

A Brief History and Reflections

Phoenix Community Church  
United Church of Christ

Kalamazoo, Michigan

in Celebration of our 25th Anniversary  
February 17, 2013



## The Early Years

On October 25, 1987, First Congregational Church of Mattawan, Michigan, at the time affiliated with the United Church of Christ (UCC), decided not to renew the contract of Rev. Cyril Colonius, who had been the pastor of that church since 1982, by a vote of 62 to 61. Rev. Colonius stated, "I was dismissed for two reasons. One was my homosexuality. The second was a fear of AIDS. It was very clear to me that those were the factors. I think what motivated people was fear. 'Homophobia' is the word I use. The meeting where the vote was taken was an example of fear. It was hysterical. Unkind things were spoken that were not true."<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, in the late 1980's ministerial options were slim. "The possibility of an openly gay pastor getting a local church position in the UCC is still very slim. We'd like to think we're liberal, but we're not," Rev. Colonius stated.<sup>2</sup> However, out of the devastating decision to dismiss Colonius and uncertain prospects for the future, hope was born: "The most important thing is that I have been freed from the burden of fear. I no longer need to be afraid of being discovered. ... I've said goodbye to the past and I am willing to greet and welcome a new life. I'm still the same person I was. And I am hoping to start a new congregation. ... The church has always been such a 'no.' I want to be about a religious community that says 'yes' to life. I feel energetic, I'm excited about this new project."<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, from this difficult and controversial set of events, Phoenix Community Church was born. On February 17, 1988, a group of eighteen people met in Kalamazoo, Michigan, to discuss starting a new church that would be open and affirming to all people from its very beginning. This new church became a reality just a couple of weeks later when a group of thirty met for worship for the first time in a room at People's Church of Kalamazoo. Helping to organize this new church were Rev. Cyril Colonius and Rev. Melanie Morrison. Colonius said of the venture, "Every loss is an opportunity for

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1 "Gay pastor dismissed at Mattawan," Denise Karasiewicz and Barbara Walters, Kalamazoo Gazette, November 2, 1987.

2 "Congregation Ousts Mich. Gay Priest", Peter Freiberg, December 22, 1987

3 "Spurned by his church, a minister journeys back to professional and personal renewal," Barbara Walters, Kalamazoo Gazette, March 9, 1988

transition and growth. This will keep me in touch with oppression. It will remind me to never forget injustice. I know now that oppression and injustice are real and I also know there is life after death for me.”<sup>4</sup>

The name of the church carried significant meaning for those beginning this adventure: “The name Phoenix Community Church says much about who we are because it says much about where we came from and what hope gave birth to this church. The phoenix is a mythological bird that rises out of its own ashes to new life. This Egyptian myth was appropriated by the early Christian church as a symbol of resurrection. The people in Kalamazoo who gathered to form a new church also appropriated this myth as a symbol of our belief that resurrection is possible out of the ashes of discrimination, self-hatred, and oppression. The dream and hope that gave birth to Phoenix community Church, and still calls us to new birth, is the dream and hope that it is possible to be a church that is a 'demonstration plot' for God’s commonwealth.”<sup>5</sup>

Almost from the start, those who comprised Phoenix Community Church began to question whether they should be independent or affiliated with a church denomination and, if so, which one. In June of 1988, letters of inquiry were sent to twenty different denominations. Responses were received from nine and after additional study, the congregation decided to enter into further conversation with the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) and the United Church of Christ (UCC). After meeting with both denominations, it was decided in January 1989 to suspend further activity until Phoenix was able to draft a mission statement and bylaws.

The church's mission statement was adopted on October 1, 1989, and is still in effect today, having stood the test a time as a beloved statement of what it means for the church to be in community together. Rev. Colonius said, “One of the things we are trying to do is redefine what it means to be a church. We had no blueprint.”<sup>6</sup> Phoenix strived to remember its past, but not live there, offering the

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4 “Spurned by his church”

5 “How We Believe at Phoenix Community Church, UCC,” Rev. Melanie Morrison, 1989.

