

Church 'prepares the way' for pastor's family

I peered out on an unfamiliar backyard. Thick grass that hadn't felt the edge of a lawn mower in weeks hosted curious sparrows and a lone female cardinal at a seedless feeder.

They looked in at me, perched inside an empty yellow kitchen, flanked by cardboard boxes labeled "Carrier Packed Glass" and "Carrier Packed China: This End Up."

It was a rainy end to summer. Those giant boxes smelled musty, a mingling of the old with the new.

I had carried to another new parsonage all the familiars of our past: my grandmother's depression glass goblets from her first home on a Texas prairie; my mother's wedding china from New Haven; art and artifacts from our five wonderful years in a UCC church in Providence, R.I.; and holy relics from my partner's childhood: St. Louis Cardinal baseball cards, pennants and gloves.

As you leave one home for another, you choose to have such things swaddled in reams of cream-colored paper and carefully tucked into a great big truck. But the relationships with people, forged during years of church barbecues, hunger walks, Palm Sundays, birthday parties, candlelight services, weddings, births, baptismal celebrations and funerals — these shared moments of life can never be brought along in a box.

Moving is inevitable in most people's lives, especially in the ministry. Homes enable families. Families help make us human. But how do families preserve the emotional stability, the nurturing friendships, the sense of home, when frequently called to unknown cities and towns?

I was warned by friends to pack a "survival kit" for the first day in a new house: paper plates,

cans of tuna, coffee, filters, paper napkins, light bulbs, toilet paper and most important, a can opener. Bare subsistence.

Arriving after three days of non-stop driving, we walked into the house to find a table decked with lemon-colored daisies and carnations set up for us in the kitchen. An ice box brimming with milk, bread, blueberry pie, coffee cake, homemade soup and casserole, dinner rolls, butter and cookies. Fresh bars of lavender soap in all the bathrooms. A garden of ornamental lettuce planted by people we'd never seen.

We had expected mere survival. We discovered a banquet.

Vaclav Havel, in "Letters to Olga," writes about the need to keep throwing oneself into life, over and over again. As we felt the loss of friends and comfortable routines of our former life, we found ourselves

thrown into a new community of faith which had "prepared the way" with unabashed openness, abundance and celebration.

Now the bird feeder brims from an overflow of seeds, ready for winter's snow. The cupboards and closets and drawers are filled with familiar cups, old coats and beloved baseball cards. My heart is full with warm memories from our last home, yet it is good to be here. Throwing oneself into the life of strange lands and faces, over and over again, renews my appreciation for just how wide the Body of Christ is.

Dwelling within the Christian family, one is always home.

Focus on Faith is a reader-written column of stories and ideas to help readers grow in their faith. Katharine Swearingen recently moved to Haslett, Mich., where her spouse is pastor of Community UCC.

FOCUS ON FAITH



by
Katharine Swearingen

United Church of Christ
National Newspaper
which is no longer
in publication