December 2, 2018

First Sunday of Advent

**Sign of Things to Come**

Luke 21:25-36

*First Night of Hanukkah*

Portents of the end of everything doesn’t sound much like a Christmas story, does it?

This year the lectionary starts Advent off with a bang by not so much predicting an apocalypse but making sure we understand what the signs of its appearance will be. Luke’s Gospel tells us that the skies will burst and the countries of the world, all the nations, will be in anguish. People will be anxious and despairing. Everything will be shaken to its core. The next sign, the one that would be hard to miss, according to Luke’s Gospel and the book of Daniel, will be Jesus riding on a cloud and shining with all his glory. You would especially pay attention if you saw this because, according to this Gospel, it would signal the entrance of a new world.

In Jesus’ day, living in his world meant being part of the Roman Empire; an empire with extreme income inequality, and oppressive forces pushing down both on the poor and the foreign born. The new world this passage envisions, is one where the poor will not be hungry, equality and compassion will rule and everything hopeful will be revealed in every corner of every street everywhere. Another way of imaging this can be stated this beautiful way: “Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing.” (Arundhati Roy)

The apocalypse, then, signals not only an end but also a beginning. According to the book of Revelation it will herald a time when the world will change dramatically…for the good, for the just, for the end of sorrow, for the defeat of greed and the end to all those things that keep people from seeing each other as they are. The new world will truly be a Just World for All!

The birth we anticipate, the baby in the manger, is a glimpse of that new world…the hope of all. It is the great purpose of the church to be a place where we can hear the breathing of that new world. The world outside our congregations might feel hopeless. It may feel like evil powers are in control disregarding human beings, creating an order that feeds on greed and corruption and the extremes of inequality. But the church as the body of Christ houses hope itself. It’s here, where we worship, that love is made visible, especially those three loves that the UCC holds dear: Love of Neighbor, Love of Children, Love of Creation. This Advent be mindful of how making love visible recharges our communities with possibility and infuses our world with resilience in times of trouble. This is the great work of the church – to make Christ visible, always.

December 9, 2018

Second Sunday of Advent

**Make Ready**

Luke 3:1-6

It is a troubling moment in the history of Israel when John the Baptist appears in Luke’s Gospel. It is the fifteenth month of the Roman emperor Tiberius, and Pontius Pilate is governor. Herod along with his family, political sycophants and bullies run Jerusalem and the countryside. They do this with the support and backing of the full might of the Roman Empire. John calls across the centuries from his anxious and troubled world. He calls to us urging preparation because something is coming, he says. Make everything ready he tells us, and let no mountains or crooked paths stand in the way. Make smooth the roads that will bear the good news.

There are all kinds of ways to make roads smooth aren’t there? You can clear them of debris, pave them, or get out the heavy equipment and begin digging through the mountain. How does the church of the twenty first century smooth out the roads to make way for the good news of the birth of Jesus? Sometimes the good news we tell is born in the good deeds we do, and even in the physical roads we clear.

Most of the roads in Puerto Rico were wiped out in the category 5 Hurricane Maria, whose sustained winds of 155 mph and rain pounded the island dealing the worst natural disaster in the island’s history. A history that includes 120 years as part of the United States, becoming a territory in 1898, a Commonwealth in 1952 and, in 1917, its inhabitants becoming citizens of the US. This island off the coast of Florida has a population of almost 3.5 million people (roughly the same as Connecticut). Since Hurricane Maria, much of the island has been cleared and power restored. The Disaster Ministries of the United Church of Christ has been on the ground since just after the storm and has remained long after the big equipment and military vessels left. As of the summer of 2018 there was much left to do. While the island’s beautiful tourist spots were open and welcoming, people in the rural and remote parts of the island still needed assistance. UCC Disaster Ministries have stuck with those people by organizing volunteer teams. Teams from churches across the country have been showing up to help with repairs and thru donations from congregations and individuals have been able to smooth the roads and make everything ready so that people of Puerto Rico know they are not forgotten.

December 16, 2018

Third Sunday of Advent

**Look Forward**

Luke 3:7-18

John the Baptist, good old bug-eating and camel’s-hair-wearing John the Baptist, gets in the face of his congregation, calling them, “A brood of vipers.” You probably wouldn’t be too thrilled if your pastor did that, would you? Now, what could have gotten him so riled up?

