



A Welcoming, Come-As-You-Are, Christ-Centered Community Church

Being Community Together

Agate Windows Newsletter

And I will make thy windows of agates Isaiah 54:12

June 2020 EXTRA

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Yachats church's "Pastor Bob" pushed by faith and family activism, rises to new challenges during pandemic and troubled times.

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As the coronavirus pandemic changed their activism, Bob and Lorraine Barrett have turned the sanctuary of Yachats Community Presbyterian Church into their media center for Sunday worship and online gatherings.

A homeless man approaches Bob Barrett one misty May morning as he goes to work at Yachats Community Presbyterian Church. The man is there to see if Barrett – known throughout Yachats as "Pastor Bob" — has a line on an apartment.

Barrett is friendly, open, welcoming.

Moments later someone from Oregon Gov. Kate Brown's office is on the telephone. They want to include something about Barrett and his prodigious local fund-raising work in a newsletter.

Barrett is friendly, open, welcoming.

The pastor in jeans and well-worn running shoes straddles both worlds comfortably. But Barrett says he is far more concerned with the homeless man than the governor.

Barrett, 55, is an activist minister. From gay rights to immigrant plights, he literally practices what he preaches, and has been driving himself especially hard this year to help raise money for pandemic victims. Since shutdowns and closures struck in March, he has spearheaded the collection of almost \$200,000 for Yachats' unemployed workers, struggling local businesses, and the now church-based Yachats Food Pantry.



Yachats Community Presbyterian Church pastor, Bob Barrett, prepares to hand out \$100 to displaced workers who stop by the church each Wednesday to receive help.

“... the community... made it happen”

Starting with \$15,000 in YCPC seed funds, Barrett's appeals for donations began in March as most Yachats businesses were forced to shut. Donations quickly multiplied.

“The church was the impetus and conduit for all of this,” he says, “but our \$15,000 would have been gone in a week. It was the community that made it happen.”

By mid-June the church had received donations of more than \$194,000, distributed \$91,700 in weekly payments to workers laid off by Yachats businesses; given \$68,000 in grants to 21 small businesses to help owners keep them afloat, and operated a three-day-a-week food pantry that has served over 600 people.



Coronavirus restrictions on church gatherings has forced Pastor Bob to hold Sunday services via computer set up in the church's sanctuary — but allows him to do that without wearing shoes.

Despite all this, or maybe because of it, donations to the church itself are at an all-time high. The campaign — and its remarkable success in a small coastal community — has drawn attention and made Barrett a media presence.

There has been coverage in YachatsNews.com and Oregon Coast TODAY, notice by the governor's office and even a spotlight from “Holy Breadcrumbs,” the blog of Presbytery of the Cascades, a regional group of some 100 Presbyterian churches. The presbytery was so impressed by the outpouring of help in Yachats that it gave \$1,000 to all its member churches with a challenge to “invest it in something that changes lives.”

Like everyone, Barrett's own life has been changed by COVID-19. Lorraine Barrett, his wife and partner in most church and many political activities, was laid off from her job as assistant manager at Heceta Head Lighthouse when the pandemic struck.

In pre-virus days, he preached Sunday sermons to an average of 50 members gathered at the “Church of the Agate Windows” on West Seventh Street. Now, he preaches online via Facebook and reaches about 700 people; the church has almost 3,000 “followers” on Facebook, a number he says exceeds that of much larger churches.

“It's a response to what we're doing in the community: a message of love and acceptance and inclusion,” he says.

That message is clearly getting through.

On the streets in Yachats, people stop Barrett to talk; when he grocery-shops in Newport, Lorraine knows he'll be gone for a few hours because so many people want a word with him. Phone calls, emails, texts and visitors pepper his stop-and-start days. He had not a single day off between March 8 and May 11. He isn't sleeping well. And yet...

“This is what I was made for — activism, community engagement, community building,” he says.



Lorraine and Bob Barrett have helped organize Saturday protests along U.S. Highway 101 in downtown Yachats.

