

January 2021 Council Report

The Rev. Amy Gopp, Senior Pastor

Worship

We continue to adapt and adjust, and hopefully, we're getting better and better at doing so. I never, ever would have imagined that my ministry and career would have included televangelism! God truly never ceases to surprise and amaze me, pushing me outside my comfort zone and sustaining me as I expand and grow spiritually, vocationally, and professionally. Crafting our online worship services is indeed a tremendous task each week, demanding much more coordination and concerted effort than even our in-person worship services. While I have gotten into a nice rhythm, it still takes a great amount of planning, time and logistical effort to pull our online services together. I am determined that our online services are inclusive, substantive, and meaningful spiritual and liturgical experiences throughout this pandemic, as they are the tie that binds us during this long period of social distancing and isolation. If any of you have any feedback, please offer it. I want to hear from you!

Our regional UCC Living Water Association as well as the Ohio Heartland Conference are aware of the pressures and resources needed to provide ongoing online worship experiences, so have begun to offer services at various times this year. I thank the conference ministers for our service for Epiphany on January 10, allowing me some time off after the holidays as well as Corey, Kim, and Felicia and Julie. We were very grateful for the break. On February 14, Transfiguration Sunday, Rev. Nayiri Karjian, General Minister of Living Water, will preach and the rest of the worship will be provided by our Association.

I have begun planning for our Lenten season. The theme will be "Holy Vessels: A Lenten Season of Recovery" focusing on healing and wholeness. We have been through a harrowing time since last Lent that has shattered our sense of wholeness—body, mind, and spirit—like a glass vessel fractured into pieces. In this Lenten "season of recovery" for our physical, communal, mental, intellectual, and environmental health, we will explore the healing narratives of Jesus (in the Gospel according to Matthew) that tell of divine solidarity with human suffering and remind us that we can begin a journey toward making something beautiful from that which is seemingly broken. I think this will be a beautiful liturgical and spiritual journey—and much needed. My adult education class beginning in February will also look at mindful silence and contemplative practices of healing.

While it will look and feel quite different, as Advent and Christmas did, I am confident that we will create meaningful rituals and services for this most sacred Lenten season in the life of our faith. Our Ash Wednesday service will be a collaborative one planned and produced with other churches in our Living Water Association. The same is true for our Good Friday service this year. All other Lenten services, Sundays and Maundy Thursday, will be recorded at Kent UCC.

Pastoral and Spiritual Care

As senior pastor, one of my primary and constant concerns is the spiritual health and wellbeing of our congregation. I continue to pray for God's guidance as I do my best to offer spiritual care, support, and sustenance to our church family. My hope is that during this time of pandemic, people are open to new spiritual practices.

On the morning of Inauguration Day, January 20, I offered a special Space for Grace contemplative prayer time. We gathered on Zoom to pray together and listen for God's prayer for us and for our country. We prayed for peace, to let go of our anger and fear, and to live into a new era of compassion, empathy, peace, justice and joy in this new year.

As COVID cases and deaths continue to plague Portage County and all of Ohio and the U.S., I fear that we are far from close to the end of this pandemic. In addition to the public health crisis, we also have a serious mental health crisis. The mental and emotional needs have increased dramatically during this time as we have had to physically distance ourselves from one another, creating an even more severe sense of isolation and loneliness for many. A majority of my time is spent extending pastoral and spiritual care and support. For those living alone, this season has been particularly challenging especially during these winter months. I remain deeply concerned about how to care for our people experiencing depression and social isolation.

I am very grateful and excited about the renewed efforts of our Mental Health Ministry. After attending the online conference in November sponsored by the UCC Mental Health Network, we are moving forward with the W.I.S.E. process to become a more wise, inclusive, supportive, and engaged church for those with mental illness and addiction and their families and friends. We will commission our W.I.S.E. team on January 31 during worship and then the process will begin in earnest, guided by our new Chair of the Diaconate, Jackie Peck, who is also serving as convenor for this process.

I want to thank Don Bubenzer profusely for all of his work as past Chair of the Diaconate. I have a difficult time even finding the words adequate enough to express my profound gratitude, respect, and love for him and his ministry among us. He has been a Godsend during this time to so many in our congregation, leading the Diaconate in their ministry of service and spiritual care, and has also been a constant source of support to me. I thank all of the Deacons for the myriad of ways they have reached out to our congregation during this time of pandemic, fear, sickness, suffering, and isolation.

While it has been my priority to care for all of you at this time, by offering comfort, care, consolation and spiritual support and direction, I also believe that it is the primary task of the whole congregation to take care of one another. Nothing else is more important than that right now. We need to continue to hold one another tenderly, lovingly and with great compassion as we adapt to an uncertain future with an unknown ending. We must also be aware of our community resources and partner social service agencies so that we can make the right referrals as people experience not only growing mental health issues but also food insecurity, unemployment, and financial hardship.

