

In Jesus' desert landscape, lentils and barley were common. Figs and dates were too. But when Jesus went looking for a way to describe his sense of abiding connection with God and those around him, the grapevine was what spoke to him. The metaphor still rings true: Christ grounds and nourishes us as we who are his branches reach far, grow strong, and bear good fruit.

As the Rocky Mountain Conference worships this morning, we resemble that sturdy, vibrant grapevine Jesus lifts up in John's gospel. We, too, stretch in many directions. Yet unlike a map with round-headed pins zeroing in on our individual locations, Jesus' image calls and challenges us to experience ourselves as we truly are: one in his love as we overlap in surprising places and unusual ways (as grapevines so easily do) in what we in the Rocky Mountain Conference call being "radically connected."

Especially this morning we revel in our inherent unity as we worship here in this place following the same liturgy that our sister churches across three states are using. Better still, those gathered in Salt Lake at Annual Meeting are worshipping with this same service, too. Quite literally, we all on the same page today!

Holding fast to Jesus' image of a vine and its branches, let's now hear how fruit-bearing efforts across the Rocky Mountain Conference are growing out of our rootedness in Christ.

First a fun story from the Intermountain Association, which includes congregations in Utah and southwestern Wyoming. Last January, Rev. Gage Church, pastor of Congregational UCC of Ogden, Utah, sent out an invitation to the thirteen churches of his association (which includes all of Utah and southwestern Wyoming) inviting them to join in a friendly competition. Which congregation could gather up the most donations of food and dollars in the UCC's annual Souper Bowl of Caring?

In his role as Director of Communications Ministries, Cory Kibler promptly highlighted this effort in the RoMoCo News. Before you know it, someone from Community Congregational UCC of Manitou Springs in the Southeast Association was contacting Rev. Church with this happy inquiry: could that congregation participate in the Souper Bowl of Caring Challenge, too, even though they were almost 600 miles away?

What a Spirit-led desire! This is exactly the kind of thing we all dreamed would happen when in 2014 our conference formally embraced its vision, *Be Radically Connected*, calling us into a future where individuals, groups, and congregations across our three-state region would find creative and lively ways to encourage, collaborate with, and participate in each other's efforts.

When the Souper Bowl of Caring competition was over and the seven participating churches reported their results, it was clear Manitou Springs had taken the challenge very seriously. In combined donations of food and money, they were a close second to First Congregational in Rock Springs, WY. Not to be outdone by the larger churches, however, modest-sized Kingsbury Community UCC in Vernal, Utah, earned bragging rights for having the highest per capita giving.

Stretch and reach. That's what branches on grapevines do. How can we not smile at the God-inspired reaching across distance and association affiliation that enabled Christ's followers at opposite ends of our conference to work together for the common good!

Pause for a moment to prayerfully ask: How might Christ be working here to inspire a reaching across the miles to partner with a far-flung church or association?

*Optional sung response:*

*"Spirit of the Living God"--TNCH # 283. Consider using "us" instead of "me"*

Another way Christ's branches reach and stretch is choosing to be creative when "the way we've always done it" bears diminishing fruit. That's what's happening these days in our Western Association as folks from Union Congregational UCC in Crested Butte envision new ways to minister to youth—its own and those of their high country community.

Union's pastor, Rev. Tim Clark, explains: "We're a mountain town and most weekends our teens who are on sports teams are away competing. Meeting weekly just wasn't working as well as we wanted, so we looked for another way to gather our youth for faith formation and fellowship."

Crested Butte's freshly-launched effort centers around offering periodic experiences that are designed to be more substantial than two-hour weekly meetings allow. In the works are outings that will be more like mini-camp experiences or little retreats; these will include middle and high schoolers from other congregations, as well as those youth with no church affiliation. One trip will send youth to be in mission together in southern Colorado's San Luis Valley. Another outing will be to the small community of Olathe, CO, for a week-end of

Christian music. Time on a high country lake with Rev. Clark as their capable guide is being planned, as well.

Not only is Union's model a fresh way to offer programming for youth who are frequently unable to make weekly gatherings, it's a new way of envisioning adult leadership, too. A whole host of church members is signing on to oversee just one youth experience each.