6 “Member, pastors say Phoenix Church can help rebuild lives”, William R. Wood, Kalamazoo Gazette, April 21, 1990.

message that we need to let go of negative experiences to grow into the future. An important element of this principle was, and continues to be, a commitment to struggle with the language of the church, especially challenging sexist and racist language. “In religion, we often predetermine the boundaries for religious experience. Religion is real heavy in 'haves,' 'shoulds' and 'oughts.' My experience tells me these things need to be challenged,” Colonius stated.<sup>7</sup>

While work continued on the mission statement and bylaws, discussions with the UUA and the UCC were renewed in the last quarter of 1989. After completing an extensive process, Phoenix voted on March 4, 1990, to seek affiliation with the United Church of Christ. Three weeks later, on March 25, the church's first bylaws were approved.

After struggling with process issues, the Committee on Church and Ministry for the Southwest Association, Michigan Conference, UCC, appointed a committee in June of 1990 to work with Phoenix toward affiliation. Thus began a time for the Southwest Association and Phoenix Community Church to get to know each other through worshipping together as well as a series of meetings to foster understanding. It was agreed by all parties that Phoenix's special ministry to the gay and lesbian community would be talked about openly and honestly throughout this process, which culminated on April 28, 1991, in the decision by the Southwest Association to accept Phoenix Community Church by a vote of 92 to 29.

Phoenix Community Church was officially installed as a member church in good standing of the Southwest Association in a worship service held June 9, 1991. Rev. Morrison and Rev. Colonius, having already served Phoenix for the three years since its inception, were officially installed as the pastors during the same service. Before helping to start Phoenix, Rev. Morrison served First Congregational Church in Bronson, Michigan, and a Dutch Reformed church in the Netherlands. She earned a Master of Divinity degree from Yale University and a Doctor of Theology degree from University of Utrecht, Netherlands. Rev. Colonius previously served First Congregational Church in

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<sup>7</sup> “Member, pastors say”

Mattawan and First Congregational Church in Constantine, Michigan. He earned a Master of Divinity Degree from Chicago Theological Seminary.

### Significant Dates in Phoenix's History

February 17, 1988	First meeting to discuss creating a new faith community
February 24, 1988	First worship service held
March 6, 1988	First public worship service at People's Church
October 1, 1989	Mission Statement adopted
March 25, 1990	Bylaws adopted
April 28, 1991	Accepted into the Southwest Association of the Michigan Conference of the United Church of Christ (UCC)
June 9, 1991	Church installation in the UCC and pastoral installation of Revs. Melanie Morrison and Cyril Colonius
June 5, 1994	Installation of Rev. Janice Springer
August 7, 1994	Open house at Phoenix's first office.
June 1, 1997	Phoenix choir performs Phoenix Cantata, arranged by Randy Thomas and Scott Helms
June 1997	Phoenix moves worship to Skyridge Church of the Brethren
February 22, 1998	Phoenix celebrates its 10th Anniversary
Fall 1999	Jacki Belile serves as sabbatical minister
September 9, 2007	Installation of Rev. Gail Holman
2008	Phoenix celebrates its 20th Anniversary
May 2, 2010	Celebration of pastoral covenant with Ken Arthur
June 27, 2010	Adopted Purpose Statement
May 1, 2011	Phoenix moves worship and office to Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
June 5, 2011	Phoenix celebrates 20 years as part of the UCC
February 17, 2013	Phoenix celebrates its 25th Anniversary

### Church Pastors

	<u>Status</u>	<u>Starting</u>	<u>Ending</u>
Melanie Morrison	founding pastor	Feb 17, 1988	Jan 31, 1993
Cyril Colonius	founding pastor	Feb 17, 1988	June 27, 1993
Susan Irish	interim	Feb 1, 1993	April 3, 1994
Brewster Wilcox	interim	Jul 11, 1993	April 3, 1994
Janice Springer	called	April 24, 1994	May 8, 2005
Jacki Belile	sabbatical	1999	1999
Liz Colton	interim	Sep 4, 2005	May 27, 2007
Gail Holman	called	Jul 8, 2007	Jan 17, 2010
Ken Arthur	designated	Feb 1, 2010	March 27, 2011
	called	March 27, 2011	

