Good morning! My first words must be “thank you” to Christa Kronshage and to everyone on the UCC Forum Committee for hosting our group from the Ohio and Indiana-Kentucky Conferences. And thank you to everyone here for taking the time to gather, celebrate and share in Christian fellowship. It is a special blessing to be with you as we give thanks for twenty-five years in this partnership of ministry and friendship.

We bring loving greetings from your sister congregations and friends in the Ohio Conference. Also, I extend Christian friendship from my home congregation, the Amistad Chapel UCC which is located at the national offices of the United Church of Christ in Cleveland. I have asked the congregation to pray for this gathering and the mission of Kirchengemeinschaft.

I am grateful for this opportunity to explore with you some of the joys and challenges of our churches. Our UCC Ohio Conference delegation of five, along with friends from the Indiana-Kentucky Conference, is very honored to represent our churches as we commemorate the 25th anniversary of Kirchengemeinschaft.

The Ohio Committee recently met and there was great energy as we talked about the recent youth exchanges and the importance of the camp counselors’ work with our children. At this year’s Annual Gathering in the Ohio Conference, the Ohio Young Ambassadors were commissioned for their trip to Paderborn and Rev. Christel Weber told us about her church’s interaction with refugees which was, to me, the highlight of the Gathering. We have been sharing the Good News of Kirchengemeinschaft and now some of our newer pastors and lay members want to become involved, so in the next year you will meet some more Ohioans! On this weekend as we look back over a quarter-century and consider the multitude of blessings we have shared, we believe that the future holds more possibilities.

Quite some years ago, perhaps fifteen, I learned that German students were counselors at the Ohio church camps. I was intrigued about how that occurred, but I didn’t hear of Kirchengemeinschaft until about 2008 when I was invited to join the committee. Since then, I have been at our camp alongside your young people and last year I spent some time with the Youth Ambassadors when they toured northern Ohio and Western New York. I discovered that this program is a lot of fun!

My first trip through Kirchengemeinschaft took me to Dresden for the Kirchentag in 2011. That was an amazing introduction to the Church in Germany and numerous other countries. I met a few of you there, and it is so good to become re-acquainted here at the UCC Forum.

Later, a church fundraiser in Bonn named Hille Richers contacted me through the people I’d met from Westphalia. That led to professional interactions including meeting her in New York City and then her invitation for me to speak with church fundraisers at the national church fundraisers’ Kollekta in Hannover and at a special meeting in Dortmund with church fundraisers across the Westphalia and Rheinland Landeskirchen. Those professional exchanges
are very precious, and they happened because of Kirchengemeinschaft. In fact, Hille Richers hosted me at her home just this week.

These rich interactions with youth, professional colleagues and church members have been important to me and I know that many of you have had similar experiences. We recognize that our relationship has impacted many people through learning about one another's country, church, and culture.

On a personal level, Kirchengemeinschaft has allowed me to come to the land of my paternal lineage. My father’s family is from the rural area east of Strasburg, which I would like to see some day. Even better, my daughter lives in Frankfurt and flies internationally with Lufthansa. I flew in early for family time last week. For myself and so many others, I want to thank the church of Westphalia for these 25 years of opening the world to people through church relationships.

At this Forum, we are strengthening our connections yet again. I am honored to introduce a theme of critical importance to the Church in the United States and globally. After my comments, we will talk together, which I’m sure will be the best part of this session!

I will address a few aspects of how our countries and churches are coping with the dramatic amount of change occurring in our era. I have titled my talk, "Shifting Sands: Grappling for Identity, Place and Power."

We live in a time of huge changes in numerous aspects of life - social, economic, institutional, environmental, technological, political, and so on. Not only that, but the pace of change is exponentially more rapid than ever before. We are constantly challenged with new ideas and exposed to new information. We apply new technology, we adopt new methodologies and we encounter strangers from other places at a rate unknown to humanity.

The sands seem to be shifting below our feet. In Matthew, chapter 7, Jesus talked about the options to be wise and build our houses on solid rock or to risk building on sandy ground. The sands of change swirl around us, clouding our vision and leaving us uncertain about where to place our feet next.

