

Report of the Pastor

Supplemental

Rev. Teressa M. Sivers
St. Paul's United Methodist Church
Finger Lakes District
Upper New York Annual Conference
Church Conference: November 17, 2020

Church Conference last year was held at Lansing UMC on Saturday, October 26. St. Paul's had the wonderful joy of welcoming Rev. M Barclay as our guest preacher on October 27th, in partnership with the Office of Religious and Spiritual Life at Ithaca College. We also wrapped up our year-long 200th Anniversary celebration with the installation and dedication of a historical marker, sharing with all who walk by that we have been a spiritual presence in downtown Ithaca for 200 years. The Confirmation Class was meeting and learning about membership in the church and attending awesome field trips. We worshipped with Al-Huda Islam Center and had amazing conversation, and we 'broke bread' with Temple Beth El youth and had a tour of the temple, all while hearing of the faith journeys of the youth. Pastor Debbie hosted a well-attended group on end of life planning, and I led a bible study, also well attended, on the Book of Job. Small groups were meeting weekly. I was working with the pastors of Calvary Baptist and First Unitarian Universalist and the leaders of United Way to plan a big event for the early summer.

Advent focused on the coming Incarnation of Christ through the worship series entitled, "The Redemption of Scrooge." Over forty St. Paulians attended the Hangar Theater production of "A Christmas Carol" and Pastor Debbie held a viewing of one of the many movies of that classic Dickens work. Our capital campaign work was moving more quickly. We interviewed a potential consultant early in 2020. Our Lenten journey centered on the wilderness—Jesus' forty days in the desert and our forty days travel toward Easter. We created beautiful sanctuary art using glass vases, bare branches, stones and moss. Lent was well underway when word began to spread about a virus. Shortly after the University of Washington on the west coast closed, our own Cornell University also closed, just as cases in New York City began to explode in number. In consultation with staff and a few team leaders in the church, I announced that we were stopping in person worship for March 15, and the rest of March, while we watched how the virus would affect our nation and our community.

March 15th marked a whole new world for everyone, including the people of St. Paul's. I am so extremely grateful that David Kingsley, a production expert, stepped in and offered his expertise and time as a gift to the church. With his help we have held live worship online through our streaming site and on Facebook throughout the pandemic. His skills allow us to incorporate recorded elements into the live feed in a very professional way. In the early days of the pandemic, I 'held the space' in the sanctuary, with only David Kingsley and one of our awesome camera operators. Scripture readings and music were recorded during the week remotely and inserted into the service at the appropriate times. Most small groups moved to Zoom gatherings, as well as all our committee meetings. I am grateful to the small group of leaders who agreed to meet with me weekly as a 'helping' team, as Arlene Hewitt aptly called it recently. This team helped me make nibble decisions as everything changed by the day. We tried children's ministry and youth ministry zooms, but found our children and youth were becoming zoomed out with all their school and activities also moving online. We saw people come together for online yoga, book studies, midweeks with the pastors, and more.

We continue to have committee meetings, post-worship fellowship time, and many small group meetings via zoom or other online services. In June we practiced the protocols for in person worship through a series of very small Communion services in the sanctuary, limited to no more than 10 people in our huge space. This prepared us well when we started hybrid services on September 27—

with some worshiping in person while the majority continue to join online. Thank you BZB Planning Team and the Building Reopening Team for your hard work in making this happen. And a huge thank you to our several hospitality ministers who make in person Sunday morning worship a safe and welcoming time.

Attendance for worship has increased during the pandemic. Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday saw login numbers for the live feed at over 1000, with no idea how many people were attending per device log in. Currently our weekly logins range from 220 to 350, with 30-50 logins on Facebook Live, and many viewing during the week via YouTube. Giving has remained relatively steady, however our income from building use has obviously dropped dramatically. Finances are 'tight' and we are grateful that we were able to secure funds from the PPP program to help with staff salaries. The church is grateful to Opus School of Music for working with us, and we look forward to the time when we can welcome our other building partners, whom we miss deeply.

This new world we find ourselves in requires a great deal of learning. I attended too many webinars to count on such subjects as; the virus itself, changing protocols for houses of worship and businesses, digital giving and stewardship, music in the time of pandemic, and much more. I was fortunate to find an online class on "How to Lead Through Crises" with Carey Nieuwof, offered for free and focused on this new pandemic world. This helped the staff utilize online tools like Slack for communication and gave me great suggestions, as well as validating decisions I had already made. The Festival of Homiletics graciously offered their sermons and classes online at a greatly reduced price, and Church of the Resurrection's Leadership Institute did the same. I attended both. I am also very grateful for new spiritual growth tools such as the Rituals app, which I spend time with every morning in Lectio Divina and other mindfulness resources.

As the pandemic of racism escalated along with the virus, the church engaged in conversation and learning through online Imagine No Racism classes and books studies with "White Fragility" and "Their Eyes Were Watching God." It is my plan to offer a study of Ibram Kendi's book, "How to be Anti-Racist" and explore resources to guide us in being active change agents in 2021. Currently Pastor Debbie is offering midweek evening prayer, the family ministries is sending out 'blessing boxes' each month and creating events like trunk-r-treating to bring us together, and we have some exciting Advent and Christmas activities planned.

Looking into 2021, despite the big changes that the church is facing and will face, I am filled with hope. The congregation is slowly learning a new rhythm of life together. It has been a struggle and we have not always succeeded in what we intended and hoped. However, we are reaching hundreds of people each week with messages of hope and love and justice. The congregation will work diligently with the conference to welcome a new pastor who can work alongside St. Paulians and the community to live into the dream of Beloved Community. St. Paul's continues to be a compassionate community led and transformed by the Spirit. Thanks be to God.