John was angry because he saw that his people were relying on their national identity as a get-into-God’s-good-graces card. Instead of repentance, the people were expecting special favor for being “children of Abraham.” It’s as if someone today thought that being a citizen of the United States got them special pure and moral status in the world. As if being an American was such a worthy state God would bestow blessings without a second thought. This kind of nativism made John very angry. In response, the crowds around him wanted to know what they should do. In a word, John’s answer was, “Share.” Share everything you have that’s extra, he said, don’t take more than you need. Share with everybody.

Of course, over the centuries, waves of immigrants have come to this country eventually enriching our world. And, in all that time, we have not always been welcoming. We have made those who were here before us feel like aliens on their own land; we have vilified nationalities - the Irish, the Italians, the Polish; and, we have brought whole peoples here against their will. It seems we have not assimilated as well as we thought because there is today so much acrimony and cruelty and disregard for people who are different, people who wear head scarves and turbans and all those who do not appear “white.” Most of those who have come here of their own volition came because our country means something good and safe and represents a home where their children can learn and grow. Why did your forebears come to America? What does it mean to call oneself an American? How do we respond to John’s call to share?

Shadow Rock UCC in Phoenix, Arizona is establishing something they are calling “Hope Station Nogales” in Sonora, Mexico. It will be a ministry of hospitality and justice created for those in this country we call “Dreamers.” Built as a place for healing for these people who came to the US as children and have spent most of their lives in our country and may now be deported. It will be for those individuals who have family here, who have an attorney, who are not criminals, and who need a place to be among people who care for them and where they will find shelter and safe lodging and assistance. "The core of the Gospel is new life," said the Rev. Bill Lyons, Southwest Conference Minister. "Hope Station gives deportees a chance at new life near the border.” If you want to find out more about Shadow Rock and the Sanctuary Movement in Phoenix go to: *shadowrockucc.org*.

December 23, 2018

Fourth Sunday of Advent

**Moving with Mary’s Song**

Luke 1:39-45 (46-55)

*Christmas Fund Offering*

*Magnificat* is the first word in the Latin version of the song of Mary that starts on verse 46 in the first chapter of Luke’s gospel. It means “my soul magnifies.” The church around the world uses this word as the title for this piece of poetry. Considered a song (a canticle) this passage has come to be a regular part of the season of Advent. Mary, pregnant with Jesus, visits Elizabeth, also pregnant, and Mary can’t help but sing. She sings about the goodness and joy of being in that place, that village, with her much older cousin Elizabeth, invoking an attitude of overwhelming thankfulness. Mary must have felt quite safe. There is a Franciscan church called The Church of the Visitation that was built to commemorate this moment in time–this visit between two women many generations apart.

Mary sings about filling the hungry with good things. Filling the hungry is something churches do quite well. We feed people dinners. We organize pot lucks, and serve coffee. We bake cakes and cookies and offer them to anyone who comes through our door. We care for each other. There is an offering we take every year which is a part of that ongoing care. It’s called “The Christmas Fund’ and is administered by The Pension Boards, United Church of Christ, Inc. The gifts we give to this Fund are given to supplement the income of those retired clergy and church lay workers and surviving spouses whose pensions are small. It’s as if generations come together and say, “Yes, you are a part of us and we have not forgotten. You are safe with us. We are here for you”

Feeling vulnerable and being able to find a place where you are affirmed and aided is the kind of atmosphere that surrounds the two women in this passage. They are comfortable and know that each of them is supportive of the other. This Fund we collect this Sunday makes that kind of comfort available across generations and is available on behalf of all of us. And, if you know of a retired church worker who has hit a rough patch and once worked on behalf of us with the United Church of Christ make sure they know about this Fund and tell them to call, or go to pbucc.org and search for ministerial assistance. The hungry we feed with this fund are those who have fed us spiritually and have visited us many times in our homes, prayed with us and preached the Good News.

December 30, 2018

First Sunday after Christmas

**Who is This Child?**

Luke 2:41-52

Have you ever looked up for a moment out on the street, in the park, at the mall and not seen your children? Have you ever become separated from a child and felt a hole open in your heart? Can you imagine how Mary and Joseph felt that day in Jerusalem a city with thousands of people crushing in for the holidays? The streets would have been narrow and crowded. Mary and Joseph would have been alone and out of their comfort zone in a place not their home. Put yourself in their shoes. Their only son is missing. They had been through so much turmoil in the first year of their son’s life.