To that end, I stressed in worship on January 24, the day of our Annual Meeting, the Congregational and Community Assistance Fund. This fund is open to everyone—anyone with need—and I hope we can encourage anyone who is experiencing financial hardship to utilize it.

Funeral and Memorial Services

Betsy Grimm passed away at the end of December. Linnea and Pat Ray, along with their families, held a private graveside service in Dover, Ohio, for her. John Bertsch conducted the brief service while I was on vacation. William Fisher passed away on January 15. His graveside was also conducted by John Bertsch, at the request of the family, as they all know him very well. Scott Baughman's mother passed away earlier in January as well; I will be conducting a graveside family

service on January 30 for her. All other families have opted to wait until we're on the other side of this pandemic or to not hold a service at the church at all. I am concerned as to how this will all play out, but especially worried about these families, and our congregation, not having a sense of closure.

Administration

I planned an online Christmas party for our staff during the holidays. It was a very important time to gather together and celebrate all we have been able to accomplish during this very trying time. Fun was had by all! In my usual tradition, I sent a gift to each staff member, something personal, to affirm how much I appreciate them and their work. I consider each of them to be my partner in ministry. We're a great team and Heather is a wonderful addition! She is a delightful person with a light and positive spirit and optimistic attitude. She also seems to be a quick-learn. Heather is now set up and able to work from home as we all continue to work primarily remotely. She will be working with Sally Saltzman, our new treasurer, as they both get oriented to the financial office and their respective roles. Welcome to Sally!

I want to wholeheartedly thank our outgoing treasurer, Kay Hansford, for her tremendous service to our congregation for the past two years.

Our COVID Advisory Team will meet again on February 15 at 7pm. I look forward to their ongoing assistance, guidance and recommendations as to the safety and wellbeing of our entire community.

Community Outreach and Social Justice

The annual MLK Jr. Breakfast of our Portage County NAACP was held online this year, on Saturday morning January 16. I opened the gathering with prayer.

On Monday, January 18, MLK Day, I facilitated a conversation on the documentary, "The Rape of Recy Taylor" for the congregation. It was a marvelous discussion with many members of our Social Justice and Advocacy Committee as well as others interested in the mission of racial justice.

Communications and Marketing

Kelley Gifford is the new chair of the Communications and Marketing Committee. She and I have already spent some quality time envisioning the future of this committee and of our overall communications strategy for the church. I want to thank Scott Baughman for serving as the first chair of this new committee. We have already met in January and had a robust meeting! The committee will be designing birthday cards for the church to send to our members, and will be collaborating with the H&M Committee to ensure that everyone gets a card. We are also reformatting the newsletter. Huge thanks to Barb Hanniford for her 10 years of editing *The Messenger* and a big welcome to Terri Silver for taking over this important task!

Communication During COVID

I continue to prepare and send out weekly "Updates and Resources" every Friday to keep the congregation informed about our Sunday worship service and other information regarding the public health crisis and important events and resources for spiritual care during this time. If there is another communication tool that you think would be helpful for the church to offer, please let me know. Communications and Marketing has also looked at this tool and others to see how we can continue to best communicate with the congregation.

Wider Church Engagement

I continue to serve on the Living Water Associations' Commission on the Ministry as part of that commission and on the Discernment Committee.

I was also invited to participate in a Clergy Care cohort looking at better self-care practices for clergy. This has been convened by the MESA Team of the UCC national offices.

The National UCC Offices, under the direction of Traci Blackmon of Justice and Local Church Ministries, have asked me to facilitate the UCC Women's Table. We meet monthly. This is an important group as there is no longer a women's desk or women's ministry position on the national staff.

Schedule

As part of the Healthy Boundaries training that clergy must take for good standing as well as for my service on the Commission on the Ministry, I will be attending a seminar conducted by the Faith Trust Institute on Clergy Boundaries and Misconduct on **February 3, 4, 5, 10, and 11 from 10am-1pm** on those days. This is a large time commitment but necessary and very important.

Sunday, February 7-March 28 I will be teaching a class on Sunday mornings entitled, "Mindful Silence" based on the book of the same title. This series focuses on contemplative practices and prayer and will be a wonderful complement to our Lenten season of recovery and healing.

Please note that **Heather Cronin**, Financial Administrator, will be on **vacation Feb. 12-19**.

Our mission is to love and transform lives by the grace and guidance of Jesus Christ as we do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. What we have to offer is what people most need, especially now as so many experience loneliness and social isolation, fear and anxiety, grief and longing for what they have either lost or fear losing, and a sense of great uncertainty and even terror about the future. Let us commit fully to our mission and vision.

Thank you for your ministry and your witness!

Respectfully submitted,

Rev. Amy Gopp