**How We Believe at Phoenix Community Church, UCC**  
**(Written by Melanie Morrison in 1989 for the UCC Affiliation Process)**

On February 17, 1988, eighteen people gathered in Kalamazoo, Michigan to begin conversation about forming a new congregation. This meeting grew out of the conviction that Kalamazoo needed a church community that would be welcoming of all people, especially those who have felt excluded or marginalized in other churches. From its inception, Phoenix community Church has embraced a special ministry with gay men and lesbians, but this ministry by no means constitutes the total vision of Phoenix's mission and ministry.

We also worked to include all people regardless of who they are; whether they are straight, disabled, black, white, red, yellow, young, old, big, little or anything else. At Phoenix we celebrate the fact that each of us has particular gifts for ministry and mission, not in spite of but precisely because of, our particular gender, age, race, orientation and abilities.

The name Phoenix Community Church says much about who we are because it says much about where we came from and what hope gave birth to this church. The phoenix is a mythological bird that rises out of its own ashes to new life. This Egyptian myth was appropriated by the early Christian church as a symbol of resurrection. The people in Kalamazoo who gathered to form a new church also appropriated this myth as a symbol of our belief that resurrection is possible out of the ashes of discrimination, self-hatred, and oppression. The dream and hope that gave birth to Phoenix community Church, and still calls us to new birth, is the dream and hope that it is possible to be a church that is a "demonstration plot" for God's commonwealth.

We believe that Phoenix has a gift to offer the larger church and the community; the gift of hope and healing to people who had become cynical and despairing about the possibility of being welcomed, seen and heard in the church. Those who have chosen to come to Phoenix come from a broad spectrum of religious backgrounds.

We have a theological commitment to draw upon the Jewish and Christian heritage, which has been oppressive for many people, and seek to recover that which is liberating.

We are an open, liberal Christian church. We seek to honor and protect the freedom of belief of the individual. We are trying to reclaim those parts of the Christian tradition that have been inclusive and life-giving.

We affirm at Phoenix that God has many names. You will hear such names as Mother, Father, Friend. Lover, I am who I am, Higher Power, Spirit of Life – to name only a few.

At Phoenix, Jesus means different things to different people. For some he is a teacher, for some a prophet, for some the Christ, for some a personal Savior. We recognize that we come from very different church backgrounds and that what one person may mean by “Christ” or “Savior” conjures up very different meanings for others.

We believe that spirituality and sexuality have for too long been seen as enemies of each other and that has caused us to do violence to ourselves and our bodies, to say nothing of the bodies of others.

As we say in our Mission Statement: “We believe that the spiritual life cannot be divorced from an active concern for the world. Individually and collectively, we seek to challenge oppression and injustice, and work for peace and the preservation of the environment.

Once a month we celebrate communion at Phoenix. We affirm that communion means different things to different people. But one thing we hold common: the table is a common table and therefore all are invited to share in the bread and cup. We understand communion as a ritual of remembrance; remembering Jesus and the way he lived, and also remembering others who lived and died with passion and love for justice.

## **Phoenix Community Church**

### **Mission Statement Adopted 10/1/89**

Phoenix is a church community that encourages spiritual growth. Questions are taken seriously, and the people of Phoenix share the struggles and joys of being alive.

All are welcomed at Phoenix, regardless of age, abilities, sex, race, or sexual orientation. We wish to rejoice in our differences while we affirm our similarities.

At Phoenix, we encourage and celebrate the whole person—mind, body, spirit, and imagination. We use new forms of worship that speak to a church community with a variety of beliefs. We attempt to avoid language that is hurtful or exclusive.

The people of Phoenix share good times together and try to support one another during hard times. We do not want to become self-satisfied and complacent, but seek instead to be a life-giving church community that reaches out and welcomes in.

