

**25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration of the  
Ordination of the Rev. Dr. John W. Clarke  
First Congregational Church of Meriden**

June 13-14, 2009

It all began in Nov. 2008 when pastoral student Cindy Stasko became aware that June 2, 2009 would be the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Pastor John Clarke's Ordination. She assembled a committee to properly celebrate this occasion, with the group meeting on a frequent basis. At the request of his wife Maria, it was decided to keep the whole celebration a secret from John, something that was astonishingly accomplished despite the large number of parishioners, family members and other friends who were invited.

It was decided to have a toast/roast event on Sat. June 13 (1:00 - 4:00 pm) and a special Sunday service on June 14 at 10:00 am. "Save the date" cards were sent early in 2009, followed by formal invitations sent on April 15. Some 162 individuals responded that they would attend on June 13 and 118 on June 14, many traveling from around the country (special rooms with a special price at a local hotel had been arranged).

At the church's Annual Meeting on May 28, John was presented with a proclamation stating that the Administrative Council had designated June as "John Clarke month" (much to the consternation of the office staff), with daily special treats by parishioners and committees such as lunches, outings and gifts.

When June 13 arrived, the Bell Choir took John to lunch at a local restaurant at noon as the crowd gathered in the church sanctuary. At 1:15 pm, the Bell Choir and John exited the restaurant, with one member expressing surprise that the church's front doors across the street were wide open. As John entered the church to investigate, a pre-arranged fanfare and a thunderous standing ovation from the large crowd greeted him. Looking a bit confused and certainly overwhelmed, John was escorted to the front pew past many out-of-state family members and friends to be seated next to his wife.

Prior to John's arrival, opening remarks by Cindy Stasko had been followed by piano music performed by Dr. Joe Utterback, a favorite friend of John's from the Stratford Congregational Church. Following John's arrival (and his partial recovery from the enthusiastic welcome), Joe emceed the toast/roast event which lasted about 1½ hours.

1. Michael Rohde, Mayor of Meriden, presented John with a proclamation designating June 13 as "John Clarke Day" in Meriden.
2. The Rev. Karl Duetzmann, a close friend and fellow student at the Bangor Theological Seminary 25 years previously, presented humorous recollections of their long friendship.
3. The Rev. Doreen Bottone, Chaplain at Meriden's MidState Medical Center, delivered warm comments about her association with John at the hospital.
4. Bruce Burchsted, accompanied by his ukulele, sang an original composition titled "The Ballad Of John Wayne (Clarke)" with the audience joining in the refrain.

5. John Smayda, Moderator of the Central Association, presented John with a special certificate from the UCC. He was joined by Rev. Carol Ann Celella, Protestant Chaplain at the CT Veteran's Home, who shared greetings from the veterans and a moving reflection on Rev. Clarke's service as both a veteran and pastor.
6. Approximately 10 folks from the audience came forward to offer individual accolades or roasts, including church secretary Lois McMahon who tongue-in-cheek stated this might be her last day in that position.
7. Then a presentation of special gifts:
  - a. A purse for John (received from many friends and family members)
  - b. A check for \$1290 for the Mercy Touch Orphanage in Ndola, Zambia (which John helped to found with Rev. Bernard Mukwavi) along with an original painting by an artist from Ndola, sent by the children of the orphanage
  - c. Two box seat tickets to an upcoming Boston Red Sox baseball game
8. Final words by Rev. John Clarke

The audience then adjourned to Smith Hall for elaborate catered refreshments, accompanied by a PowerPoint show of photographs of John from infancy through the present, projected on a movie screen. A memory book, filled with cards, photos and letters previously sent in by friends and family, was on display, along with a large poster which used photos to create a timeline of John's life.

But it wasn't yet quite over. A plan for the following day (Sunday) to "hijack" the sermon from John and have it presented instead by long-time friend Rev. David Macy from Maine was abandoned at the last minute when John's family expressed a desire to hear John preach. However, during that service, the Bell Choir performed with piano an arrangement written especially for this celebration by Music Director Barbara Mase. This service was followed by another reception in Smith Hall.

All in all, quite a weekend!