His birth was outdoors, in a stable among straw because as luck would have had it they landed in a strange place too late in the day for a bed with a roof. They were homeless. Later the life of the baby was threatened by the Governor. What else could they do but jump on a donkey and flee the country? So, they fled to Egypt for asylum where their baby would be safe. How different the world might be if Egypt had deported them back into Herod’s evil hands? Deported baby Jesus into the bloody slaughter of the innocents? But they had survived all that, and the young family returned. Now, however, the boy had disappeared into the crowded market streets of urban Jerusalem. What could have happened to him?

In the last late spring and early summer, we all learned of the terrible things happening in our name and on our borders. Young children, even toddlers, were forcibly removed from their parents who were seeking asylum in the United States. Parents who had come to our country, just like Mary and Joseph had gone to Egypt, seeking safety from violence and protection for their children were having their children taken from them.

How does the church explain the pain of such policies to a world that doesn’t always want to see how and where suffering occurs and how it can be perpetrated in our name by those who are our servants? A United Church of Christ in Sacramento, California found a way to do just that. The Parkside Community Church United Church of Christ took the figures from its Christmas nativity and set them up in the front of their church to mirror what was happening to asylum seekers on our borders. They put Mary and Joseph in a chain link cage and put baby Jesus in another similar cage with a sign that said, “Asylum seeking in America Today.” How powerful a message, linking the Christmas story with the moral and political events of our day.

January 6, 2019

Epiphany

**Where is the Child?**

Matthew 2:1-12

Herod has no good intentions for baby Jesus. He was not looking to buy him a blue bassinet or a tiny little catcher’s mitt. No, Herod had a more diabolic plan. The Magi who had traveled all that way to find the baby under the tail of that great extraordinary star knew better. They knew he was an evil man with an evil intent. So, when the time came, as Matthew’s Gospel tells us, those Magi went home by another way. Thus, they saved the baby Jesus. The Magi were wealthy and were a part of Herod’s world of privilege. But they could escape Herod’s reach, and chose another way in order to protect the child.

Clergy in the New York Conference of the United Church of Christ have chosen another way with respect to immigrant children housed in their state. They have joined with other faith leaders, lawmakers and attorneys to introduce legislation that would require state licensed facilities that house immigrant children on behalf of our federal government to report to the public regularly. Those reports would require an accounting of how many children each facility is housing. Currently, the facilities say that they are not required to report anything about what is happening to these immigrant children. These are the children that have been forcibly removed from their parents, many of whose parents came here seeking asylum in the United States.

This coalition is hoping that other states and conferences will follow their example. The legislation is called “The Separated Children Accountability Response Act (SCAR). The gist of the Act would be to require state–contracted facilities to report every 15 days on numbers of children and on efforts to reunite children with their parents. This Legislation was introduced last summer at Judson Memorial Church (UCC affiliated) in New York City.

In Africa, among the mighty Masai warriors, the traditional greeting is to ask, “How are the children?” Even warriors without children ask that question of each other, and the traditional response is, “All the children are well.” Thus, if there is time and attention and care for the children then life is good. We should all ask each other that question in order that all of us in all our churches might use the well-being of children as the test of how well we are doing as a society. The Magi knew that. The authors of this legislation know that. How are the children?

January 13, 2019

The Baptism of Christ

**Affirmed by Love**

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

How many sacraments does the United Church of Christ celebrate? Don’t look ahead**!** Do you know the answer? Ask a pew mate. See if they know. Any more, or less than two is the wrong answer. Yes, other Christian denominations have more. No, marriage is not a sacrament in our tradition. We celebrate Baptism and Holy Communion. Both are, for us, about community, about being gathered and called by the grace of God and about sharing in the life of Christ.

For Baptism, it’s all about the water. We all use water. It’s just that some of us use different amounts. It can happen at any age – from 1 hour old to 125 years­ – any age works. And, you only get one…no do-overs. Finally, baptism is a communal affair. It’s a ritual and a sign about belonging to one another so, most of us, celebrate baptisms during worship. Here’s a rundown of some of our practices.

