



Rev. Sara Wilcox, Land of the Sky Church CHRIS HIGHLAND/COLUMNIST

Finding transformation at Land of the Sky



Highland Views
Chris Highland
Guest columnist

Before driving to East Asheville for a conversation with Rev. Sara Wilcox at Land of the Sky Church, someone sent me a poem by Linda Hogan titled "The Unseen." It begins,

"If you think I'm going to write about someone's god
that's a mistake. I am sitting by wild strawberries
not yet blooming. An emerald-green frog believes it can't be seen
under the leaf. The insects it wants sing, also unseen,
and mourning doves in the distance
think I am not here with a silent song,
not even to interrupt morning's eye wide open."

Talking with Sara, I sensed she doesn't want anyone to go unseen. Her congregation is "not a place but a people" who practice an "extravagant welcome." As their website states, there is "no formula as a test of faith." Yet, for Sara as a pastor, she understands that "the work of a Christian life is transformation." She doesn't emphasize correct beliefs or creeds, though it's clear Land of the Sky is rooted in the United Church of Christ. Members don't share an exclusive faith, however. While "unapologetically followers of Jesus," they "embrace other faith traditions" and there are "definitely atheists" who attend.

Sara believes that it is central to "cultivate spirituality, like Jesus' spirituality." I had to ask what that meant. We don't often think of Jesus having a spiritual practice. As Sara explains, he had his own Jewish practice while radically

transforming lives.

One parishioner, "KC," entered the conference room while we were talking. She wanted me to know, "If you are striving for the spiritual life, keeping the main thing the main thing, finding God in all things and all people, you can't go wrong with Sara Wilcox as your pastor." She and Sara both asserted a foundational principle for their community: "Our lives are better 'cause we're all together."

This last phrase echoed something Sara told me. "An essential aspect of this community is that folks can sit in the pews next to others who don't necessarily believe the same as they do, so if you are still figuring things out, Land of the Sky is a good place to be." If one is looking for a traditional service with traditional (exclusive) language, Land of the Sky wouldn't be a good fit. But if a person is community-centered with an open mind, this church might feel right.

Sara grew up in the Church, but her original intention was to become a professor of political science. She felt a call to ministry, attending seminary in Chicago before leaving her Presbyterian roots to join the UCC in part because she found the UCC more accepting of LGBTQ persons. This presents an interesting parallel to the transformation of the church property from its former Presbyterian ownership to Land of the Sky.

That early interest in education still informs her work today (her husband teaches at UNCA). With a commitment to critical thinking, social involvement and "finding a way around obstacles," she connects this to her faith in "transformation"-encountering an obstacle offers an opportunity to work through it.

This creative view of obstacles connects to the church's decision to partner with BeLoved Asheville in con-

structing a dozen tiny homes on church property. With low rent and a cooperative contract with residents this small "village" aims for completion sometime next year. This project attests to the "extravagant welcome" the church believes carries out the "radical" nature of Jesus' message.

The UCC denomination was the first to ordain African Americans, women and an openly gay man. Sara describes this history and the present reality here in Asheville as a "commitment to people finding community without feeling isolated and alone." People who have felt "exiled" from the Church (or the wider community) can have an experience of home. Sara says this is "the core of who we are."

I asked one of my favorite questions: "What do you see as the future of the church, the Church (universal), and faith itself?" She replied very honestly, "We don't know." The church will need to do "more collaborating as people of faith bring goodness" to the world. She feels the Church must continue to evolve and better present "a relevant understanding of Christ." Waving her arms, she exclaimed, "We can't ignore all THIS [the world as it is]." Not only are "all people the children of God" but "community is the face of God." And lastly she said, "the properties of the Church need to change," to be altered into more community-centered, collaborative spaces."

With a smile and wink, I told Sara if there had been a church like hers around years ago I might not have left. It can feel that way at Land of the Sky.

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for many years. He is a teacher, writer, freethinker and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife Carol, a Presbyterian minister, live in Asheville. Learn more at chighland.com.