Activism that reaches out, rankles some

Pastor Bob is not widely known as “Rev. Barrett.” To many, he’s simply Bob. That informality fits with a man whose six-year tenure at YCPC has included walking the walk on these issues:

- ♦ LGBTQ rights (lesbian gay bisexual transgender questioning): After the 2016 Presidential election, Barrett offered to perform free same-sex marriages for those who feared a crackdown under the new administration.
- ♦ Immigration: “No kids in cages” read the sign on the front lawn of the Barrett home last year. A child-sized mannequin locked in a metal cage was Barrett’s visual protest against the administration’s Mexican border detention policies. So horrified was Barrett at the situation that he went to the border in California and spent 10 days helping feed, clothe and counsel immigrants. His trip was paid for through private donations. He stayed at a \$25-per-night San Diego hotel so squalid that “I had to treat myself for lice when I came home.”
- ♦ Gun control: When a handgun was the grand prize in a 2018 Boys and Girls Club event in Florence, Barrett posted about it on Facebook, and got assurances that guns would no longer be involved in fundraising. The raffle was just days after the deadly shooting at a Florida high school that killed 17 students.
- ♦ The homeless: A gray tent erected under an overhang on the south side of the church regularly houses people without homes. Barrett and the church have allowed more than one homeless man to sleep in the church in exchange for chores, while helping them navigate government channels to obtain benefits. Before coronavirus halted in-person Sunday services at the church, homeless people regularly attended. As the YCPC web page promises, “We welcome all. And all means all.”
- ♦ Racism: As protests erupted across America over the George Floyd death in Minneapolis during a police encounter, Barrett did more than post to Facebook (which he did, with big-type sentiments like “It is not enough to be quietly non-racist, now is the time to be vocally anti-racist.”) On the last Saturday in May, and again the first two Saturdays in June he helped muster public protests in downtown Yachats.

Barrett’s community activism doesn’t sit well with everyone; the church has lost a few members over it.

The activism has turned off some people,” notes DJ (Debra) Novgrod, a Yachats Realtor and church elder. “There was a retired Methodist minister who used to worship with us. He liked Bob and the church, but he didn’t want to hear the politics when he came to Sunday services.”



Bob Barrett marches in a July 4 la de da Parade through Yachats as part of a group supporting gay rights.

“I understand the feelings of those who left, and I don’t blame them for it,” says church elder Pam Luderitz, head of several YCPC committees. “I’m still friends with a lot of the ones who left, but I’m in alignment with Bob: ‘Love thy neighbor’ — there’s no asterisk after it as to who that covers.”

Barrett freely admits to “grieving” over the members who left.

“It was a difficult first couple of years,” he recalls. “Some people thought I wasn’t a good fit for their politics or for their theology. But I was the pastor that they (YCPC) called, and we have to trust that the spirit is at work.”

While drops in church attendance are a nationwide trend, and certainly not unique to Yachats, YCPC felt the loss keenly: membership fell from about 65 to some 50 members. Nevertheless, “We have seen an increase of about six or eight new members who joined just before the virus hit,” says church elder and treasurer Nan Scott. “I believe we’re growing again, and monetary giving to the church is at an all-time high.”

Scott feels that religion — and not politics — was behind several departures from the congregation. She notes that “several” members left before Barrett arrived due to the activism of his predecessor, interim minister Brian Heron. “They had a longing for more ritual ... the comfort that they had grown up with.”

Growing up conservative, liberal and Catholic

Barrett grew up in a family that was at once conservative and liberal. He was raised as a Roman Catholic by Republican parents in the blue-collar town of Naugatuck, Connecticut. His father was progressive, his mother a radical feminist.

“We never passed a protest that we didn’t stop and join,” he remembers of outings with his mother. “I grew up fairly conservative despite my Mom’s best attempts to make me not.”

Even as a child, Barrett felt the tug of ministry. “I used to play pretend-Communion with Necco wafers” while reciting the liturgy of Mass, he remembers. But he resisted the call for much of his life, opting for a more conventional life.

“I knew I wanted to be married and have a family, and that wasn’t going to happen in the Catholic church,” he says. His own family turned away from Catholicism over a health crisis: Barrett’s sister had overdosed on sleeping pills, and as she lay in a coma, their priest declined to come to the hospital, pleading a busy schedule. A friend got her Lutheran pastor to come instead, and shortly afterward, the Barrett family became Lutherans.

Barrett became involved in a Lutheran youth group where he met his wife, Lorraine. He took a post with the Connecticut Department of Mental Retardation, where he remained for 17 years in a variety of jobs: group home worker, case manager and more. But a disagreement with Lutheran policies again led to change: the Lutheran church was pro-gay marriage and pro-gay ordination; Barrett was not.