THE WATER: It cleans and purifies. We speak of the one baptized as dying and rising with Christ. Thus, the water is a vehicle for going under it and rising up. Some people sprinkle water on the head of the person three times for each part of the Trinity, and some dip into the water with fingers and make a sign of the cross on a forehead and some, like Reverend Amy Lignitz Harken, Minister, Mattapoisett Congregational Church, have baptized in the waters of the Ocean. You can read her story on the Massachusetts Conference Blog. She says, “Standing on a beach under an overcast sky was as much a naked expression of faith as an ashy forehead smear on Ash Wednesday. And it moved them, and me, deeply.”

ANY AGE: Our tradition makes it possible for infant baptism. Parents speak the promises about faithful participation and discipleship and then, when the child is confirmed they repeat those promises. But, anyone can be baptized at any age. Who was the oldest person you ever saw baptized?

NO DO-OVERS: Some traditions say that you need to be baptized in their tradition. We don’t believe that the still speaking God keeps records about what words were used by what denomination when everyone was baptized. No do-overs are ever necessary.

If you want to know more about Baptism and the United Church of Christ you can find resources by going to uccresources.com.

January 20, 2019

Second Sunday after Epiphany

**Extravagant Sign**

John 2: 1-11

*Ecumenical Sunday*

Weddings join more than the people being married. They join families, traditions, and stories. Generations come together. Children who were strangers become cousins. Two become one in many ways. In this story told in John’s Gospel, there is a wedding with a problem. The wine has run out. Jesus is there, with his mother. In the hands of this gospel author that situation turns into an opportunity to make a point about a moment in the first century when the religious landscape was changing. This is a story about the transformation of traditions.

During the time that John’s Gospel came into being, synagogues were being disrupted by Jews who were proclaiming a new religious vision within the context of Judaism. Their voices were raised in worship and community gatherings. What they proclaimed was disruptive to the religious traditions of their day. They were saying that a carpenter’s son who was crucified by Roman guards was the Messiah for whom they have been waiting. Talk about conflict! Talk about turmoil! It must have been hard for everyone. John’s gospel emerged in the middle of this commotion. That is why this Gospel often takes traditional religious symbols of its day and puts them in the hands of Jesus who transforms them.

The jugs that Jesus fills with wine were used for religious rituals of cleansing. What was sacred and symbolic is, after Jesus gets through with them, now filled with wine…a symbol of celebration and newness. There are many ways we can think about this. One is that by using ritual vessels for wine Jesus joins what we think of as ordinary with our sacred practices.

Many of our churches are experimenting with new ways of worship and new ways of transforming old traditions. In Cleveland, at our own Amistad Chapel, this past summer, artists gathered from all over the country. They were visual artists, dancers, scholars of liturgy, writers, and storytellers. They gathered to create and wonder and experiment and discover a new language of our faith – a language for a new century already well underway. They gathered to develop resources for the local church and to support our justice work, and they all came to share how the sacred speaks through our creative selves made in God’s image. One of the participants, Rev. Erin Beardemphl said this about art,” "If we could, in our churches and in our communities, show people that they really are creative beings, I expect the world would be so much more loving." Like what Jesus did at the wedding, they were filling old vessels with new wine.

January 27, 2019

Third Sunday after Epiphany

**Good News, Good Ways**

Luke 4:14-21

*Health and Human Services Sunday*

Across the country there is an epidemic. An epidemic that is killing our people and devastating communities. The reach of this crisis can be felt deep inside many of our congregations. It is the ongoing soul-emptying and family-destroying plague of opioid addiction. The UCC has ministries and congregations that offer support and various services to those affected. Our Council for Health and Human Services Ministry (CHHSM) is planning to offer a resolution at General Synod in July 2019 at Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Resolutions offered at General Synods have the effect of focusing our advocacy and energy toward legislative and public stances around those issues important to all of us. This is no exception. When Jesus stood up in that synagogue two thousand years ago and proclaimed himself sent to heal the brokenhearted and preach the Gospel to the poor he could have been standing at the door of a family devastated by addiction. How will this resolution ask us to respond to this crisis?

CHHSM leadership plans that the resolution will call us all to act on advocating for better access to treatment and to call attention to how the pharmaceutical companies have contributed to the problem. It is a resolution that calls for comfort and aid to those afflicted and to afflict the powerful of the world with condemnation for their part in human suffering.

