spiritual journey.

Growing up in the United Church of Christ (from now on, UCC), I wasn't all that passionate about my faith. The single biggest influence that my home church had on me during high school and college was an annual work camp down in West Virginia - an experience that included direct service, lively worship services, community building, and Bible study groups. The West Virginia work camp touched my life so deeply because it was an embodiment of all that I saw as good, true, and beautiful in Christianity. The people at work camp "embodied" a faith that was lived out, a faith that modeled in so many ways the essential teachings of Jesus. As a community, the West Virginia work camp incarnated love to a degree that I had never experienced before.

After graduating college, I spent time in several evangelical Christian communities. These churches were truly welcoming, friendly, and hospitable. The music in worship moved me in new dimensions I had never experienced before. Music in the church was contemporary (which I had never experienced before with my UCC background), yet sung with passion and deep devotion. Each Sunday, the church sang its heart out to God.

Theologically, however, I never felt fully at home in these churches. While my heart was opened in many ways in these communities, in other ways I wasn't able to be fully myself. At these communities, I encountered drastically different theological views on topics such as LGBT rights, the role of women in the church, salvation, God, Jesus, and the like.

When I started seminary, I had a newfound appreciation for the ways that the UCC had been on the forefront of peace and justice. I was inspired by the UCC firsts. I resonated much more with UCC theology. However, my experience of worship in the UCC was very different from worship in Belize. While the communities and people were more open-minded, I did not find the same passion and devotion in worship and music. I missed that immensely.

I've found that my experience is not unique. It can be summed up in one simple observation- for many people when they enter a church, they feel they have to leave either their mind or their heart at the door. Isn't that a shame? My vision for Agape is as a place where you don't need to leave your mind OR your heart at the door.

Serving at New England churches since 2004 has affirmed for me that there is much beauty alive in the church today. At the same time, many older New England churches today (being hundreds of years old) are reluctant and resistant to change. The beauty of a new church start is being able to start fresh without hearing "We've never done it that way before." Many pastors today **are** excited about new and innovative worship (certainly I am not the only one), but often are met with resistance in congregations that have long-standing traditions. In the words of Paul Nixon:

*"Many Protestant worship services feel to me like something Fred Rogers could lead. Quiet, calm, plodding, and insufferably boring, these services invite us to stand, sit, and move through the script, while someone monologues us to sleep... Often these services deal in profound truth, but they do so in ways that simply do not engage the young adult public.*

*"If any element of our worship service would fit comfortably on Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood, we need to think seriously about either not doing that thing any longer or doing it in a bolder, edgier way, so that it sparkles like a diamond... Boldness in the world of sound means, for starters, pulling the stops out at times- and then plunging into total silence, so we can hear our hearts beat. Mild churches are uncomfortable with either... It means creating music that captivates people and pulls them to their feet wanting to cheer."*<sup>1</sup>

I do believe that churches can change. Many churches have incorporated alternative worship services with varying success into the life of their communities. Change in long-standing congregations, however, takes time. People like to worship in the ways they are accustomed to, and the possibility of change inevitably brings about tension.

It is fine that churches prefer a variety of worship and music styles. The fact is, however, 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.<sup>2</sup>

Twenty and thirty year-olds are mostly absent from the progressive church (though not from conservative, evangelical churches, who often have a vibrant worship and life). Yes, some 20 and 30 somethings do come back to the church. Even then, many only come back once they have children. And, a good number of young adults and new parents only go back to church

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<sup>1</sup> Nixon, Paul, *I Refuse to Lead a Dying Church*, (Cleveland, The Pilgrim Press, 2006), p. 71-73.

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

FOR their children. While this is noble and good, it is a sad and telling observation that these young adults would NOT choose to attend many of our churches if they were just church shopping for themselves! 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.<sup>3</sup>

In 2008, Phyllis Tickle wrote a book called “The Great Emergence.” In it, she outlines a new trend our church is going through today. Anglican Bishop Mark Dyer referred to the heart of this emergence when he said that every 500 years or so the Church feels compelled to hold a giant rummage sale, and “the empowered structures of institutionalized Christianity, whatever they may be at the time, become an intolerable carapace that must be shattered in order that renewal and new growth may occur.”<sup>4</sup> According to Tickle and many others, we are in the midst of one of those 500 year rummage sales right now.