We believe that the spiritual life cannot be divorced from an active concern for the world. Individually and collectively, we seek to confront oppression and injustice, and work for peace and the preservation of the environment.

To fulfill our mission, we need the presence of the Spirit and the support of one another. We seek to forgive ourselves and each other when we fail and to accept the responsibility to begin anew.

### **Purpose Statement Adopted June 27, 2010**

The purpose of Phoenix Community Church is to embody God's all encompassing love, as exemplified by Jesus, in the way we interact with each other, our neighbors, and all creation.

## Reflections

In honor of Phoenix's 25th Anniversary, several of our former ministers contributed words of greeting and reflection about their time as part of the Phoenix community. These are included on the following pages. We first share short reflections from a current member of Phoenix and two past members.

### **From Linda Cross, current Phoenix member:**

#### REFLECTIONS ON THE 25TH ANNIVERSARY OF PHOENIX COMMUNITY CHURCH

As I look back on my 24 years at Phoenix Church, I have so many fond memories of the friends I have made there through the years and the lessons I have learned. The most important, of course, is what it means to be a community. The term is sometimes used interchangeably with “town” but it can be so much more than that. Even in the church I grew up in, I never felt connected to the other members the way I did at Phoenix. I believe the Support Group that we formed early on had a lot to do with that. We got to know each other more intimately than is possible just attending worship together. We were open and vulnerable with each other and, speaking for myself at least, I felt cared about and safe. The friends I made in that group will be in my heart forever, even though most of them don't come to church here any more.

At the same time that Support Group was flourishing, Janice was preaching about commitment and how important it is to work through our differences rather than giving up and going our separate ways. I had been divorced twice and realized that it was because I had never made a real commitment. Unfortunately, once I finally understood what commitment meant and felt ready to make one, I chose the wrong person to do it with—someone who didn't have a clue what it meant. I found out it takes commitment on the part of both parties to make a relationship work.

Many people have walked through our doors, stayed for a time and left. Some found what they were looking for, some didn't. Our numbers are much fewer these days than in the past, but those who stayed have a strong sense of commitment to each other. The older I get, the more strongly I feel that everyone who has been a part of my life is now a part of me. In the same way, everyone who has been a part of Phoenix will always be a part of Phoenix. We are Phoenix Church and our message of love and acceptance for all will continue to live on in us, no matter where we are.

Love,

Linda

**From Anthony Verhage, former member of Phoenix:**

Phoenix has been the best thing that has ever happened for me. I met great people, had services that were both spiritual, but also had depth and meaning. I grew up Methodist and always had trouble with feeling like I belonged. I came to Phoenix and felt like I belonged. And as soon as I started coming to church I joined in, as a care contact and on the search committee. Congrats on 25 years and here's to 25 years more.

From Peg Ball, former Phoenix member:

The newly-opened Phoenix Church became spiritual home for me just a few short years after my coming out and being thrown out of, and shunned by, a church that I thought I would be a part of for the rest of my life. How blessed I felt to find a place where I was assured that God loves me regardless of the gender of my life partner! Phoenix, well the people that made up Phoenix, blessed me in so many ways, becoming companions in friendship, prayer and song, and in activism. I was also blessed by their supportiveness of me as I ventured into leadership roles in this young church. I grew

spiritually under the nurturing of Melanie and Cyril, and drank in every bit of wisdom and love that they poured out. The sound foundation that I developed in the early days of Phoenix has carried me across the country and back, and sustains me still, though time and distance separate us.

Happy 25th anniversary, Phoenix Church! I wish that I could be there to celebrate with you! Know, Phoenix People, that my heart and prayers are with you, now and always.

**From Rev. Melanie Morrison, co-founding pastor:**

While reflecting on the anniversary, Rev. Morrison, founding co-pastor, was reminded of this sermon which she preached on April 28, 1991, following the spring meeting of the Southwest Association, Michigan Conference, where the assembled delegates voted overwhelmingly to receive Phoenix Community Church into the United Church of Christ.

