



Cause for Alarm

Rachel Hackenberg

Publisher, The Pilgrim Press and Faith-Forming Publications

In my social media feed, there's a [funny video of an emu](#) overreacting to a loud noise by running haphazardly around the pasture with panicked energy, its legs churning, its neck swinging in high alert. A voiceover for the emu shouts: "They're coming for the eggs! They're coming for the eggs!"

I giggle every time that video appears. I also wish it wasn't so accurate.

The world is full of loud, startling noises—crises for concern, sources of fear, calamities and violence—and the world is just as full of reactionary emus, running through the news, mobbing across social media, shouting for attention to their cause. "They're coming for the children! They're coming for the books! They're coming for the guns! They're coming for the ballot box!" Also, "They're coming for your data! They're coming for your wallet! They're coming for your time!"

When the emus take over, when our alarm churns its legs and swings its neck and runs around the pasture in endless circles, our capacity to respond—productively and from a faithful core—falters. When anxious emus are only satisfied by an increase in anxious emus, the cause becomes secondary. When the cause is secondary, the response is reactionary. And faith cannot be lived as a reaction.

Too often, I confess, I experience the church as a worried mob of emus, sounding the alarm but only living for the alarm. "Membership is declining! Injustices are growing! Financial support is down! Humanitarian crises are up!" Also, "They're getting a new hymnal for worship! There aren't enough volunteers! There's not enough Jesus! There's not enough activism!"

A church built solely on alarm is not a church but a siren. It gets the heart

racing, it creates a purpose to pursue, but it doesn't nurture the spiritual foundation to sustain a response. Siren ministry doesn't know its purpose without tension. Siren ministry doesn't know its own resting heart rate.

Similarly, when church races from alarm to alarm, it lives not as a ministry but as an ambulance chaser, in need of a crisis to have meaning. For the ambulance-chasing church, alarm is the cause. The ambulance-chasing ministry is a heart attack waiting to happen (while chasing heart attacks).

The church and her ministries cannot live well when constantly alarmed. Neither can you. Neither can I.

When we experience that adrenaline rush of alarm, we must practice reversing our response: starting not with reaction but with foundation, searching not for a fitting response but for a faithful root. Then the root frames the cause. Then the foundation fuels the response. Then life is sustainable through and after the moment of alarm has subsided.

The core makes the cause possible. The root understands love as the beginning and the end. The foundation—the Foundation—cannot be alarmed.

We are not anxious emus. We are the church.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The Rev. Rachel Hackenberg is the Publisher for The Pilgrim Press and Faith-Forming Publications for the United Church of Christ.

LEARN ucc.org/justice

DONATE ucc.org/donate

ARCHIVE bit.ly/witness4justice



The United Church of Christ has more than 5,000 churches throughout the United States. Rooted in the Christian traditions of congregational governance and covenantal relationships, each UCC setting speaks only for itself and not on behalf of every UCC congregation. UCC members and churches are free to differ on important social issues, even as the UCC remains principally committed to unity in the midst of our diversity.