This design offers a double blessing. Not only will youth have more adults to form relationships with, more adults in the church will have an opportunity to be stretched and changed by their youthful charges. In an age of increasing separation between the generations, the lines between young and old in Crested Butte will surely blur, not unlike the way a vine and its branches seamlessly interconnect.

Take a moment to ask yourself: What unexpected fruit might form in this season of this church's life by choosing to come at something in a new way?

*Optional sung response:*

*"Spirit of the Living God"--TNCH # 283. Consider using "us" instead of "me"*

Have you ever noticed how far tendrils on a grapevine stretch sometimes? This is happening in the Platte Valley Association. This association extends south from Casper, Wyoming, to Loveland, Colorado, and east across the Plains to the Kansas border. Here we find two congregations separated by 230 miles who are both reaching out, each in different ways, to address hunger in their respective settings.

In Windsor, Colorado, Faith UCC has "A Place at the Table," which serves a free dinner every Wednesday night; it's one of three evening meals sponsored by churches in their town. Four hours away at Community UCC in Casper, Wyoming, that congregation is helping feed people's spirits by way of Melrose Coffeehouse, a smoke-free, alcohol-free Friday night happening during the fall, winter, and spring months, a time when Casper's outdoor venues prove much too chilly for musicians and music-lovers alike.

With space and love to share, both congregations are reaching out to those who need not only food for body and soul but who are also hungering for affirming, caring community in a world where social isolation is far too common.

Now in its third year, Casper's Friday night coffeehouse draws in those who have expressed little interest in Sunday morning worship or church in general; they are becoming

what that church's pastor, Rev. Dee Lundberg, calls "a community within community." Musicians perform for tips and church volunteers run a coffee bar that features espresso drinks and desserts, the proceeds of which have helped purchase musical instruments for local school children and have provided fresh fruits and vegetables for patrons of Casper's Food for Thought food bank.

That same wonderful wider reach that branches on vines do and which Community UCC is doing is also evidenced in Windsor. Rev. Fred Evenson happily reports that when members of the wider community hear about the hosting his church is doing, they eagerly to sign on to assist. Boundaries between guests and hosts blur, and those gathered any given Wednesday night get a taste of the unity Christ's grapevine and branch image so vividly affirms.

Prayerfully consider what you might have in common with a congregation at a distance who—at root—is seeking to minister in ways your congregation cares about.

*Optional sung response:*

*"Spirit of the Living God"--TNCH # 283. Consider using "us" instead of "me"*

Look closely at a grapevine; it's like a loose braid as branches weave in and over each other, offering mutual support as the whole vine goes about producing good fruit. That braiding and fruit-bearing is happening in many exciting ways in our Metro Denver Association.

Here's one beautiful example. Sixth Avenue UCC's city-center location and its abundant space make that congregation the ideal host the Denver Women's Homeless Initiative. Since February 2015, Sixth Avenue has been partners with thirteen other hosting churches and organizations in providing overnight hospitality for 20 women from a nearby day shelter. In this entirely lay-run effort, the church provides an evening meal and sleeping space on cots, and then sends participants off in the morning with breakfast and the blessing of having had a safe place to get a good night's rest.

Certainly this housing program meets a critical need. But there are other equally vital needs this program is meeting, as well: those of churchgoers who feel called to this kind of ministry but whose home churches are too far from the city center to be hosts in this program.

Sixth Avenue's pastor, Rev. Chris Gilmore, is quick to point to the ways members from Parkview UCC in Aurora are key to the success of this program, as are those who drive in from First Plymouth in Englewood and Wheat Ridge UCC. "We have the place but not the people. And other churches have the people but not the place," Rev. Gilmore says, reminding us that when we engage in service on Christ's behalf, mutual support is just part of the design. No

church stands alone. We are a part of a greater whole and when we discover this, amazing things can and do happen.

Especially exciting to those who have felt called to become involved in hosting is news of a 50 unit housing development being built on Colfax Avenue that will provide a longer-term solution for women living with homelessness. From the branches of caring service Sixth Avenue, Parkview, First Plymouth, and Wheat Ridge are offering even sweeter fruit is now beginning to grow.