“I was still very fundamental and conservative in my thinking,” he recalled to *The Yachats Gazette* a few years ago. The Connecticut conservative and his family (which by then included daughter Hannah and son Zach) began worshipping at a Methodist church, and it was then that Barrett finally heeded the call to study for the ministry.

The only George Bush bumper sticker in the parking lot

In 2004, at age 40, Barrett, his wife and two children pulled up stakes and headed for new lives in the Midwest. Barrett landed at a seminary in Tulsa, Okla. that was “liberal, progressive, heavy on social justice ... I wondered if we had made a mistake. I had the only car in the parking lot with a George Bush bumper sticker.”

The choice of Phillips Theological Seminary was a practical one: courses were scheduled in a way that let Barrett study and also work full-time as a mental health case manager to support the family. Later, he tripled his schedule by also becoming pastor for a small, rural church on the Oklahoma-Kansas border.



The Barrett family, from left, Hannah, Bob, Lorraine and Zach.

“It was a tough time,” says Lorraine, a native of Oxford, Conn. “It was a very small community of folks who had a bias against us because we weren’t from there.” While Bob Barrett studied, worked and preached, Lorraine worked at a variety of jobs.

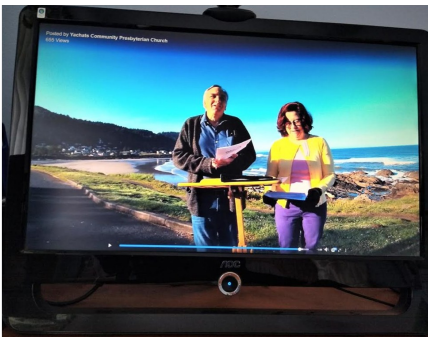
When the family first arrived in the Midwest, “We were some of the most conservative people you’d ever want to meet,” she recalls. But that was to change for both of them.

It was that seminary that turned Barrett around. Phillips Seminary “exposed me to the lens of ‘liberation theology’: the whole notion that God stands on the side of the poor, the disenfranchised, the least and the last. If that’s where God is standing, that’s where I want to stand.”

When he first entered Phillips, Barrett thought his job as a minister was “to help people ‘earn’ their salvation.” Today? He passionately believes that a pastor’s job is to “share the good news that God loves as you are, who you are. You’re already saved; you’re a beloved child of God.”

“As Bob changed through his studies at the seminary, we both tracked in the same direction” on social issues, says Lorraine. One of the Bible teachings that stands out for her is that, “We will all be united one day. We’re not black or white, gay or straight, Presbyterian or Lutheran — we’re human beings created to serve each other, love each other.” Although she doesn’t necessarily take part in “everything that he does” for social change, she’s on the front lines with her husband in protesting against racism, and for immigrant and LGBTQ rights.

It took one more change in worship to bring the Barrett family to Yachats. Although they began their seminary time as Methodists, the Barretts felt drawn to a Presbyterian church, and became members.



Pastor Bob Barrett and his wife, Lorraine, lead an Easter sunrise service at Yachats State Park.

Who wants a community-minded pastor? YCPC did

At the same time Barrett was being ordained as a Presbyterian minister and starting to cast about for a permanent church to lead, Yachats Community Presbyterian Church was seeking a new pastor — but not just any new pastor.

“We were and are an older congregation,” says Novgrod, a 12-year member of YCPC who helped draft the criteria for the search. “We needed somebody to get a little life in us; we needed some new ideas.” Novgrod and her wife were married in YCPC shortly before Barrett arrived, after looking for a church “to accept us as who we were.”

Luderitz, who served on the pastor nominating committee, remembers being “impressed with Bob’s passion, and his passion for people.” Scott, another member of the pastor search committee, recalls how impressed she was with his “out-of-the-box thinking.” Although she felt a bit nervous when the fairly conservative congregation was asked to select their preferred candidate, “The vote (for Barrett) was absolutely unanimous.”



When the Yachats Commons closed due to coronavirus restrictions, the Yachats Community Presbyterian Church took over operation of the community food pantry — and has served more than 600 people since March.

More than six years later, Barrett has shown the church and the community that he doesn't just espouse the gospel — he lives it. When people in need come to the church seeking help for bus fare or gasoline, or vouchers passed along through non-profit South Lincoln Resources, "Bob talks to them, not down to them," says Luderitz. "He leads by example — he doesn't just stand up there and preach."