In what ways does the Church stay rooted in the solid rock of the Gospel? There are, of course, varying ideas about these issues. During my presentation, I will share the views of a few Christian leaders and the observations of journalists, political and social scientists in the United States.

Let’s enter our topic from a broad perspective by acknowledging the environment within which the Church exists. Humanity today is seeing a rate of change unlike anything known before. People are often surprised, confused and exhausted from continual evolutions in nearly all aspects of life. We are tempted to resist change because we are used to our familiar patterns and are comfortable with what is customary. Many people want the Church to be the one place where things will stay as they always knew them, yet this cannot be.

I’ve heard sociologists say that we are at a critical point in a 500-year cycle. The new age won’t be settled during our lifetimes and yet what we choose to do now is shaping that new thing. We are at an in-between time, and that can be scary and uncomfortable.
We are losing the old and familiar ways. We develop ways to create a sense of home in new places, and we find new ways to be productive. The United States’ population has been the most transitional, with people frequently moving for employment. Flying across oceans from one continent to another is routine for people who can afford tickets. Those who can buy computer technology can connect easily with people we may never meet in person.

But again, the pace is unprecedented. The world is experiencing massive migrations on a scale that is shaking our institutions; we were not prepared for human movement at this level.

We are identifying ourselves in different ways, especially in regard to gender, sexuality and race. Making assumptions about people by their outer appearance is now inappropriate. People who grew up with social norms that are now sliding away are often confused. Recently at a workshop introducing gender terminology, I sat next to a married couple in their eighties. Their questions were genuine and well-intentioned. But their confusion was plainly evident and almost painful for me to observe.

In this whirlwind time, many traditional ideas no longer serve us well. Some of us cling to them anyway, which separates them from others who are adjusting to change and adopting new practices. This divide can result in the many forms of fundamentalism that we see today and in the great rifts that have led us into wars. It feels to many like the ground we stand on has shaken to the core and that the sandstorms of change have enveloped us.

The new ways are here, like it or not. My father is one who does not like it at all. He is eighty-three years old and proudly states that he is determined to be among the last to resist computer technology. He is amazed at the information I can get on my iPhone, and he complains that it is harder to take care of personal business the way he prefers -- in person. Yet he lacks the confidence to learn the technology. He even gets upset when the grocery store move products around on the shelves. "Why does everything need to change all the time," he will ask me, "I liked it the way it was. I knew how things worked, and they worked just fine."

It is no small thing that we are living in a post-industrial age, in which our lives in the "first world" are no longer based on producing things but are primarily service-oriented and information-based. Our economic and social institutions were not designed for this time. In my lifetime, we have experienced a shift from manufacturing products to generating ideas and knowledge. The United States was the first country to have more than half of its population in service-sector jobs.

The impact of this change is far-reaching. No longer do workers have one employer for life and no longer can they anticipate workplace benefits for health care and retirement income. Our approach to employment has changed. Professionals now have several distinct careers in a lifetime - not just different employers, but several careers. This requires renewing our knowledge and skill sets, maintaining professional networks, and being willing to enter entirely new work environments. Unskilled workers have few options in the US for self-sustaining employment, and our public educational system is woefully inadequate for the needs of employers.
In the last ten years, the economy has endured a recession and some recovery. But the recovery has been very uneven geographically in the US, and the jobs that have been added back offer much lower wages with fewer benefits. Finances are strained in most households. People are now acutely aware of the growing economic divide within our country. That divide is intensified when factors of race and gender are considered, since the wages of women and people of color are typically on the low end of the pay scale.

Clearly in some areas change would be welcome. The US has high rates of drug and alcohol addiction, incarceration, youth suicides and gun violence. There is a waiting list of ten low-income elders for every affordable apartment available. Refugees crossing our southern border are dying in the desert of a country proud of its Statue of Liberty in the New York harbor. None of this makes sense. We know this, yet we are either unwilling to admit our failures, or to be inconvenienced by change or, especially in the political realm, to agree on how to effect change.