**How Shall We Sing God's Song in a Strange Land?**

This was, without a doubt, one of the most challenging sermons I have ever had to write. It was difficult to listen to these scriptural texts, seeking a word of hope and consolation, without assurance that the delegates at the Southwest Association would vote to receive us as a new congregation in the Michigan Conference, United Church of Christ. But as I listened deeply to the texts and remembered the integrity of our own process over the past two years, as we struggled to discern whether to seek membership in the UCC, I knew that these verses from Psalm 137 and Leviticus would be life-giving and relevant regardless of how the delegates voted. Let me read again the words from the psalmist:

By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept,  
when we remembered Zion.  
On the willows there we hung our harps.  
For there our captors required of us songs,  
and our tormentors, mirth, saying,  
"Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"  
How shall we sing God's song in a foreign land?

Psalm 137 was written about a community in exile, a community of faith without a home, trying to hold on to its vision, its dreams, and its memories in a foreign land. Their oppressors in Babylon taunted them by saying, "Why don't you sing one of those songs about your native land that you love so much!" But the people of Israel, uprooted, in exile, sat down by the waters and wept. They hung their musical instruments on the willow branches. They had no more songs in them. "How can we sing God's song in this foreign land?" they asked. Or, as I have reworded it, "How can we sing our heart's desire in a foreign land?"

At the heart of the Hebrew Scriptures, there is a story of oppression and liberation. The Hebrew people were for many years uprooted, enslaved in Egypt, exiled in Babylon, and strangers in a foreign land. Throughout that time of exile, they longed for their homeland -- a land flowing with milk and honey, flowing with peace and justice. To this day, Jews remember when their ancestors suffered the cruel burden of oppression, their escape from slavery, 40 years wandering in the desert in search of that home.

That story of oppression, liberation from slavery, and exile in a foreign land forms the background for the central command in the Hebrew Scriptures: namely, to welcome the stranger, the outcast, and the oppressed. God commands them to extend hospitality to "outsiders," to welcome foreigners as kinfolk. Not because it is the nice or moral thing to do. God grounds the command in their collective memory: they know by experience what it is to be treated not as kinfolk but as strangers, exiles, a people oppressed. They know it in their flesh and bones. They know whereof they speak.

Is their story resonating with yours? I suspect it is. We, too, know how hard it can be to try and sing our heart's desire in a strange land, even in the strange land of the church. We know the struggle of trying to remain faithful to the vision that birthed Phoenix Community Church when people are questioning that vision. But we are called to remember, again and again, that we have embraced a

ministry of radical hospitality precisely because we know in our flesh and bones what it is to be strangers, outcasts, relegated to the margins.

In the meetings held around the Southwest Association leading up to today's vote, some people have been critical of the fact that Phoenix doesn't have a statement of faith; that we have instead "a statement of mission." Their implication is that a statement of mission is not – at its heart -- a theological statement. We beg to differ with that conclusion. We have responded to this charge by saying, "It is not coincidental that a people who has been excluded and rejected from many churches would write a mission statement that has radical hospitality at its core. For we know, by experience, what it is to be a stranger, an exile, in a foreign land.

Leviticus states: "When a stranger stays with you in your land, you shall not harm that person. The stranger who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love that person as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt; I am the Holy One, your God." It is the Holy One who is the source of liberation out of oppression and who reminds Israel of this covenant. The covenant with God is a covenant to remain faithful to the memory of oppression and liberation, to remain faithful by welcoming the stranger and loving that person as kin. To welcome the stranger is to serve God. Words alone are not enough. Professions of faith are not enough. Worship alone is not enough. Deeds of justice and compassion are the true worship that God requires. "You shall welcome the stranger and love that person as yourself: I am the Holy One, your God."

This is the theological gift we shall offer the Southwest Association and the Michigan Conference: the centrality of mission, hospitality, and reaching out to welcome the stranger.

