

## **Saint Paul's United Church of Christ Hosts First Circles of Love Graduation West Milton, Pa.**

"I didn't wake up one morning and say, 'Yes, I'll gladly move into low-income housing, and need help buying clothes for my kids.' I hate that my kids are treated differently because we live in low-income housing. But that is the situation we are in."

That's what class representative Patricia Mowrer said Thursday evening, June 28, as she addressed a crowd of 73 at Saint Paul's UCC in West Milton, Pa. They came to honor and celebrate the accomplishments of the first class of six graduates and the church volunteers who supported the 16 week Bridges Out of Poverty "Circles of Love Program."

Saint Paul's sponsorship was the brain-child of member and certified facilitator Rose Williams. In late 2017, Rose approached Pastor Timothy Hogan-Palazzo to talk about a subject dear to this community of faith - helping others.

"You bring me the information and let me talk to Consistory," said Pastor Tim. That January, the Consistory fully agreed but didn't have the required \$7,000 to support the program's launch or would have the 1,000 volunteer hours needed.

So, Pastor Tim began the work of fundraising. He made announcements in church, spoke with community peers – even approached the UCC Conference. One day at lunch, a local business owner who had heard of the group's efforts laid an envelope containing \$500 in front of Pastor Tim. Within weeks, Circles of Love was fully funded. The program began the second week of March.

"It was the right thing to do. It was what God was calling us to do," said Pastor Tim during graduation. "Rose brought us a gift and all we had to do was ask. Funds came from church members, community members our own UCC Association and Conference. God said, 'I will supply your every need' and that's what happened."

How successful was the first class? Two members are pursuing their GED's, several graduates have moved into safe, more permanent housing, others accepted new jobs with better pay and more opportunity. One participant's child connected with a volunteer and is pursuing a 'shadowing' program to determine her interest in medicine.

Following graduation, the class members will each be assigned 'allies' – a hallmark of the 'Bridges out of Poverty' program. Their role is to assist and support graduates as needs arise.

"We continue to live into and work together in this faith community," said Pastor Tim. "Allies come from our church and sister church's in the area and are just a phone call away when graduates find themselves in precarious positions – or simply have questions about what their options are or what they should do next."

“No one in our class was looking for a handout,” said Patricia. “But because of this class we now have hope.”

The next class has been scheduled to begin in January.

To lend support in any way, you are encouraged to contact Saint Paul’s United Church of Christ through our website, or contact Pastor Tim directly at 570-975-9536.