As with the previous rummage sales, today’s rummage sale is a purification of the ways that the church is no longer serving society. It is a return to the heart of our faith, which is Jesus. This rummage sale involves questioning those church traditions, beliefs, and practices that have moved the church farther away from Jesus. This is embodied in what I call “Giving Christianity back to Jesus.”

Today’s rummage sale involves realizing and living out the primary task of the church: embodiment. The church can and has been rich with words, but our words will never be as important as what we do and who we are. As Saint Francis said, “Preach the gospel. If necessary, use words.”

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 is a community where you don’t need to leave your mind OR your heart at the door!

From this place, Agape:

- Has **music and worship that caters to younger generations**. While a diversity of music from contemporary to contemplative chanting will be represented, all music will be an avenue where we can open our hearts more fully to God and to each other. Music is one of the centerpieces of a transformative worship, and so excellent and devotional

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

<sup>4</sup> Tickle, Phyllis, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why*, (Grand Rapids, MI, Baker Books, 2008), p. 16.

music will be made a priority in the worship life of the church. As Paul Nixon says in his book *I Refuse to Lead a Dying Church*, “No institution (religious, political, or corporate) will survive long in the twenty-first century without a *passionate* core community of support, which reaches into the current young adult population and has a mission far beyond preservation of the status quo.”<sup>5</sup> The church’s rigidity to tradition has kept us from living out new ways of worship and music that speak to people today. Realizing this, Agape seeks to live out worship, prayer, song, service, practices, and traditions that give life to our membership. Agape’s practice is as a living tradition, where we continue to discern what gives life and what doesn’t.

- Seek to **live out and embody our faith**. Many 20-30 year olds are seeking real, authentic community- places where they can incarnate love in action. Young adults don’t just want the talk, they want the living.
- Have a **progressive Christian theology**. Many young (and older) people have left the church because they don’t agree with the God of anger, jealousy, judgment, and wrath they have heard preached from the pulpit. Agape will seek to live into the fullness of our name. “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.**

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

- As an explicitly **Open and Affirming** congregation, Agape is welcoming to all people, and in particular those who have been marginalized or outcast by church and 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.” Exclusive doctrines which say that Jesus is the only way to heaven have turned scores of people away from the church. Agape affirms the UCC motto that “God is Still Speaking”, and not only through Christianity! 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. Agape’s common life draws primarily from the life and teachings of Jesus, but is open to deep teachings and practices from other spiritual traditions.
- **Note:** A word should be said about the Pluralistic nature of Agape UCC. One thing we will seek to avoid at Agape is “spiritual indigestion.” Many people spend significant amounts of time exploring different religions, but don’t go deep into any one of them. At Agape, our path will be the way of Jesus. However, as a community intimately connected to God through Jesus, we will also affirm that God is at work in and through other religions. Other religions are vehicles for love and good in the world, and to the extent that we at Agape can benefit from their wisdom, we will.
- Agape is a church that affirms the best of what the UCC has to offer. As a **Just Peace** church, Agape works for peace and justice and seeks to live out God’s reign on earth.

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<sup>5</sup> Nixon, Paul, *I Refuse to Lead a Dying Church*, (Cleveland, The Pilgrim Press, 2006), p. 71.

We seek to live out the power of love through service to humanity, charity work, education, as well as larger systemic change to alter oppressive societal structures that harm people and the earth.