In the last few weeks, as we prepared for the meeting this afternoon, we had the experience of being welcomed by others, of being received and supported. We have witnessed people take courageous stands in their local churches on behalf of Phoenix. We have received calls and letters of support. We heard eloquent and moving testimonies at the Association meeting this afternoon. We are not alone in this. We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. And we have taken courage from

their love and encouragement...Nancy, Pam, Bee, Dick, Jim, Whitney, to name but a few. We have made new friends and found new advocates. Long before the vote today, we were surrounded by a larger faith community.

We have also experienced pain in this process of seeking membership in the United Church of Christ. There have been times when we could only sit by the waters and weep. Unable to sing. Feeling broken hearted by the fact that when bore witness to our heart's desire, it didn't seem good enough for some.

Through the joyful moments and the painful moments, we have been asking ourselves: How shall we sing God's song, how shall we remain true to our heart's desire? And I believe we have loved each other through, pulled each other through. We have indeed come through this process without surrendering our integrity as an open and affirming faith community. Not that we presume to know the whole truth. We can only speak of what we know, out of our experience. But we have done that with integrity. And therefore, I believe we will continue to do that.

There was a victory this afternoon. Praise be to God! But there will be more skirmishes, more tests, as we covenant to remember the stranger in our midst and in the midst of the wider church. The fun and the struggle have just begun. I am deeply grateful that we can know and remember in the days ahead that we are not alone in this. The Spirit is here. God journeys with us. There are people in this Association, in this Conference, and throughout the country, who have been praying with us, pulling for us. Last week I called Carter Heyward and a number of CLOUT women around the country, asking them to hold us in the light this afternoon. I have a lot of telephoning to do later tonight as I call to tell them about the vote!

CathyAnn Beaty, one of the pastors at Spirit of the Lakes in Minneapolis, wrote a letter which was intended for last Sunday's service but didn't arrive in time. I want to read it to you now:

Dear Phoenix Community Church,

I send you greetings and peace from Spirit of the Lakes United Church of Christ as you prepare and wait for the Southwest Association to make a decision of church affiliation. As I see it, the Southwest Association is not only voting about whether you should join with them but also about whether they should join with you and with gay, lesbian, and bisexual people of faith everywhere. For Phoenix Community Church to be affiliated with the United Church of Christ is yet another historic moment in the work for peace and social justice. For the United Church of Christ to affiliate with Phoenix is a resurrection moment, for it means new life and liberation for the United Church of Christ. In these days ahead, remember that you are not alone in your journey. You are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses that have gone before you and you are held in the thoughts and prayers of the community of Spirit of the Lakes. We rejoice in your boldness, faith, and courage and we remember with you what it means to affirm and claim who we are and how we live our lives.

Shalom,

CathAnn Beaty, Co-Pastor  
Spirit of the Lakes UCC  
Minneapolis, MN

We are not alone – when we sit by the waters and weep or when we celebrate the dawning of a new relationship with the wider church. With God’s help, and the loving presence of sisters and brothers near and far, we are able to pick up our instruments again, taking them from the willows to sing again, singing for our lives. Amen.

**From Rev. Brewster Willcox:**

Dear Members and Friends of Phoenix Church:

Twenty-five years for Phoenix Community Church! That’s amazing to me. And almost twenty of those years since I was there with you as Susan Irish and I served you as your interim ministers. So much you have accomplished since we were in leadership there! And I was also long a member with you for many years after that, when you ministered to me.

So my appreciation for Phoenix extends from the year I was your pastor to the time when you all were my pastors as I was flitting about being an interim to various churches in Michigan and elsewhere. Mary Ellen and I worshipped with you periodically during those interim years of mine; and your pastor then, Janice Springer, was our pastor and support, and we have stayed close friends with

her ever since. You all fed us at soup suppers and entertained us at talent shows. You stimulated our thinking and expanded our Christian experience with your own insights and your guest speakers and open discussions.

And now we follow your life in Phoenix Flamings and know you have grown and expanded your ministry over the years. You've changed ministers and changed venues, and you yourselves have changed to keep up with the times. We're proud to see what a major part you play in the life of the Michigan Conference and the national United Church of Christ. You have certainly moved on from strength to strength.