This two part resolution would highlight the fact that treatment for this addiction is costly and access is limited. Without some action access will get more difficult. And, the resolution would call out the unethical marketing of drugs like oxycodone, hydrocodone, fentanyl and other such prescription pain relievers.

Did you know that according to the National Institute at least 115 people die every day from opioid overdoses? There are medications for opioid addiction but their availability is limited. In addition, there is a call abroad in the land for drug companies to stop marketing these opiates to doctors recognizing that over prescribing them is part of the problem.

Perhaps this resolution, now in the process of being created, will come before our General Synod and prod all of us to work together to bring healing to those brokenhearted and broken bodied. This is a way we can continue to create a “Just World for All.”

February 3, 2019

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

**Prophet on the Edge**

Luke 4:21-30

Jesus, the young Jesus, has just returned home and preaches his first sermon in his home synagogue. He reads scripture and says little. Yet, something he says makes the people in that synagogue that day so angry that they want to throw him off a cliff. What made those first century worship attenders so enraged that preacher-cide was on their mind?

What Jesus did was suggest that their God, the God of the Old Testament, often spoke to non-Israelites, like the Syrian Naaman and the widow of Zarepath. His listeners were not happy to think that God was God to others as well as themselves. Of course, this is not just a first century idea. We humans have often fashioned God into ourselves. We are heirs of a tradition that has historically claimed God as Western European. Imagine a God that speaks Spanish, or Urdu, or Quechua. That is God – still speaking and not necessarily in English. How do we, as congregations, open ourselves to a multilingual God? How do we deepen our relationship with that God of all people? One way is become an Immigrant Welcoming Congregation.

Just as churches became Open and Affirming and grew spiritually in their understanding of who God includes; welcoming those culturally different from us and listening to how God speaks to them in their traditions expands our understanding of God and of ourselves as human beings. It all begins in the Bible, a book that some have called the immigrants handbook because so many of its stories are about immigrants. Its stories teach about welcoming strangers and foreigners and how such relationships deepen people’s connection with God.

Your church can do more than Bible study on this issue. Some churches reach out to immigrant communities and churches and plan programs to share food, and culture and ministries. Some congregations read books, take trips, watch videos and listen to the stories of immigrants in their communities. Getting to know this changing world and letting in those who are different is all part of God’s plan for the world. A world made of many kinds of people from many nations. All of us are born a life created by the same God. All of us trying to make a Just World.

If you want to know more go to ucc.org and search for becoming an Immigrant Welcoming Congregation. It’s time we all did this. God has called to open our hearts to the stranger. God has called us to welcome the foreigner in our midst. It’s part of being the church. It’s yet another way to show your love of neighbor.

February 10, 2019

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

**A Surprising Catch**

Luke 5:1-11  
Racial Justice Sunday / Science and Technology Sunday

Apparently, being the church is not all potlucks and Bible study, Christmas bazaars and picnics, preaching and marching for justice. Apparently, according to Luke’s Gospel, it’s also about deep sea fishing. That is, very specifically, deep water fishing. If you want to catch a lot of fish then you must put your nets out into deep water. Of course, the fish Luke is talking about are not mackerel and blue fin tuna, they are people. They are the people Luke envisions coming from all parts of the world to worship in Jerusalem and come to understand God through the person of Jesus Christ.

What does it mean in your community for your church to put its “nets” out unto deep waters?

Our denomination is casting our evangelical nets more broadly and effectively through reorganization. The United Church of Christ is hoping that by combining some of its offices we will be able to spread the good news of the UCC in a way that will benefit the local church. We have launched a newly organized team called OPTIC.

OPTIC is the Office of Philanthropy, Technology, Identity and Communication. We believe that combining our communications and marketing with philanthropy and technology will enable the casting of our nets into deeper waters. Our denomination believes that there are people out there waiting to see our vision, hear our voice and understand the wide-welcome and just-world creating church that is the UCC. Finding these audiences, developing them and welcoming them into our churches is what this new team is about.

