



YOU ARE WELCOME HERE

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Beloved of God,

Grace and peace to you in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ!

I write this letter thinking of you eventually reading this, decades into the future, as yet another manifestation of the body of Christ that calls itself the Kent United Church of Christ. Having celebrated our bicentennial recently, I smile envisioning all that you will be celebrating in your congregational life in the year 2050. Know that you have been held in prayer all of these years, for “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Hebrews 13:8).

As we approach the 20th anniversary of the tragic events of September 11, 2001 this Sunday—our first worship service back in the church building since the coronavirus stopped us all in our tracks in March of 2020—we will honor the lives lost and the trauma our country is still experiencing as a result of that unthinkable day. We have just brought our troops home from Afghanistan, bringing a 20-year war to an end for us but ongoing oppression and suffering for the Afghan people. Meanwhile, the 2020 presidential campaign and election was the most divisive any of us have seen in our lifetimes, leading to the violent attack on the US Capitol by insurrectionists hoping to overturn the election results. We no longer refer to climate change but rather the climate *crisis*, for it is that dire. The murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020 sparked a racial reckoning the likes of which this country hasn’t seen since the Civil War; the public outcry and demand for racial justice and equity has been extraordinary.

Needless to state, we are currently living in a rapidly changing world. Even before any of us heard the words “coronavirus” or “COVID-19” we were living in a dramatically shifting society, a VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) world. The global pandemic has demanded that we surrender certainty and live in ambiguity and adaptability. In a world changing so fast, and so much, there is no certainty—which is why we call what we do at Kent UCC walking by *faith*. This VUCA time has also impacted the Church. We are living through what I would consider the Second Reformation. Or, as Phyllis Tickle, an authority on religion in America, put it in *The Great Emergence*, “Every five hundred years, the church cleans out its attic and has a giant rummage sale.”

Ironically, even though we have had to postpone our legendary Kent UCC rummage sale yet again this year due to the pandemic, we are actively cleaning out our proverbial attic, so to speak, in this great shift in ecclesial history which seems to happen about every five centuries. By 2050, the Church will undoubtedly look, feel, and behave quite differently—and yet!—the Church will still be the body of Christ in the world, living out the Gospel mission of Christ, in perhaps a new form and fashion.

Whoever you are...wherever you are on life's journey...you're welcome here!!!

For now, we have chosen to be the church *for such a time as this*—not a church of the past, but a church that plants the seeds now for our church, *your* church, to thrive as a witness of God’s love and Christ’s compassion in 2050. For now, we are a proud Open and Affirming and Accessible to All church that has invited the Portage County NAACP to move into our building so they could finally have an office space to call their own, housed with a strategic partner in the community. After George Floyd’s murder, we committed even more boldly to becoming an anti-racist congregation and witness in our wider community. We have also dedicated ourselves to becoming a fully Green Church, one that works for justice not only for our BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) siblings, but also for all of creation. Our goal is to become a zero-waste congregation, using fair trade products and making energy-efficient choices that will benefit many generations to come as we do our part to restore God’s gift of creation entrusted to us. Joining recent Climate Marches, the Akron Pride Festival, Black Lives Matter events, and NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness) Walks have been significant ways we have shown our solidarity and lifted our UCC voice in pursuit of social justice, peace, unity and Christian love.

We have also been engaged in loving one another just as we are. Our congregation is completing a process to become an official WISE congregation in the UCC. WISE stands for Welcoming, Inclusive, Supportive, and Engaged and it refers specifically to people living with mental illness, brain disorders, and other forms of mental health dis-ease. More than simply providing welcome and hospitality, our objective is to be a stigma-free church and community of radical belonging and acceptance for all—and most certainly for those living with mental health challenges and their families. While the pandemic has put our physical health at risk, it has also posed a great threat to our mental health. Sharing Jesus’ healing and liberative love with one another has never been more important than it is now. Being physically separated from each other for almost one year and a half proved to be tremendously difficult. And yet, we learned that the church is truly not the building, but the ways we experience and share Christ’s sacrificial and unconditional love with one another and with a world that so desperately needs it. Our ability to pivot during these unsettled times has been due to our spiritual grounding in the One who is the Ground of our Being. We have all been reminded to seek not the things of this world, but to “seek first the realm of God” (Matthew 6:3) for it is the *only* thing on which we can rely.

On behalf of myself and the entire congregation, it is our earnest hope and prayer that you will find these heartfelt words and buried treasures informative, interesting, and inspiring. We are making decisions now with you in mind, and trust that you will do the same for generations to come, until we have manifested the deepest prayer of Jesus, “that they may all be one” (John 17:21).

May you delight in the Sacred Surprises of our Still-speaking God, find peace in the Tender Embrace of our Teacher and Lord Jesus, and be moved by the Divine Dance of the Holy Spirit.

With profound excitement for your ministry and prayers for your joy in serving the Lord,
I am, and will be, faithfully yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Amy C. Gopp', followed by a long horizontal line extending to the right.

The Reverend Amy C. Gopp, Senior Minister