

Interim Minister's Report to the Board

December 2014

As always, December is a very busy month for ministers! In addition to the usual Christmas Eve planning, the Worship Associates have decided to add a Solstice Service on Saturday 12/20 @ 7 pm. And I am collaborating with the Gun Violence Task Force to host a regional vigil for victims of gun violence on Thursday December 11th at 6:30 pm.

Updates:

- We had a good first meeting with a group of volunteers who have agreed to create a new Adult Education program. In consultation with our DRE and the RE Council, we will be adding an Adult Education Circle to the RE Council. This will give them some institutional support, particularly important at a time when there is, realistically, very little staff support time to offer them. (Adult Education had been in the portfolio of the Associate Ministers in the past.) I am hopeful that in the New Year you will begin to see the fruits of this new group of leadership.
- Pledge calls from staff: I would say that most of the people we called either confirmed that they are no longer a part of the congregation, asked for a financial waiver, or agreed to make a pledge. We did get some feedback that getting a call from a staff person felt like 'shaming' them into pledging. I am hopeful that with a more accurate membership list and a well-organized year round stewardship committee the list of people that staff would be asked to call would be much shorter in the coming year.
- Nursery School: As previously reported, Dorothy has talked with the Director of the Nursery School. This conversation reaffirmed that the Nursery School lease allows them access to the class rooms only during the day on week-days. They do not have access after 6 pm week-days, and not at all over the week-end. The Director has agreed to remind the teachers of the terms of their lease. We all have to recognize that shared use of rooms with children means that some things will be left less than perfect, and the way to work this out is through cordial and open communication.
- Committee Charters: We have gotten Charters (either newly written or updated and revised) from about half the committees. Most of the others have asked for an extension; a few have not responded at all and we will be following up. I knew it was an ambitious goal to have them all ready for the

December meeting. They will be ready for the January meeting with a few exceptions. Having looked over some of those submitted there are a few questions that the Board probably needs to wrestle with:

Do you want to include term limit language in all charters? Perhaps something close to what you agreed to for the Governance Committee Charter – a two year term limit with exceptions made under extraordinary circumstances. Do you want to require some basic form of record-keeping for all committees? Minutes taken and archived somewhere on the website? Do you want to require some minimal expectation of communication with the congregation? A quarterly article in Soundings, or an updated web presence, or something? Anything?

Big Idea to Think About: I was asked to give you some thoughts about what the purpose of a Communications Committee might be. In some systems the Communication Committee, like the HR Committee, exists simply to advise the Board on communications policy and practices, and leaves the implementation of communications to staff and appropriate other committees. In this system, the Board would approve policy, and identify the people authorized to carry it out. Communication policies are pretty complicated given the use of social media, so initially this would not be a simple task. Once the policies were all written, the Communications Committee would be available to consult on matters that would come up (particularly on web and social media) and would regularly review and update policies as new forms of communications became available. Given your desire to move towards a policy governance based system, this is what I would recommend.

In the initial term of a Communication Committee they could also look at all the possible forms of communication (both internal and external) and make recommendations as to what is missing completely, what is underutilized, and what is out of date in our current practices. They could recommend to the Board which group or committee or staff person should have primary responsibility for the various lines of communication. These folks could then be empowered (and I assumed given the resources) to communicate! Right now it is an open question as to where publicity and public relations falls. And we are seriously underutilizing the most contemporary forms of social media, video-casting, etc. These are all forms of communication that require some expertise, and also some funding.

Program Area Update: In response to your expressed concerns I am going to give you a somewhat detailed update on various program areas over the next few months. This month will be Social Justice. January will be Membership and Religious Education. February will be Worship and Music.

One of the ways social justice programming has changed in the past decades has been a move to understanding that this is work that is best done in coalition rather than independently. Having a staff person dedicated to social justice means having somebody who can identify the issues that congregants are interested in supporting, researching the organizations (both denominational and in the local community) that are working on that issue, and then creating the coalitions that will best leverage congregant time and resources.