One of the many initiatives of this new team is to work closely with those planning the next General Synod. The newly minted “Shine” logo is part of that work. There will be roll outs of innovative resources for local congregations and an attention to how we can put our collective nets into deeper waters. After all, the church is called to grow and to call disciples not simply to exist. Our passion for spreading the good news is as deep as our belief in a God who offers an extravagant welcome and longs for us to live in a Just World for All – where love of neighbor, love of children and love of creation are woven in the net cast for all of us in the UCC.

Look at ucc.org for word of what is happening with your OPTIC team and see the new logo for General Synod 2019.

February 17, 2019

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

**Surprising Teaching**

Luke 6:17-26

Nothing is ever the same after Jesus talk gets in your brain. When he preached on that hillside, as reported in Luke’s gospel, and began with “Blessed are you who are poor” there must have been more than a few taking those words out into the Roman empire. The church later spread those words, upending the way people thought the world worked. “Blessed are you who are hungry now, and who weep now, for everything will change.” These words burned in the hearts of many in the ensuing centuries. These words that instigated change with an emphasis on the marginalized and the outcasts and those excluded from the great and powerful rooms where important decisions get made. These words grew from the bottom of society not from the top. Jesus knew that change happens from the bottom up, not from the top down.

If we are going to really call into being “A Just World for All” then we need to start preaching to the bottom from the bottom. Take racism, for example. Take it as an example of something woven into our world that creates suffering to benefit others. Jesus said blessed are those on the bottom not blessed those who oppress and stigmatize. The unraveling of the sin of racism begins in Jesus words getting inside our brains so that the world will never be the same.

A group of young people, ages 11-24, met this summer for a week in the basement of Bethany UCC in Seattle, Washington. They met there to learn and talk about dismantling racism for the sake of the world. For 17 years, this pop up social justice program has spread the word so that we, as a nation, might absolve our past by inoculating the present with visions of an aspirational nation. An aspirational vision that believes Jesus’ words about hope.

Those words reorder our perceptions of the poor and move us from blaming poverty on individuals. It lifts our eyes to see the systemic forces that keep people on the bottom. Forces like lack of health care, poor education, stagnant wages, racism, segregation, lack of affordable housing and more. When Jesus says, “Blessed are those who are poor,” believe him and let those words get inside your brain so they might change the world. What action can you take to fight for the powerless?

February 24, 2019

Seventh Sunday after Epiphany

**Love Your Enemies**

Luke 6:27-38

*Seminary Sunday/Church Vocations Sunday*

It’s Seminary Sunday! Yay! Have you planned a church vocations party? What? You haven’t? Well, maybe next year.

In general, church attendance may be down across the country, it’s also probably true that most people think the basic code of compassionate living espoused by we followers of Jesus is worth preserving. What about you? Do you think that loving your enemies and showing mercy to the whole world is a way of living that is, at the very least, worth preserving for the future of the world? You probably do. So, why don’t we celebrate church vocations more loudly?

Without new leaders, trained leaders, and leaders who can inspire others and help us learn new ways of articulating this ancient faith tradition our churches will starve spiritually. The 21st century is already a century that looks like it is going to need a hopeful word and a compassionate agenda. We need to raise up leaders who will feel called to empower that agenda and we need to install them ASAP.

Where do you think the next generation of clergy and lay leaders will come from? Do you think seminaries manufacture them or find them going door to door? No. They come from the local church. They come because you see among you those who have gifts for this kind of work and you invite them into a process of discernment that may lead them to seminary or another path toward ministry. The larger church needs all of us to pay attention to those in our pews who could help the church and spread the gospel and change the world.

Aspiring clergy begin in discernment and begin with your pastor and your church leadership. It is up to you to bring them to your Conference for further work and discernment. It is part of our job as congregations to encourage the gifts of our members and to develop them. There are many seminaries around the country that are particularly affiliated with the UCC. See if one is near you. Some of them have lay leader programs, some allow for auditors and all would be glad to give you a tour. They are:

Andover-Newton Theological School, Newton Centre, MA; *www.ants.edu*

Chicago Theological Seminary, Chicago, IL; *www.ctschicago.edu*

Eden Theological Seminary, St. Louis, MO; *www.eden.edu*

Lancaster Theological Seminary, Lancaster, PA; *www.lancasterseminary.edu*

Pacific School of Religion, Berkeley, CA; *www.psr.edu*

United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities, New Brighton, MN; *www.unitedseminary.edu*