Pause for a moment to ponder how you could produce good fruit with a congregation near you.

*Optional sung response:*

*“Spirit of the Living God”--TNCH # 283. Consider using “us” instead of “me”*

If you’ve ever looked closely at vines in a vineyard, you know every single branch’s impulse is the same: to stretch and reach as far as possible as it goes about supporting the vine’s production of good fruit.

The United Church of Christ shares this impulse, too. We celebrate our radical hospitality and express this commitment often and in countless creative ways—from websites, to banners hanging off bell towers, to placards raised high in parades, to announcing as Sunday worship begins: “No matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here.”

Our closing story comes from Vista Grande UCC in Colorado Springs where they are a part of the Southeast Association. Their recent experience invites us consider how reaching further than ever before has the power to not only transform the one being embraced but those doing the embracing, as well.

Last summer, Vista Grande welcomed into its midst someone new, someone unlike anyone that faithful flock had ever embraced before. A staff sergeant at nearby Ft. Carson, Patricia (Trish) King was a three-tour combat veteran and the Army’s first openly transgender infantryman. While the Army has since 2011 welcomed into its ranks out gay and lesbian soldiers, King’s transgendered life was a violation of regulations and a fire-able offense.

Although years before Vista Grande had successfully gone through the Open and Affirming process, their discussions and discernment focused on the needs and realities of gay

and lesbian people—and in this way they mirrored our culture’s inclinations. As a transgender woman, Trisha’s arrival at Vista Grande a year ago gave the church an opportunity to live even more fully into their ONA identity. Their pastor, Rev. Clare Twomey, is quick to say they did this quickly and wholeheartedly, and in a way that wasn’t particularly exceptional but which simply reflected that congregation’s profoundly loving spirit.

Soon the congregation had a media sensation on its hands with Trish, as news outlets like The Colorado Springs Gazette, National Public Radio, and The New York Times began highlighting her journey to remain in the Army and serve with the full rights and privileges afforded all servicemen and women. In her interviews, Trish was always quick to point to her life-giving relationship with Vista Grande and the strength and support she drew from the congregation’s abiding support.

Talk about reaching and stretching—now a nation, even the world, was learning about how the love of Christ was being made real through one particular community, one specific branch on his vine.

It’s easy to focus on the outward reaching and stretching of branches that Christ intends. But he asks us to do that work inwardly, as well. Vista Grande’s embrace of Trish King didn’t just affect Trish; it transformed everyone in the church. Individuals grew and changed, and the congregation did too, as together they discovered that the love they’d been given to share went wider and deeper than they imagined. “What made Vista Grande exceptional,” their pastor says proudly, “is how readily they grasped the call to become different themselves, not just to welcome someone in and have that person be part of them.”

Still so new that it’s hard to grab hold of just yet, there’s a quiet branch of possibility growing at Vista Grande now. It’s not that they welcomed in a transgendered, trailblazing woman. What’s unfolding is bigger than that. As Vista Grande experiences a time of renewal and fresh visioning, as they seek a new physical location to call home, there is a sense developing that God is calling them to a future that includes growth far more exciting than more people in worship. The growth Christ is nurturing at Vista Grande which will be richer and more exciting than mere number. The congregation might not talk about vines and branches but they know they’re entering a time of reaching and stretching toward new ways to be the church together, new ways to be in service to the Christ in whom their lives are anchored in common. It’s anyone’s guess what the fruits of this journey will yield but in Christ, we can be confident that the harvest will be abundant.

Ponder for a moment: in what ways is Christ inviting you or this congregation to stretch and reach inwardly?

*Optional sung response:*

*“Spirit of the Living God”--TNCH # 283. Consider using “us” instead of “me”*

Look closely at a grapevine and you will see a wild tangle of browns and greens, a latticework of branches that reach, stretch, and flow together in undulating, fruitful beauty. We grow together like that here in the Rocky Mountain Conference and it's a remarkable thing to behold. We can't take the credit for that, though--the glory goes to Christ!

Amen.