It is said that "knowledge is power." What kind of power do we derive from seeing that, as my father has often said, "the rich get richer and the poor get poorer"?

With this question, we arrive at the topic of politics. In the political arena, decisions are made that advantage some and disadvantage others. In the US and in Europe, we see the struggle between those who want to hold onto "what is" to prevent losing identity, place or power and those who try to envision "what is to come" in hopes of benefitting from a change in identity, place or power.

A few months ago, the UCC Forum Committee and the Ohio Committee for Kirchengemeinschaft talked on a conference call. The UCC Forum Committee challenged me to explain the political phenomenon of Donald Trump, saying "this is not the America we know." And we replied, "this is not the America we know!"

Our reply elicited a few nervous chuckles, but it also revealed how easy it is to remain in denial. Of course this is the America we know; it is just not the America some of us want. More to the point, it is not the America we want to acknowledge.

Please understand that I respond to the Forum's question with a good deal of hesitation. I am not a social scientist nor even a political junkie. Personally, I am opposed to the vision that Trump puts forth but I affirm that there are Trump supporters in UCC congregations. If you know the UCC to be a progressive denomination, you have encountered only a certain portion of our members. In truth, the UCC includes many members and congregations that are quite conservative socially and theologically.

Across the UCC, we disagree about a lot of things. Some people are Biblical literalists, while others include readings from the holy books of other faiths in worship. We disagree on abortion, marriage equality and other LGBTQ rights. It is still hard for women and gay ministers to find congregations who agree to call them. We argue over Israel-Palestine. Questions about who is qualified to be clergy are debated. We are not of one mind, although we try hard to be united in faithfulness.

I emphasize this because it is important for you to know that my response to the Forum Committee's puzzlement about presidential politics in the US is quite different from the way
some others would respond. People are naturally drawn to the arguments and explanations that bolster our own views. I'm attracted to the perspectives of progressive journalists and political scientists, and I more easily disregard views that I find offensive or manipulative.

(As an aside, this gives you a peek into the delicate waters into which our UCC ministers wade during election season, often having to minister to congregants of various political persuasions.)

With that disclaimer, I will proceed as honestly as I can and I ask you to bear with me as I enter into this as one with no preparation beyond that of a typical citizen. I will step right into the muck of US history and politics. And as if that is not enough of a challenge, then I will address the question posed to me regarding the current challenges of the Church in the United States.

Let me start with history, and the fact that the US is steeped in the legacies of Manifest Destiny, which annihilated most Native Americans, and of African slavery which stole people's lives to turn them into profit-making resources. The effects are so much a part of our culture that often white people do not see it. Unless there is a push to reveal a particular example, we usually slide along without facing this truth or its ramifications on individuals or on our society. As with any aspect of one's own culture, we carry unconscious mindsets. Usually white people can smooth the surface when uncomfortable differences arise without really giving much thought to it. I state this as an indefensible reality to place a backdrop behind the political climate.

So when Trump points to a black person at his rally and says "toss him out" a few of his supporters throw in a punch or a kick or a slur as the person is removed - and those of us white people watching the report on TV express shock and dismay. But why should we be shocked?? People with dark skin have been abused throughout the history of the United States, starting with the Native Americans and then those brought forcibly as legally enslaved profit-making property.

Donald Trump says he will "Make America Great Again." His slogan reflects the deep-seated hope of many in his contingent (who appear to be nearly all white heterosexuals) that the tides of change can be reversed. For some months now, people have pondered how Donald Trump became the Republican nominee. Especially because the UCC Forum Committee asked me to explain this, for several months I have been reading articles and listening to broadcasts that cover this question.

One piece of this surprising candidacy has to do with Trump's skills and his personality. The man knows how to read an audience. He knows how to sell ideas and he knows how to entertain. Comedian Trevor Noah - a black South African who hosts The Daily Show on TV - did a piece this summer depicting Trump as a stand-up comedian. He showed some clips of Trump campaigning, noting that Trump might be hilarious if he was in a night club. But he is running for President of the United States.