Speaking about Barrett's commitment to helping others reminds Luderitz of a favorite quote: "Sitting in a church doesn't make you a Christian any more than standing in a garage makes you a car."

In that same vein, one of Barrett's own favorite quotes is from St. Francis: "Preach the Gospel at all times, and if necessary, use words."

But Barrett doesn't hesitate to use words and images frequently on Facebook to promote food pantry hours, funds for the unemployed, or a progressive point of view on current affairs. In recent times he's been an almost constant presence on the pages for both YCPC and Yachats Community. He understands that some people might be feeling "message fatigue," but makes no apologies.

"I'm probably posting now more in the midst of the pandemic, but what we're doing is resonating with people," he says. "If we look at the response to our requests for help and money, people are still stepping up and responding. When things slow down, we'll back down again."

"I never met anyone who's been so kind to me"

The anecdotes about Barrett's compassion-in-action abound.

- ♦ There's the young mother desperate to escape an abusive partner, but lacking the funds to get into an apartment. Through the YCPC Pastor's Discretionary Fund, Barrett helped her reach safe haven.
- ♦ There are the people sleeping overnight in vans in the church parking lot, or in church doorways. Barrett checks on them several nights a week, offering blankets and comfort.
- ♦ Then there are the homeless who sometimes linger around C&K Market at night; Barrett will offer to buy them a hot meal.
- ♦ There's a homeless man right now who sleeps inside YCPC in exchange for chores; Barrett and the church are helping him file paperwork to get government benefits.
- ♦ Or how about the man who rolls around town with a small cart, offering to take tourist photographs for a living? When one of his tires went flat, Barrett helped him get a new one.

"It's the little things like these that a lot of people aren't aware of," says Scott.

Better-known is the story of Martin Baker, a homeless man who started attending church services a few years ago. Baker was living in a tool shed belonging to a church member. Barrett asked the congregation to let the man sleep in the church in exchange for security and other services.

That arrangement lasted for some time, as Baker proved his trustworthiness and work ethic. One YCPC member offered him a trailer with no electricity or running water to live in; another offered him showering privileges at her home. Ultimately, with a lot of help securing his government benefits, Baker moved into a small rental house that he calls home today, thanks to a member of YCPC.

“I haven’t met a pastor like Bob before,” says Baker, who in addition to attending services also served as an usher when needed. “I never met anyone who’s been so kind to me. That’s what so unique about Oregon: the people are special.”

Special describes Barrett and his journey from a blue-collar Connecticut town to the plains of the Midwest to the seaside glory of Yachats. He’s traversed several different paths but few possibly as demanding as the pandemic work that encapsulates his faith-in action.



Bob Barrett has been working nonstop since March on relief efforts at Yachats Community Presbyterian Church.

So what drives him to drive himself?

“I know the roots of it all were my Mom —her own activism and our family value of altruism,” says Barrett. “She was always out, championing some cause. She worked for local youth services, staffed a suicide hotline, did drug and alcohol counseling. Once she brought half a dozen gay people to the house so we could be exposed to that.”

Still, “It didn’t really take hold ‘til I went to seminary. Once I learned to view the world through the lens of ‘liberation theology,’ I realized that it’s really not theology that keeps most people in the pews — it’s relationships with the congregation and the community.”

Building and sustaining those relationships, especially during the coronavirus crises, has been tough on Barrett. “People in my clergy groups are all expressing some burn-out. I’m not the only one making sacrifices.”

He’s quick to credit the work of the many YCPC volunteers who help keep the wheels turning. Although he’s entitled to a three-month sabbatical after ministering at YCPC for six years, his plans were put on hold when coronavirus struck. He’ll be applying for a grant to take his sabbatical next summer instead.

Until then, he’ll remain a familiar presence around Yachats: zipping out in their 2011 orange Kia or his beat-up pickup truck to fetch bread when the food pantry runs low, counseling the jobless and homeless, posting on Facebook and protesting when he feels called to do so, and in between, prepping “virtual” online sermons as virus restrictions remain in place.

“Why are you doing all this?” asked a young woman one day at the church. She had just collected her \$100 from the Displaced Workers Fund window at the back of the church, then walked to the food pantry at the front to collect some free groceries.

“Because it’s what Jesus did,” Barrett replied, “and it’s what Jesus would have us do.”

The woman told Barrett she had been an atheist all her life, then began to cry.

“If this is what you mean by God, then maybe I believe.”