What's In A Name?
By Rev. Laura Ann Beville

On January 11, 2015, in a unanimous vote of those present, the members of First United Methodist Church, North Bend and First United Methodist Church, Coos Bay voted to merge together into a new church, Harmony United Methodist Church.

For over a century, the cities of North Bend and Coos Bay have been a bit like the Hatfield's and the McCoy's. Our cities don't always see eye to eye or even agree on how to do business together. These divisions, at least for me as an outsider, seem a bit ridiculous. So when I tell this story in our community, of these two churches from these two cities coming together, folks are surprised. And hopeful for the future of our community.

Our process of considering merge was not unlike many small churches in our Annual Conference. In part, one could say it was born out of necessity: one church had no building; neither church could sustain a full time clergyperson. Both churches had seemed to have fizzled, like a balloon that had lost its zip. But lately as I reflect on our journey, I'd much rather say that it was born out of out of the chaos that is inspired by the Holy Spirit.

Every good story has a major catalyst. For us, it was on August 7, 2012 when the North Bend church building burned in a fire. I was there that day. It was scary. It was shocking. It was tragic. I stood with members of the congregation who weren't even mine yet, and my heart ached for them. What were they going to do? Perhaps they would turn toward our United Methodist roots. I felt God's stirring in that moment, but pushed it down, saying to myself, if God is going make changes, there needs to be ground tilled and ready. It wasn't ready yet.

The Leadership for both congregations had already decided to be a part of a connectional program offered by our denomination. In September of 2012, both churches found themselves at a crossroads and began discerning their purpose by participating in the Oregon-Idaho Annual Conference Leadership Development program led by the Healthy Vital Church project. The Leadership from both churches knew that things could not remain the same, a conclusion they came to quite separately even though they were participants in the same program.

Was God stirring the ground? We're hearts being strangely warmed?

I was appointed to both churches beginning in July of 2013. I had already been serving the Coos Bay congregation since July of 2010. The North Bend church worked hard to discern their future. Some were holding on to the old city divisions. Others just wanted something - anything to happen, and move forward from the place where they had been paralyzed following the fire.
After much hard work, grieving, and conversation, the North Bend congregation decided that they needed a partner in ministry. In October 2013, the First United Methodist Church, Coos Bay Administrative Council voted to offer to North Bend an option to be “two churches, one site” beginning February 1, 2014. In early November 2013, the North Bend Administrative Council accepted the offer, and asked our District Superintendent, Gwendolyn Drake to recommend to an all church conference to prayerfully begin the process of merge with Coos Bay.

On November 24, 2013, the North Bend congregation, by a majority vote at an all-church conference, voted to begin conversation and prayerful consideration on whether a merger of the two churches would be beneficial. Since February 1, 2014, both congregations began taking incremental steps toward merge, including “Get-to-know-you” activities, combined worship teams, combined staff, and trustees duties.

We began increasing in worship attendance, and new members were joining both congregations monthly. We began to see God’s spirit working through both worship services. We determined that we needed to see some intentional change in our worship, so we crafted a worship survey, and invited people to voice what they wanted worship to look like. Resounding comments of the need for unity and togetherness rang through the survey results. So we decided that we would have a combined worship service beginning in September. Our average worship attendance has been between 80-95 much of the fall and now into the new year. (This is significant because average worship attendance had been in 2013 about 60 between the two congregations).

The leadership of both congregations worked hard to cast a shared vision for our congregation, so that we might become united as we share God’s unconditional love, connect with God and with others, serve with compassion, hope, joy and prayer, and grow on our faith journey. But there was still a missing piece to the puzzle of our two churches unification.

One of the pressing items, in the midst of combining worship experiences and styles, staff, and building maintenance and care, was the idea that to truly be a restart for both congregations, we would have to lose the identity of “First” “Coos Bay” and “North Bend” in our newly merged church. So, we went through a process of asking for suggestions regarding our name.

There were several major camps: geography, mission, and new age. We had 30 name suggestions heading into our initial vote in September. By the middle of October it looked as though our two congregations would continue to be divided. At least regarding our name. I was fairly worried that a name would only “win” by a narrow margin. Would that be an indicator of our hopes for our final merge decision? Who knew that I should have trusted in what the founder of Methodism referred to as the phenomenon of hearts being strangely warmed! For that is what has happened throughout this process as these two congregations have moved toward connecting in ministry, mission, and vision.
In late October 2014, we held 5 small group meetings, where we invited members to come together for a time of questions and answers regarding the merge process. There, we revealed the top 5 names. The names that rose to the top? Geography. Not ministry, not mission, not vision, but geography: Bay Area UMC, United Methodist Church, Coos Bay-North Bend UMC, First UMC, UMC of the Bay Area. The first meeting went off without a hitch. People seemed to understand the process, and with very few exceptions, desire change and growth.

When I arrived at the second meeting, at a congregation member’s home, I was pleased to see a usually homebound member there, Frosty Mulkins. Frosty had been a school principal in the community, and both congregations knew him well: as a teacher, a mentor, and as a loved member of the community. I knew there would be a moment of tension, because the name he had chosen was not on the narrowed down list of names. A few months before, Frosty had called the church office to bring forward a name for our church. He wanted me to know that the name God had written on his heart was “Harmony United Methodist Church.” We added this name to the list of names that were put forth in front of the congregation for a vote. But it had received only 5 votes, and was nowhere near the top of the list.

At the meeting, Frosty proceeded to talk about why he thought our new name should be “Harmony UMC.” We needed to move beyond geography – because the world was our mission. He talked about musical notes on a staff, and how, while different and equally beautiful, they are even more beautiful if they work together in harmony. “That is what we are trying to do here with our churches. Work together in harmony.”

In the tradition of John Wesley, I think everyone there would say that our hearts were strangely warmed by the passion and conviction that Frosty spoke that evening. This story becomes even more poignant when we know that these were some of Frosty’s last words spoken. That evening, on his way home from the small group meeting, he had a stroke that ultimately cost him his life. But the words of God’s grace, words of passionate love, and reminder of how God is always making beautiful music in our lives rang true.

The morning Frosty passed away, we had another informational meeting. A person who was at the meeting Frosty had attended told the story of Frosty’s impassioned speech and vision of “harmony.” The last words that Frosty spoke spread through the congregation with the swiftness of the wind of the Holy Spirit.

We are Harmony United Methodist Church, not because we seek to be something that we are not. We are continually discerning our vision and place in ministry for our community. We are Harmony United Methodist Church, not because we always sing the same notes either. Each person is wonderfully created in the chaos of the earth. We each come from unique backgrounds and perspectives. But we live in harmony. We are Harmony United Methodist church because we are working together so that we are singing the same song: to share the unconditional love of God, connect
with God and each other, serve with compassion, hope, joy, and prayer, and grow on our faith journey.

One of my new favorite scriptures comes from Romans 15:4-6:
For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Hope is the expectation of possibility. Hope is an action that always looks to the future. It is quite a waste of time to hope for something which has already occurred. The possibilities laid out for our congregation and its future are endless!

But the hope, the expectation of the possible, is that our congregations can do more for Christ’s kingdom together than they can apart. Together, with one voice, may we glorify God!