Writing for The Blog on HuffPost, Michael Rosenblum, founder of Current TV and Past President of NY Times TV, claimed that "Donald Trump is going to be elected President." He proceeded to connect Americans' addictive craving for "mindless TV reality shows" with Trump's entertainment value. Let me quote Rosenblum:
"Donald Trump is great TV. He knows how to entertain. He understands ratings. Hillary Clinton is crap TV. She may be smarter, better prepared, a better politician. It won’t matter. She is terrible entertainment. That’s just how it is. Depressing, but true."

Thank you, Mr. Rosenblum. That may be depressing, but at least we might laugh just a little at the truth of the American TV addiction. But there is another aspect of Trump’s nomination for President that we Americans must own up to, and it is harder to face.

I would really prefer to ignore this piece with the incredibly vain hope that it will disintegrate before November 8. This part of the answer to Trump’s popularity dodges the realities of the post-industrial society. It reflects shallow, short-term, irresponsible thinking. It pushes back against rising cries of injustice from people of color, from refugees and immigrants, from women, from the LGBTQ community, from people who are physically, emotionally or mentally challenged…. essentially anyone who does not fit a mythological image of a strong, self-sufficient American. It taps into fear about the future and shame about the past.

This part is not so much about Trump but about what he is so skilled at seizing upon and exploiting -- the fears of others. And this is the part that may outlive Trump’s candidacy or even his possible presidency. This is about the American people and how a fair number of us are responding fearfully to the sweeping changes that I mentioned when I began this talk. At its core, this is not about public policies - which supports Rosenblum’s observation as to why the politically experienced Hillary Clinton has such an uphill battle in this race.

This involves human psychology, specifically how some people respond fearfully to changes that they perceive as significant threats to their way of life.

The concept is laid out in an article published online by Vox. Author Amanda Taub writes about foreign policy and human rights issues for Vox.com. In March of this year Vox posted her article, “The Rise of American Authoritarianism." A short teaser introduced it, saying, "A niche group of political scientists may have uncovered what’s driving Donald Trump’s ascent. What they found has implications that go well beyond 2016."

Here are some of the claims from these political scientists as reported by Taub:

Matthew MacWilliams, a PhD student at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, studies authoritarianism which is characterized by a desire for order and a fear of outsiders. His research shows that “people who score high in authoritarianism, when they feel threatened, look for strong leaders who promise to take whatever action is necessary to protect them from outsiders and prevent the changes they fear.”

Taub reported on MacWilliams’ discovery that having a high level of authoritarian characteristics not only correlates, but seems “to predict support for Trump more reliably than any other indicator.”

Of course Trump’s campaign did not create authoritarianism. Back in 2009 the work of two university professors, Marc Hetherington at Vanderbilt University and Jonathan Weiler at the University of North Carolina, concluded that “much of the polarization dividing American politics was fueled…. by an unnoticed but surprisingly large electoral group - authoritarians.”
Taub stated that "Trump embodies the classic authoritarian leadership style: simple, powerful and punitive." But as I said, while this may explain Trump's nomination, the rise of authoritarianism has a scope far wider than the candidacy of one man.

Taub described the "larger trends in American politics [as] polarization, the rightward shift of the Republican Party, and the rise within that party of a dissident faction challenging GOP orthodoxies and upending American politics."

She claimed that "a combination of demographic, economic, and political forces, by awakening this authoritarian class of voters that has coalesced around Trump, have created what is essentially a new political party within the GOP - a phenomenon that broke into public view with the 2016 election but will persist long after it has ended."

An example of authoritarianism is evident in a 2012 radio interview transcript that I read. A columnist for the New York Times, Charles Blow, was interviewed by National Public Radio about demographic changes in the US. Part of the interview focused on a projection that by the year 2043, whites will be less than half of the population when as recently as 2000 whites were at 77%. The interview revealed that while people of color are becoming a larger percentage of the population, they are not achieving economic parity [with whites]. Further, people are grouping together by race, income and political views so even though the country is increasing in diversity, racism is not being reduced.