This is true for both acts of charity and acts of justice. Acts of charity involve providing funds or other tangible donations or volunteer time to directly serve people in need. Feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, etc. Acts of justice or advocacy involve trying to make structural changes to our society that will lead to a decrease in a particular need. Asking why there are hungry in people, for example, might lead to advocating for an increase in the minimum wage or working in a food justice coalition.

We have a good number of people involved in both acts of charity and acts of justice under the umbrella of social justice here at TUCW. I asked David Vita to give me a brief summary of current activities. Here's what he said.

“There are three ways that we engage in social justice/social action: advocacy, material support, and community involvement (work that takes place outside of our church or brings the greater community in).

Due to the nature of various committees they might engage in one, two, or all of the above. The Beardsley School Committee provides material support and is actively involved in the school, for example, while our new Immigration Committee will be doing all three, and our Microfinance Committee solely provides material support.

Our social justice/social action work is increasingly moving beyond our walls and partnering with community organizations. The list below is of people actually out in the community, not the size of the committee's email list.

Mercy Learning Center Committee, in its second year now, has approximately 12 people tutoring and volunteering at MLC, located in Bridgeport. Volunteering at Mercy represents a substantial commitment-- twice a week, 2 hours per session.

Westbridge Coalition renovates homes for people who are physically or financially unable to do so themselves. A wheelchair bound Iraq War vet in Norwalk was restricted to the second floor of his home. Westbridge went in and installed a chair lift on the stairs, made the first floor wheel chair accessible, and built a ramp outside the house. This man is now connected with the outside world. There are currently 6 members of the congregation regularly engaged in this work.

Beardsley School Committee- Read-A-Loud Days, mentoring, tutoring, reading to classes, working in the library. About 60 members of our congregation are actively involved with Beardsley. Our committee has been honored by the Bridgeport Mayor and City Council with the presentation of a citation recognizing the work that our volunteers have done at the Beardsley School.

Immigration is our newest committee (1 month old). Thirty people attended our first meeting and we have already connected with NEIGHBORS LINK Stamford (an immigrant support organization) where 5 of us, so far, are volunteering to help with online registration for folks applying for the new "Drivers-only" auto license.

The Food Access Coalition (July, 2014) is also new. We've been working with a farmer's market doubling food stamp purchases for fresh produce in Norwalk, doing food runs connecting food markets and restaurants with soup kitchens, and the Annual Saugatuck Thanksgiving meal are all areas that this group has been involved with. There are 10 members on the FAC.

Rainbow Task Force (RTF) partners with a number of local organizations, the Triangle Community Center in particular. On November 20th RTF organized the third Transgender Day Remembrance event here. Thirty people attended- 25 not members of our congregation. There are 20 members of the RTF active outside the church tabling at Gay Pride events, the Westport Country Playhouse, marching in the Memorial Day Parade.

Voices Café increasingly brings more and more new faces into our sanctuary. At our most recent performance a show of hands indicated that more than half of the audience were not congregants. Our new and very active Young Adult Group grew out of Voices Café, as well as new members. I organized a table that consisted of 2 new members, 4 people that I had met with for 1 to 1 meetings, and

2 of their friends with the intention of establishing the nucleus of a Young Adult Group. They clicked. And the group is organizing monthly activities. Of the 6 non-members at the table 4 are now new members. There are 9 members on the Voices committee.

Advocates for Prevention of Gun Violence partners with Connecticut Against Gun Violence (members of our congregation were the founders 25 years ago), the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence, and March for Change, and the Newtown Action Alliance. While much of this committee's work has been advocacy its members have attended marches and rallies, held informational programs for the public at the church, and organized a vigil in downtown Westport. Buses were organized for the 2013 March for Change Rally in Hartford and for the Mothers United Against Violence Rally, also in Hartford.

We also have congregants volunteering through the church that are not connected to a committee here -- Caroline House, International Institute of Connecticut, and the Bridgeport Child Advocacy Coalition, for example. And the Director of Social Justice represents TUCW at the Interfaith Council of Westport/Weston and the Westport Domestic Violence Task Force.”