

Saying Yes to Transformation

A few months ago, we presented an alternative for the type of reports that region churches could submit as a part of their Annual ABCUSA Covenant Report. We asked churches to submit stories about transformed lives because of their church's ministry instead of statistics. A handful of churches responded by submitting stories.

As you might know, our region's longstanding mission statement is: **Supporting congregations in developing leaders who transform lives.** Read some of the stories and perhaps they will conjure up some stories that come out of your congregation, or out of your own spiritual journey.

From **Genesee Baptist** in Rochester, NY: *"The Clothes Closet is opened every second and fourth Wednesday of the month from 12 noon until 2 pm. All the clothes are free. Clothes that are not taken in three to four months are shared with other churches...On occasion it turns into a counseling session. Many people have broken family relations. We listen carefully and encourage them to attend church, develop a prayer life and start reading the Bible, hoping that as they grow in the word of the Lord, they will find peace and be able to cope with the family issues."*

From **Kingdom Come Community Church**, Orange County, CA: *"Every second Sunday we have a youth-focused service at the YMCA of Gardena, CA. A number of the youth were reached and are attending the service. Every third Sunday we hold our worship service at the Primrose Post-Acute Center in Inglewood, CA. We offer communion to the residents and gifts to residents and staff on major holidays. There are 68 residents and 15 attend the worship services. Every fourth Sunday our worship is held at Seal Beach Health and Rehabilitation Facility. Again, we provide gifts during the year for the 40 or more residents who attend. In addition, we provide feminine products for female sex trafficked and undocumented immigrants and we held two financial planning seminars, reaching 20 people."*

From **Parma Baptist Church** in Spencerport NY: *"When he came to us he couldn't stop using drugs, he was prone to fits of violence, he was frequently in the local jail and he could not maintain relationships. He started attending once a month and eventually was regular in attendance. He began cooking for the church and became our 'Culinary King'. He volunteered to clean and make small repairs to the church. He enrolled in school and stopped using drugs. It has been one year, and he graduated from Drug Court, is engaged to be married and is finishing school. Everyone who meets him can't imagine what he was like before he was transformed."*

From **Peace Community Church** in Oberlin, OH: *"Last year one of the co-pastors was out running and met up with a church member who was walking. She had felt the horrific impact of a recent police shooting of an African American male in the nation and grabbed the pastor's arm and talked about her fears for her own grown son. The pastor invited her to share her story with the church and she did so the following Sunday. That experience was so powerful for the members of the congregation. The woman wanted to do some intentional group planning for Black History Month. A small group got together and planned to have people share personal*

stories about race. Several people shared in February and the month ended with a facilitated Roundtable Discussion in place of the regular worship service. Some folks went together to view films such as the documentary '13th', 'I'm Not Your Negro', and 'Hidden Figures'. Some folks attended a white privilege series at a neighboring church. More events have been planned for this year, and the whole process began with one woman sharing her story with the congregation."

*Also from **Peace Community Church** in Oberlin: An Oberlin College student working as our Peace and Justice Intern came to college with very negative associations with Christianity, which have gradually broken down from being connected with the social justice outreach of the church. Eventually he began looking for a way to explore the Bible in more depth and joined a Bible study on the Gospel of Luke that the pastors led for a student group. Every time a person of any age, who has only witnessed Christianity that is very excluding of the most vulnerable begins to see another approach that emphasizes and lives according to Jesus' care for the most vulnerable, it is a transforming moment. This student continues to explore a breadth of spiritual understandings with keen questions and astute observations. He recently declared a Religion major at the college."*

*From **United Church of Pittsford** in Pittsford, NY: "Estimating the number of people whose lives have been transformed by our ministry is difficult but here are two brief glimpses: Nora is a volunteer staff member for a preschool which operates in our building. She came to a pancake breakfast in the Fall and immediately started coming on Sundays with her two children. She has taken a leadership role with the Christmas play, is now on our Board of Christian Education and is working with Sunday School and is considering a new faith commitment and church membership.*

A young couple expecting their first child contacted the church about baptism for the child. (This church is dually affiliated with the United Methodist Church). Neither had been active in any church, but they began to attend worship and are coming regularly. Their child will be baptized this May, and they are considering their own faith commitment.

One further transformative influence on the congregation we learned from a growing mainline church in Canada that urged to 'pay for what you want, not what you have.' We challenged the church to increase the role and salary of our organist to be our Director of Music. She is an Eastman School of Music Ph.D. graduate and writes a blog with 5,000 hits a month. Her work has had a transforming effect on our worship, including much greater participation in planning, preparing, and leading worship."

*From **St. Luke Tabernacle Community Church** in Rochester, NY: "Our collective outreach ministries has directly touched more than 2000 lives in 2016. We served nearly 200 meals per week, we provided tutoring to 40 students each week, we provided work readiness internships to 20 persons this year, we provide free medical and eyecare services to 300 persons this year and our drama ministry, The North Star Players, performs three to four plays a year with an estimated total attendance of 500 persons a year. But here are a few specific stories: One of our charter members is a young man who came to our first service in 2000 and joined our church. He is bright, talented but also challenged in many ways. Over the years, he has floated in and out of St. Luke, but we never let him completely go. As time passed we supported him as he furthered his education and he recently received a degree in mathematics from SUNY*

Brockport. Other adults have followed suit, because of the strong emphasis on education at St. Luke.

Another story comes from one of our deacons who unfortunately had been inattentive to his vision care. In carrying out his duties at the church he came into contact with the persons who run our eyecare clinic. They gave him a free eye exam and he was able to obtain his new eyeglasses free from a local vendor.”

And finally, from Webster Baptist Church, Webster NY: “Two transformative stories in the ministry of Webster come from two individuals who are living out their faith in the community. One person is a man who takes his trained therapy dog to one of the inner city elementary schools. There he reads and helps the children and his dog serves as a vitally calming loving assistant. This is his ministry.

Another is a woman who has come to the church scared and hurting. Here she found what she needed and found her grounding. In doing so she is using her skills, time and energy to help others who are going through difficult times or need assistance in their lives.”

As you can read, transformation is occurring in a number of our churches. I would guess that transformation is occurring in many if not most of our churches. I believe it is important to share these stories, not out of pride but to inspire others to make transformational decisions about their lives. Our faith in Jesus Christ does make a difference. Let us be bold in sharing the Good News of Jesus' transforming love.

Alan G. Newton