Blow remarked that "people are very worried about the concept of America - as they have understood it - continuing that way. And that ripples across society in all sorts of ways.... In terms of the gun debate, the hoarding of guns, part of it is that people [are] genuinely nervous about what they feel the country will become - whether or not the center will hold - and that society will be civil or (listen to this) - or the way it has always been. People are nervous about the future."

Of course much more could be said on the topic of the American Presidential race and the current political climate. But let's turn our attention to the American Christian Church, and within that, the United Church of Christ. People are nervous about the future of the Church, too.

I begin this topic by noting the obvious - the Church lives within the same societal environment where politics play out. The tendency to cling to the familiar is plaguing many congregations in the UCC. The temptation to close ranks against outsiders prevails in some churches. The desire to be "the biggest and best" can smother the call to be faithful and humble, though small. A belief that "we can make the Church great again" can undermine the opportunities that the Holy Spirit would have us see along a different path for a different time.

One of my passions is leading group conversations. I teach two continuing education courses which are mostly done online with the addition of conference calls. A minister in Kentucky took my course on Relational Stewardship, which is about tending to our relationships with other people, with God, and with creation. On each call, he would update the class on his progress in addressing race relations in his conservative community. As a newcomer to town, he could see a racial divide but the townspeople liked to pretend that there were no issues of race there. It took courage for him to reach out to the pastor of an African American church
in town. Fortunately, that minister was receptive. After they built trust between them, they planned to invite a few chosen congregational leaders to join them for coffee. They hoped to continue growing the circle of relationships so that people eventually could break down the barriers that previously, they'd refused to acknowledge.

One of the new paths that the UCC is trying out is how it structures leadership. A smaller, consolidated national Board directs a smaller, consolidated national staff. Our geographical Conferences employ far fewer staff leaders than before and are looking at options for the future, including possible mergers and new types of partnerships. Some of you are aware that the Ohio Conference and the Indiana-Kentucky Conference were the first to experiment with sharing the position of Conference Minister, a trial period which concludes this month.

None of these changes has come without disagreement, confusion, or some measure of failure along with some bits of success. But the UCC acted faithfully with the realization that the Church must look to future days for its best days and not to the past, which can be honored (when merited) but never repeated. We must move ahead, following the Way of Jesus Christ as the head of our Church.

One year ago, September 1, 2015, the term of the UCC's new General Minister and President began. The Rev. John Dorhauer was elected to this position after serving in two of our Conferences and in several local congregations. I’d like to share with you some of his vision for the future direction of the UCC, placing it alongside the images in my talk's title, ""Shifting Sands: Grasping for Identity, Place and Power."

I draw on a speech that Rev. Dorhauer presented last spring to the churches of the UCC's Minnesota Conference. He cited research from the Pew Foundation, which studies religion in the United States. The Pew Foundation reported on research showing that "people are leaving the Church because they see it as irrelevant."

Pew frequently refers to people who once were part of a church and who have left it as "dones" and to people who were never part of a formal church as "nones." Now Pew is telling us that people see the Church as irrelevant. We must ask: How do we see ourselves? What does the Church wish to claim as its identity?

I turn to Rev. Dorhauer's comments on the Church's mission as found in Matthew, chapter 28. This is the story of the resurrected Jesus commissioning the eleven remaining disciples. Jesus reminded the disciples that his authority is from God, and then he tells them: "therefore, go."

Rev. Dorhauer reminds us that being sent out is at the heart of the Church, that our mission was established in the single word, "go." he said, "We are sent to be a blessing and a light to others. We must remember that we do not become contaminated by walking alongside people who see things differently."

In contrast to the Church's identity as a group called out, Rev. Dorhauer speaks of a congregation as people gathered in. He says, "Being with the people who sustain you is essential because going out is vulnerable, risky, dangerous and draining. But if we only hunker down, we need to ask how long the Spirit will be willing to invest in us to be an agent of the Shalom that She needs."
Rev. Dorhauer gives voice to an important and, I believe, valid criticism of the UCC as Church and of our congregations. I suspect that you may recognize it here in Germany, too, although I cannot say. In acknowledging our lessening in the eyes of "nones" and "dones" as being irrelevant, often we wonder, "What do we need to do to save ourselves, to preserve the institution?" In this kind of "gathering in," we miss the message of those Post-Modern people who would tell us, "I want to be an agent of transformation in the world. I desire to have a meaningful life. But that desire cannot be met in the Church that I know today."

