Pastor’s Report

January 2018

The Sunday before Christmas, as the service ended and I walked toward the sanctuary entrance, I saw four people coming into church. I was preparing myself to commiserate with them, as they had just missed worship. But it turned out that they were making a pilgrimage. Betty Clifford and John Yocom had returned to Wollaston Congregational Church, the place of their wedding on December 21st 1947, with their daughter and son-in-law. They were celebrating their 70th wedding anniversary! They were warmly welcomed by the congregation and went into the sanctuary to take a picture as they stood in the same spots where they had said their vows.

Betty wrote a letter to us, following her visit with John. She detailed her long and fruitful spiritual journey in churches in Ohio, California and Connecticut over the years. She served the church in many capacities, including secretary, clerk, and newsletter editor. Betty credited Wollaston Congregational Church as being the place where her faith life began, her spiritual home and center. Clearly the church has been a strength, support, and a place of meaning for this couple who are so blessed with health and longevity. It is my hope and prayer that our church will continue to serve people such as Betty and John, long into the future.

Events such as the visit of this couple, and the reception of new members Megan Neil, Tina Sang and Rhea Ranno over the past year, demonstrate how the church can provide a center across the generations and through the changes in culture. When we look at the changes in our community and culture over the past 70 or more years, it is not surprising that *the* Church, and our church, has been challenged. Over that time period many other community groups and institutions have either disappeared, or have been completely transformed into something new.

Over this past year, Rhea Ranno was baptized at WCC on Easter and became an official member of our church in the spring. Since coming to our church for the first time last February, Rhea has been a regular attendee and an enthusiastic participant in the book group. She has participated in worship leadership, including preaching, and is looking forward to being commissioned as Deacon.

During Advent, Megan Neil became an associate member of our church and Tina Sang became a full member. I asked them both what drew them to our church and convinced them to keep coming. Megan noted the warm welcome she received, as well as the explicit, unconditional welcome to LGBT people. Tina also appreciated the genuine welcome extended to her as well as the easy acceptance she has found within various groups in the church. I am grateful to our church for providing a genuine welcome to these young women, and other newcomers too.

Today I am pondering the ways in which the church remains the same as in Betty Clifford’s time, and the ways in which it has changed and is changing. I doubt that 70 years ago, there would have been a discussion about explicitly welcoming people of different sexual orientations or gender identities. But perhaps over the years there were discussions about becoming more welcoming to people of color or to people raised in different Christian traditions, or the question of calling a woman minister.

I believe that if our church is serious about living into Christ’s wide open welcome in the world, we will be always looking for ways to grow that welcome. Are there groups we had not considered before, who have felt excluded from our community? Are there ways we can be more outwardly explicit about our welcome to LGBT people and their families? Are there ways to reach the many immigrant families in Quincy? Can we begin talking about being more welcoming to people of different religious traditions, or no tradition at all?

I leave these questions with you, as I look back with gratitude on some of the ministries of the past year:

* The Sunday Book Group: began in Lent read “Christ Actually: Reimagining Faith in the Modern Age” by James Carroll, and continued in spring, reading “Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal and Delight in Our Busy Lives” and most recently “The Great Spiritual Migration: How the World’s Largest Religion is Seeking a Better Way to be Christian” by Brian McLaren. The book group has allowed members to connect more deeply and has facilitated many meaningful conversations about our faith and spiritual lives as well as the future direction of our church.
* Meditative Services: In Lent, fall (during canning sessions) and Advent, we have had gathered for small meditative services on some Wednesday evenings. Generally these services have appealed to small numbers, but those who attended have enjoy the intimacy and depth of spiritual connection.
* Retreat: On September 30th we held a one-day Saturday retreat at the First Church in Squantum. Six women attended and had a great time, but many people have asked for another retreat. I suggest that we begin now to find a date in the spring that would work for as many people as possible.
* Taking Church Outside: On Ash Wednesday I participated with Pr. Alissa Oleson of the Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, offering the administration of ashes at the Wollaston T Station. That evening we worshiped with the Good Shepherd congregation. On October 1st we celebrated a Blessing of Pets on the church lawn, and on Wednesday October 4th I went with Pr. Oleson, and her student Samm, to give blessings to pets being walked on Wollaston Beach. These occasions served as a good reminder of the needs of our neighbors for connection and I am on the look out for other opportunities to “take church outside.”
* Hosting Youth Groups: Perhaps the highlight of the year was receiving permission from the Massachusetts Department of Safety to resume hosting youth groups on mission trips in our social hall. This ministry actually resumed in December when a group from Ohio State University stayed with us. I am most grateful for all those who worked to restore the permit and begin hosting again.

Of course, we cannot look back on the year together without remembering those who passed to eternal life, and so I remember with sadness the loss of long time church members Sandy Dixon and Peg Sandahl.

And just to close, here are a few dreams and visions for the coming year. These are my own hopes as well as suggestions from you:

* Forming small occasional pickup-choir for worship.
* Opening our space to on-point discussions, perhaps over a meal – understanding that all views, respectfully and thoughtfully expressed, are welcome.
* I hope to work with Pr. Oleson to provide spiritual care to people in addiction rehab at the Phoenix House.
* I would like to find ways to offer guidance to people from the community who wish to incorporate spiritual practices into their lives.

I end with gratitude, always, for your support to myself your commitment to our church. I truly believe that our congregation is following the leading of the Holy Spirit in many ways, and so I close with this blessing:

“If God is with us nothing else matters,

and if God is not with use nothing else matters.”

May we live as if nothing else matters.

Amen