- 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**. People have little time to fill their spiritual cup in our busy world. Agape affirms the sacred practice of generosity and giving, while also affirming the sacredness of receiving. When we are intentional about receiving God's love, we fill our own cups, and give from a full place to others. 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. Towards this end, while everyone will be welcome to weekly Agape services (day and time TBD), becoming a covenant partner of Agape church involves commitment to regular small group gatherings devoted to spiritual practices. Practicing our faith in community keeps our cup full and empowers us to be effective change agents in the world.
- 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**. This means speaking our truth in love, and sometimes agreeing to disagree. While Agape will draw its initial membership primarily from the surrounding community and populations, I anticipate that others from farther afield will be drawn into Agape's new and exciting vision. God is doing something new with the progressive Christian church, and we are at the cusp of this vision.
- Agape lives first and foremost **not by a set of doctrines, but by a desire and commitment to follow in the way of Jesus**. Christianity has been watered down by being turned first and foremost into a set of beliefs. For the vibrant early Christian community, Christianity was about a way of life. Yes, it involved beliefs, but at its heart it was about living out the greatest commandment to love God and to love one's neighbor as oneself. Agape seeks, in the UCC tradition, to encourage **testimonies, not tests**, of faith. In the vision articulated by Diana Butler Bass in her book "Christianity After Religion", we seek to honor belonging over beliefs and behavior.
- Agape strives to be **Accessible to All**. We seek to live into being accessible to people of all ages, abilities, and needs, so that no matter how you come into worship and the Agape community, you can be a part of worship and a full participant in the life of the community.

Some other characteristics of Agape (and a bit of expansion upon some of the qualities above):

- Agape is 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. To love God is the contemplative side. Agape offers diverse spiritual practices in order that people have the opportunity to commune with and "practice the Presence of God." Loving our neighbor is the active side. This involves personal practices such as compassion, forgiveness, non-judgment, and nonviolence, as well as practices on larger, communal, and systemic scales such as service, peacemaking, and legislative advocacy.

Love in action can take many forms inspired by our context, gifts, and callings, such as service to food pantries, work camps, and projects to assist the earth as well as local organizations like Family Promise.

- Agape is a community that 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). This popular quote among younger generations highlights the observation that young people want to be part of communities that live out change, and don’t just talk about it. Change starts within. If we want a world free of prejudice and condemnation, we must first live that out in our own lives. If we want to end hunger, we must be the ones who contribute to making that happen, even if only on a small scale.
- 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. I envision an active and energetic small group ministry at Agape where small groups come together at regular intervals for any number of spiritual practices, including but not limited to: Clearness Committees, Heart Circles, Lectio Divina, mindfulness and practicing the presence of God, Bible and/or book study, Forgiveness, Chanting, Yoga, various forms of Meditation including Centering Prayer, Cycling, Hiking, and more depending on the needs and interests of members.
- 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. Drawing off of the wisdom of other spiritual traditions may seem more Unitarian Universalist (UU) than UCC, and in some ways it is. The last church I served was affiliated with both the UCC and the UUA. Part of what drew me to serve this last church was the open-mindedness of the UU tradition. While I did indeed find from my (limited) experience that UU communities are very open-minded, too often I found that there was little room for open-hearted practices, as well as meaningful conversation about God, Jesus, and the Spirit. Agape is an open-minded and unapologetically Christian community that radiates passion for faith, and for putting one’s faith into creative action for betterment of the world.
- In the UCC tradition, we are 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. At the retreats I lead, covenant building is an essential part of creating and maintaining a healthy community. The nature of covenanting is that all who participate in making the covenant seek to live into it together. As a community, our task will be to continually check-in with how we are doing at living into this covenant. What are our strengths, and what are our growing edges? As such, periodic community “check-ins” will help to guide our common life together.
- In areas where **conflict** arises in the church (as is inevitable), 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. Some are called to be pastors with particular functions in the church, but everyone in the church is a minister in some way, and each of us has a calling both in and outside of the church. Agape is open to and nurtures the gifts and callings of all its ministers (i.e. members, or covenant partners). This involves discernment and prayer to seek out the ways that God is calling each individual to serve.
- Agape is a Christian community that is intentional about **listening to its calling**, and **seeking to express and live out its vision.** No two churches are exactly alike. As a result of the particular personalities, gifts, and callings of different pastors and church members, different ministries and visions will take shape in Agape that cannot be predicted until common life together begins. Agape seeks to empower its membership to live into their callings, and be a supportive community where people can be empowered in being the change they wish to see in the world.
- Agape seeks to be **open and transparent about money and stewardship.** Jesus said much about money, and our spiritual priorities (i.e. “Where your treasure is, there your heart is also.” Matthew 6:21). Our entire lives are an expression of our spiritual identity, and money is no exception. What we pledge or tithe is an expression of our trust in God, and our commitment to the work of God. At Agape we are not afraid to talk about money. When we share our time, talent, and resources, we build up the kingdom of God. As a community, we seek to be true and faithful to God first, letting nothing take God’s place, including money. Our call as disciples is to be good stewards of the gifts God has given us.
- Agape is an **eco-friendly community** that seeks to live out practices that are sustainable to 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. Indeed, our bodies are the temple of God!
- **Note:** This list is only a beginning. It is not exhaustive!