I have frequently heard this lament from post-modern individuals who have given up on the traditional Church as an agent of transformation and meaning. They may look to social movements instead, or begin spiritual groups beyond the arms of Christian denominationalism.

I accept Rev. Dorhauer's warning that if we dismiss these people, we turn away from potentially powerful relationships that may lead to the peaceful coexistence of the Holy Spirit's vision. Rev. Dorhauer asks us to consider partnerships in which parties "collaborate in a movement that we are both impassioned by. Can we see [the other] as working for the same things? These kinds of relationships," he says, "are needed to retain relevance and vitality."

Rev. Dorhauer also notes the inability of the world's religions to come together peacefully. Recognizing the importance of this, the Rev. Karen Georgia Thompson holds the re-visioned position of UCC Ecumenical AND Interfaith Officer, expanded from the former title of Ecumenical Officer. Reaching out to other faiths is, for us, a logical step.

I appreciate very much a story I've heard Rev. Dorhauer tell about Rev. Michael Kinnamon, General Secretary of the National Council of Churches. In response to a question someone posed to him about why there are so many Christian denominations, he said, "Denominations exist in order to perpetuate an aspect of the Gospel that BUT FOR THEM would be in danger of diminishment or extinction."

Well then, why does the UCC exist? "The Church must be on the move or it is not the Church," Rev. Dorhauer claims. As the societal sands of change shift around us and we grasp for our identity, our General Minister and President urges us to claim the title of a "Church on the Move."

But then where is our denomination going, and with whom? Rev. Dorhauer points to the theme of the UCC, chosen at its inception in 1957 as four strands of Christianity became one. We rely on the words of Jesus, as in his last hours he prayed, "that they may all be one." The UCC's very breath of life contains the wisdom embodied in this prayer. As Rev. Dorhauer describes it, Jesus knew that his followers "would never be taken seriously unless they could demonstrate love for one another despite their enormous differences."

Still, the UCC feels the sands shifting and we question our place in the world. Rev. Dorhauer urges us to stand with others whose passions and goals are similar, who seek Shalom. He warns us to guard against "the moment we lose the impulse to Be One." The UCC is a movement toward oneness; this is the core of our identity and of our place in the world. We must seek out others on this journey and welcome opportunities to join with groups which may seem dissimilar but with whom we share common goals.
Preparing to take our place in this era, we must, as Rev. Dorhauer says, "be willing to let go of things we hold sacred because they have proven to work in the past - but which no longer reach the people who are searching for a path to meaning." We must "be willing to hear the cries of others," he says, "especially the cries that the Powers refuse to hear and that, for you, are cries that matter."

Now let’s talk about power. Will the Church choose to use our resources and influence for itself or for the common good? The UCC finds value in offering what we call "extravagant welcome." There is spiritual power in the UCC motto: "No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here."

Let’s say it together: "No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here."

The UCC’s power lies in the Oneness we seek, and one way we work toward that is through invitation. We aim to welcome people. Period. That is our desire, though of course we fall short. But we have some successes and we keep learning to be bolder in reaching out.

Others have said they look to us to make a difference in this way, and that support gives us crucial encouragement.

I remember, for example, talking with a colleague who was a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, which at the time was struggling to comprehend and accept people’s expression of a variety of gender and sexual identities. John said to me, "The ELCA is my church by birth and I will remain in it. The UCC's ability to move ahead with this gives me courage and hope in changing minds in my church."

I once approached a man following his presentation at a church meeting. He had talked about the failure of our economic system to work for people of little means. Although he was not a religious person, he said that of all the Christian churches, he thought that the UCC was best suited to affect policy on economic inequality. When I asked why he looked to us, I was astonished at his answer. "It's because of communion. You invite everyone to the table."