So Mary Ellen and I send our congratulations to you on this notable milestone, and we include our encouragement that you continue and build upon this proud history.

God's shalom be with you!

Rev. W. Brewster Willcox

**From Rev. Jacki Belile:**

February 16, 2013

*For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.*

(Ecclesiastes 3:1)

There is, especially, a time for anniversary parties and worship! Along with these come, quite naturally, the sacred opportunity to remember. To remember moments and people, challenges and joys, lessons learned and convictions refined. To remember seasons.

I remember, with deep fondness, the season of sabbatical which first brought me to Phoenix Community Church in the fall of 1999. With characteristic intentionality and with the spirited guidance of Rev. Janice Springer, you had all planned so well for those few months apart from one another. As you shared your gifts with me, and allowed me the gift of offering mine, I walked (and

fell) into too many parallel parables to mention here. (I'll come ready for stories this weekend!) But the way you have lived Life together has had such far reaching impact that a few deserve mentioning. If not fully fleshed out parables here, you will surely recognize these creative tensions and the sustaining force they have offered you in the passing of many seasons.

First, that sabbatical you planned together was such a marvelous out-picturing of both planning and openness to the unknown. You embodied this creative tension exquisitely in that time. Planning diligently and trusting deeply. I have often reflected on this over the years, and savored the lessons we co-created. Scheduling and structuring your collective time, without losing sight of the timeless (and priceless) reasons sister-fellow pilgrims are called to gather for journey. Perhaps it can best be described as *openness to encounter*. That would be the basic Biblical value of hospitality!

Secondly, I also had the unshakeable sense of serving a community that knew the call of deep listening, nearly *constant* listening, and hearing one another into speech. Seasons pass, and churches “grow” in too many ways to plan or count. Experts console us that some seasons are simply meant to be more introspective than others, and Ecclesiastes might well agree. But in that season with you, I found you to be excellent examples of this spiritual practice of listening, and you cultivated in me this conviction: *In all seasons, regardless of church size, style or primary outward activities, such listening is the Divine compass that guides us both to our Center and beyond ourselves*. And while often not easy for we humans who are always in “listening school,” I believe this to be the mark of the *living* body of Christ.

Last, I was discovering in that early season of ministry the possibilities of “worshipful work.” What does it mean to bring into constant awareness the “why” and worth of the *work* that is church? You knew well these answers embedded in the themes of your sacred story in that season: justice, inclusion and radical hospitality are the only “why” of church, and these alone make any effort to start and sustain a church today worthy of our time and birth pains of love. Later, your Visioning Task Force and I journeyed for many rich months to explore what “worshipful work” might mean for

planning tasks that would enable encounter, discovery and fresh insights as you yearned to grow in new ways. Your commitments to such exploration – and the Source from which they come -- have continued to sustain you “season in and season out.”

Even as I write this, I feel the gratitude welling up again for the privilege of serving you in those ways early in my ministry. Never doubt the far-reaching impact of your Life Together, an impact felt whether people are now “present or absent from one another.” It’s an impact on members, former members, former staff, visitors and those who have only heard of your testimony. Never doubt that it is your “Yes” and your Presence to the calling, your quality of *being and becoming* which signals the love of God ablaze and enduring.

I pray these things in your anniversary season...

That you will enter fully savor the Truth of Divine welcome and peace as you have known them...

That the fires which nurture and guide your journeys of justice will rise from these unquenchable joys...

That you will rejoice in ways familiar and yet fresh in the reminders that we travel in such good company.

Peace and Love,

Rev. Jacki Belile, CEC

**From Rev. Janice Springer:**

To Ken and the People of Phoenix Community Church,

Congratulations on 25 years of good ministry! It is a blessing for me to have shared more than 11 of those years with you.

I remember the challenges:

Will Joys and Concerns never end?

Did we say “Jesus” too many times tonight?

What about those who sat in the parking lot, then finally drove away, afraid to come in?  
Is everybody welcome, except maybe those whose particular disability makes us  
uncomfortable? Or those who call God “Father”?

