Church celebrates 150 years by looking beyond congregation



A year spent in Palestine "changed my life," said The Rev. Dr. Eniko Ferenczy, pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church, and "changed my understanding of what ministry could be" from an "ivory tower" concept to a focus on missions "to create a better community." MIKE SCHENK/THE DAILY RECORD`

Westminster aims to mark anniversary by helping to combat medical debt

Linda Hall
Special to Wooster Daily Record
USA TODAY NETWORK

Westminster Presbyterian Church on Pine Street in Wooster has come up with a unique way to commemorate a milestone anniversary.

Instead of focusing on itself to celebrate 150 years of history in 2024, the church is looking outside of its congregation of about 106 parishioners to combat a serious economic issue – medical debt.

In coming up with a way to benefit those who are burdened by it, "two things came together," said Ferenc Relle, a member of the congregation.

First, "we wanted to find something significant to do that wasn't going to be just a big party," Relle said.

The second component was based on research done by another member of the church, Rick Drushal, who made a presentation at a church session – the equivalent of a board – about the life-changing work of RIP Medical Debt.

The mission of RIP "resonates with our mission," said the Rev. Eniko Ferenczy, pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church. "It fits in so many

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Westminster

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ways."

"We were really excited when Rick brought it to us," she said.

Using Mustard Seed campaign to raise $10K

Through a campaign called Mustard Seed, the church has committed to raising $10,000 to eliminate as much debt as possible in Wayne County and surrounding counties, starting with Wayne County.

RIP's goal is to eliminate medical debt for those who earn at, or less than, four times the federal poverty level, or have debt that is 5% or more of their annual income.

So many hard-working people have to make choices, such as paying for food or medicine, Relle said, noting, "Something happened, and they got in over their heads."

Medical debt can "wipe out a family," Relle said. "We're very blessed to be in Wayne County, which is doing so many things for so many people."

RIP works with other respected financial organizations to ensure accountability.

People do not apply for medical debt relief, Relle said, but rather it is identified, calculated and handled by RIP. When the campaign is over, each person whose debt has been resolved will be notified.

"They won't know until they receive the letter," Ferenczy said.

Because RIP "buys debt in bundles, millions of dollars at a time at a fraction of the original cost," a donation of $100 can relieve $10,000 of medical debt, according to the campaign website.

The website also states nearly 50% of adults in the United States had to delay or skip medical care because of the cost; 50% of adults in America could not afford an unanticipated $500 bill; and two-thirds of bankruptcies site medical debt as a leading cause.

A history or caring for vulnerable and underserved

Ferenczy, like Westminster Church, has a history of caring for the vulnerable and underserved members of society.

A native of Transylvania, Romania, Ferenczy came to the United States and studied in Virginia, earning her PH.D. from Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond. She also holds a chemical engineering degree from a university in Chuj, Romania.

A year spent in Palestine "changed my life," she said, and "changed my understanding of what ministry could be" from an "ivory tower" concept to a focus on missions "to create a better community."

In Palestine and Hungary, Ferenczy worked in legal and social services as an advocate for families, especially refugees.

Having spent significant time in Israel and Palestine, her biography says, she is "a passionate advocate for peace and reconciliation in the region."

'Serving among people who are pushed to the margins of society'

In a statement about the Mustard Seed campaign, Ferenczy said, "As we celebrate our 150th anniversary, we feel a renewed commitment to standing in solidarity with and serving among people who are pushed to the margins of society."

By partnering with RIP, the church can be "a source of justice in an unjust healthcare system, to be true neighbors to people in our county and beyond."

Those interested may learn more about the Mustard Seed campaign and how to make a contribution on the Westminster Presbyterian Church website.

On May 5, the church will hold a celebratory worship service, followed by lunch and a program.

Everyone is welcome and past members, college students and previous pastors are invited.

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