This is the positive power that the Holy Spirit gives to the UCC when we are true to our call to walk with others and to recognize our Oneness as God's children. This is the power that Rev. Dorhauer draws on when he says that the UCC needs to "be on the move" and to "find ways to make unity, peace and shalom possible and to ensure that every one of God's precious children knows that they are loved... no matter who they are or where they are on life's journey."

This, he proclaims, is how we matter and how the UCC can be relevant today and in the future.

I would say that this is the source of the UCC’s identity, place, and power. Despite the changes that swirl around us like a sandstorm, we walk steadily on our mission of Oneness. That is who we are and that is our place in the Kindom. That is the power that we bring to bear on injustice as we strive for Shalom.
The path that Rev. Dorhauer points to is illuminated by the work of scholar and author Diana Butler Bass, who focuses on American religion and culture. Back in 2004, she questioned “how to be a peacemaker in the midst of post 9/11 patriotism.” That was a time when a fellow UCC member asked me, in all seriousness, if I thought the church really supported peace instead of what came to be known as the War on Terror. That was truly a question about our identity, place and power.

A few years later, Butler Bass imagined what she called a “new old church” and featured in her books some clergy and congregations who were experimenting with ways of being the Church. By 2012, Butler Bass was seeing something new in the United States. Listen to the title of her book: “Christianity After Religion: The End of the Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening.” The book was followed by a DVD entitled, “Embracing Spiritual Awakening: The Dynamics of Experiential Faith.”

She is not one, as you may notice, to shrink from change! Rather, she is intrigued by new possibilities. Many people in the mainline Protestant churches look to Butler Bass for insights and clues about how me might proceed as people of faith. Her latest book, which came out last year, builds on her previous writing about spirituality in a post-religion era. It is called "Grounded: Finding God in the World - A Spiritual Revolution." How’s that for a provocative title?

She does not shy away from stating the obvious: if the Church wants to be relevant it will need to change, and that in fact many people did not wait for the Church to figure this out and they moved on in their spiritual growth. In essence they are “finding God in the world” rather than in what they see as the status quo, self-protecting Church. This is why Rev. Dorhauer says that congregations need to give up sacred barriers and why the UCC needs to be “a church on the move.”

To some it may sound like Butler Bass, who writes about the hope to be found in a post-religious time, could not possibly be in sync with the leader of an old mainline church. But she and Rev. Dorhauer both have imaginations that can see past the layers of church traditions that, for Post-Modern people, have become barriers to God. They share an optimism about the value of a genuinely lived, spiritually grounded life. Dorhauer and Butler Bass are curious, compassionate and courageous. These leadership characteristics are useful in shaping new visions.
Butler Bass wrote about naming the things that ground us in life, that help us feel secure in taking chances. In the UCC, we are grounded in an identity of being a denomination that calls for unity. We are grounded by taking our place as those who dare to welcome others into relationship despite our differences. We are grounded by the power of Oneness, led by the Spirit in moving toward Shalom.

When I chose the image of shifting sands for the title of this talk, I recalled the words of Jesus as recorded in Matthew 7:24 - 27. Jesus said: “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!”

Unless we are clear about our identity, place and power, the sands below us will shift and our house will fall. Being solidly grounded, we can not only withstand the storms of change but we will stand strong through them, sometimes bracing against the wind and sometimes bending with it.

When Jesus sent out the disciples, he assured them that he would always be with them. Likewise, we are not sent alone but with one another and with the Holy Spirit. The Evangelical Church of Westphalia and the UCC Conferences in Ohio and Indiana-Kentucky are bound together as partners on the move. By choice we walk alongside one another, seeking unity despite our differences. At our best, we follow the Spirit into new times, knowing that the holy ground below our feet will hold us as the winds of change blow strong.

I give thanks that through Kirchengemeinschaft and with divine blessings, we are partners on this journey. Thank you for sharing the Christian life with us. Thank you for inviting us every year to renew our commitment to one another. May we always welcome one another and seek greater unity with each other and others, with thanksgiving to the Spirit who leads us onward.