



## Worship Resources for *Steeple* Ad Run – Fall 2008

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**Hebrews 13:2**

### What Kind of Strange Place Is This?

“No matter who you are, or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here.” I first learned something about the implications of that affirmation in my first ministry, at Saugatuck Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, in Westport, Connecticut. At that time there were no homeless shelters in the area, so our congregation ran a kind of makeshift shelter in one of the church school rooms. It began when a homeless man came to the church on a cold winter’s night and the Senior Minister couldn’t bring himself to turn him away, and it just kind of grew from there. On any given night we would have between one and six men spending the night. The ministers on staff met regularly with these guests to coach, to encourage and, if necessary, to prod them into doing all they could to find work and a more permanent home.

I don’t want to gloss over the difficulties. If you have six homeless men spending the night in a small church school room, you really have something. After all, if these folks were easy to live with, chances are that some friend or relative would have taken them in already.

Welcoming the stranger is not always easy. One of the men who stayed at the church for a time was a fellow named Larry. Larry was very bright and well educated. And when Larry played a Beethoven sonata on the piano in the sanctuary you might think you were in a concert hall. But he also had Tourette’s Syndrome, a rather rare disease that causes a person to burst forth with involuntary exclamations, often obscenities or something similarly inappropriate. In Larry’s case, he would bark like a dog and very loudly. The sound he made was distinctively a bark, but Larry had a way of letting the bark transition into a terrible coughing spell, which he probably learned to do to cover up the barking sound. So the first time you heard him, you might think, “Did he just bark?” But then Larry would bark again, which he did frequently, and the sound was unmistakable.

Due to his unusual disability, Larry could not hold a job. His family couldn’t handle it and turned him out. Despite his affliction, Larry was not one of the most difficult of the homeless men to have around the church. But then one day Larry decided to join the choir.

I must confess that the first time I saw Larry put on a choir robe and process down the aisle, my first thought was not, “Thank you, Jesus.” No, it was more like, “Jesus, you’ve challenged us enough by sending Larry to us, but then you invite us to welcome the stranger as if that person is you, which severely limits our options in how to deal with him.” So Larry sang in the choir—and he had a beautiful voice when he wasn’t barking. (Perhaps that experience explains why I am not as disturbed as some people are by crying babies during worship. Once you’ve had someone bark periodically during your sermon, everything else seems to pale by comparison.)

As you can imagine, there was a lot of discussion about what we should do about Larry, but in the end we decided to do nothing. He stayed with us and sang and barked for a couple of months.

But here is my favorite memory from that whole experience: After a few weeks members of the church became so accustomed to Larry's periodic outbursts that they weren't as much of a disruption. So when visitors came to worship and they heard this strange sound from the choir loft behind the pulpit they would first try to see where it was coming from. Then they would look at the church members seated around them and notice that they didn't seem to be in the least disturbed.

When visitors noticed the lack of response from the church members they would get uneasy—almost panicky—looks on their faces that said, “What kind of strange place is this I've wandered into?” I have since concluded that this question is one of the highest compliments a church can receive. In our society, receiving the stranger can, indeed, seem like a strange thing to do. But that is the kind of church that our United Church of Christ aims to be.