I remember the blessings:

building together a beautiful community, caring friendships,  
reinterpreting and reclaiming the faith,  
being a witness to the wider church and community,  
sharing powerful music, healing prayer, and covenant union services,  
welcoming you into my home for Bible Study and other meetings,  
and I am still, years later, moved by the Good Friday worships we shared.

I am grateful that you allowed me to do what I love: design and lead creative worship. I am grateful for the wonderful sabbatical you gave to me, for your care for me when I was ill, when Sue lived away because of her interim ministries, when we had the house fire. I’m grateful that you stretched my thinking, called forth my creativity, motivated me to learn new ways of expressing the faith. And I am grateful for the laughter and tears we shared at our final Sunday evening together.

Phoenix is a unique community: creative, courageous, and compassionate. Think of how many people, in all these 25 years, have been touched by your ministry. Many have come and gone; some have stayed for a while, some for a long while. Phoenix has been a support and a witness to them all. Hundreds of people have experienced in your midst a loving and accepting God. Many have grown into a deeper and more expansive faith. Even people who only came once or twice experienced deeper worship, a new way to be church.

I am sure that at this point in your history, the challenges are different ones than we faced in earlier years. I'm also sure that the blessings continue, and your ministry and mission, in whatever form it takes now, continues to be faithful and life-giving.

And I am sure that Spirit is still using you!

Know that I love you and pray for you. May God bless you mightily as you begin the next 25.

love,

Janice

**From Rev. Liz Colton:**

When I started my work as intentional interim pastor at Phoenix in September, 2007, I found a congregation grieving the end of the Rev. Janice Springer's excellent, long-term ministry among you, and uncertain about where your future might lead in changing times.

Phoenix was founded twenty-five years ago to provide a safe place and a spiritual refuge in a day when LGBTQ people were judged harshly and excluded from families, jobs, and--sad to say-- churches. Out of necessity many of you were closeted and even lived in fear. I thank God and the United Church of Christ for lifting you up, accepting you, and honoring you for who you are.

I also thank God that by 2007 things had begun to change for the better. Fewer of you were closeted; more of you were willing to speak and act boldly for what you believed. That was certainly good news, but it also meant reevaluating who you were as a church. Could you let go of ideas and habits that no longer made sense and embrace new ideas and ways of doing things? Could you become more outwardly focused as a "missional" church?

Together we worked to discern where God might be calling your congregation in the future so that you could choose a new called pastor who would bring the energy, skills, and vision to accompany you on the next steps of your journey. We reviewed your history, evaluated where you were in the present, and dreamed a new mission and ministry.

Our work together was at times exciting and invigorating; at other times it was difficult and exhausting. We challenged each other and learned from each other. New ideas and dreams emerged, but

so did old divisions and conflicts. Such is the life of a congregation in transition when nothing seems certain and everything is up for grabs.

The work of interim ministry is never fully realized in its time. You will have to tell me what we accomplished together. I know that I was enriched by my time among you and still miss you deeply. I am sorry that I cannot be with you for your anniversary celebration!

My next call was to be the settled pastor of a much more traditional church in Oskaloosa, Iowa, where I still am today. Ironically, the culture here is much like Southwest Michigan. This area was also settled by Dutch immigrants. Their Reformed and Christian Reformed Churches predominate the area along with the usual array of evangelical and fundamentalist churches. I am clearly the most liberal pastor for miles around, and sometimes maligned for speaking out for justice for LGBTQ people.

My congregation here has been in a long period of transition about its own identity. I often feel like I am doing a long-term interim ministry. Some more conservative folks left, and we are just now beginning to attract new people. In February we are finally proceeding with the Open and Affirming Study. It won't be easy, but I am hopeful that we will decide to become an ONA congregation. Meanwhile, I have helped a member accept and embrace her bisexuality, and officiated at a wedding for two lesbians at their home.

I ask for your prayers for me and my congregation and wish all the best for you in the years to come!