How will Agape start? That is a great question. Let me start by affirming that there are many, MANY questions about what the community will look like. Some of these questions I have a good initial answer to, others I am still formulating a response to. It is important to be clear at the offset that 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. The more we can discern God’s will together as a community around common issues of our community life, the more we will be modeling what it is like to create and live out the beloved community together.

## **PRACTICAL STUFF**

On February 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2014, the Congregational Church of Westborough voted to officially become the “parent” or “mother” church of Agape. Westborough will help to seed Agape in its first several years, offering seed money over two years to get the church off the ground, along with

other supports. This is wonderful, and I am grateful for the generosity and missional eye of this congregation and its leadership. What a blessing!

The Massachusetts Conference of the United Church of Christ has already offered support financially and in other ways for this project. They have helped to sponsor the online learning I have been doing with The Center for Progressive Renewal around church planting, and are continuing to support coaching and training for me. I will be applying for a grant from the national setting of the United Church of Christ during their next cycle in February 2015, asking them to contribute seed money towards this essential new ministry also. I have had great conversations with Mass. Conference staff members, all of whom are very supportive and enthusiastic about this new church start.

Where will the church be held initially, and in the long-term? That is one of many great questions that I am seeking to live into, and will become clearer as the Wisdom/Visioning team and Agape Launch team begin and the community grows. The initial location for this new church start is in Waltham. This will allow me to be bi-vocational and still have a steady income, since I will continue as the Protestant Chaplain at Brandeis University in Waltham. Currently, there is no UCC church in the city of Waltham.

Many churches today are in decline, and have a primary focus on the maintenance of institutions and buildings. While that is a real issue for churches (particularly in historic New England), many potential churchgoers are turned off by needy churches that focus so much on their spaces that mission takes a back seat. Church shoppers, and particularly young people, want a community where they can live out their faith! In our busy world, young adults don't want to join a community where their new primary responsibility is to attend church committee meetings. Young adults want to experience a vibrant spiritual community, where first and foremost they feel alive and connected to God and each other, and have a chance to reach out and make a positive impact in the world. In too many churches, the people with the most passion and drive are the ones doing church survival tasks. Survival churches will not inspire new members to come in and make their spiritual home. 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!

The book "The Ten Most Common Mistakes of New Church Starts" explains clearly and succinctly some of the pitfalls of new church starts, including not doing outreach, prematurely launching, and not acting one's age or size. Much more can be said about each of these points. Suffice it to say, Agape lives out a healthy form of outreach rooted in love, not in fear or scarcity. A central Agape belief is: **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 transformational community. Let's share that amazing good news with others!

I still have much to learn about planting a new church, and don't have all the answers. I have big visions, and a grand dream. Part of starting a new church is living into that dream together and discerning God's will as a community.



I feel that our church today truly needs excited, passionate, and called leadership to be renewed. It is my vision and prayer that Agape embody this.

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.

I hold many exciting potential opportunities in my heart once Agape begins to grow and expand, as there are an infinite number of exciting possibilities once this new church gets off the ground. I know the Holy Spirit will be at work, and it will be our call to listen for Its guidance.

Thanks for taking the time for reading this, and for supporting this vision of Agape!