

Sanctuary | United Church of Christ

The Congregational Church of West Medford
An Open and Affirming Community



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Dear Members and Friends of CCWM,

The end of this month marks a dramatic change in the life of the Congregational Church of West Medford. Our “church” began with Rachel Barnes establishing a Sunday school in West Medford for 30 children in 1864. In 1872, the Congregational Church of West Medford, meeting in a local community building, was formally established with 26 members. In 1873, with only 40 members, they began construction of a church on Harvard and Bower that would seat 500! They had optimism ... and faith.

For roughly 75 years, the church grew and kept expanding its facilities to meet the needs of a large and growing community and congregation. The Harvard St. church building was destroyed by fire in 1903, and a new edifice on High Street was completed in 1904. The world, the U.S., and Medford changed dramatically over the next sixty years, including two world wars, the cold war, the growth of electricity, telephones, radio, movies, television and the widespread use of automobiles. The church adapted and grew with the times. In 1954 the congregation doubled its square footage with the construction of the Fellowship Hall wing. Within the next decade they added beautiful stained glass windows and remodeled the sanctuary. The changes were dramatic and the church was the site of constant activity.

However, as the world and American society changed in the Viet Nam era and afterwards, CCWM did not adapt rapidly. Many long-established member families saw their children grow up and move away. Young families often moved to outer suburbs, and CCWM did not attract much of the new population moving to Medford. Church membership began to decline.

For at least the past thirty years it has been clear that something had to change. As members passed or moved away, the congregation continued to shrink. We had facilities designed to serve 500 members but had roughly one quarter of that number. We maintained the facilities as best we could, but we did little to change otherwise.

CCWM continued to attract some wonderful, valued, new members, and we met the spiritual needs of our relatively small church family, but we had clearly departed from a long tradition of serving and meeting the changing needs of West Medford and environs. After years of living off our diminishing endowment, it became clear we could no longer maintain the building. We could close and sell the building, donating the proceeds to the UCC Mass Conference and other charities. Instead, the remaining members decided to do something radical, something significantly different, but really part of our long CCWM tradition: changing to meet the changing needs of the people in our community.

Less than two years ago we called Rev. Wendy Miller Olapade to serve our congregation. Though Rev. Wendy and the congregation were both confident in the call, neither fully envisioned what was to unfold.

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Through Crossroads and especially through Rev. Wendy's incredible drive, vision, and faith, we declined closure as an option. For decades, we had been a church rich in space, in buildings, and poor in program and staff. The buildings cost a lot to maintain but were not utilized most of the week by the church. We were generous in enabling community groups to use the church space, but we really did not use the church's fixed resources well for church activities.

The sale of 400 High Street at the end of this month is radically altering that situation. We will see a dramatic change in our resources. We will go from having 25,000 square feet of space that we did not use well or often, to having less than 1000 square feet that we will need to use often and efficiently. We will go from a situation where we drew down \$200,000-\$250,000 a year from our invested funds just for an annual operating budget, to where we will have our largest financial resources in decades. We should be able to rely primarily on the interest and income from our invested funds to meet our needs, along with continued giving by members and friends.

Wendy has reinforced our belief in the importance of mission, something we had already started to more fully appreciate with the Pine Ridge Mission. Our new goals include meeting the needs of our neighbors and others, some of whom were intimidated by our large buildings, our small community's "tightness," or fear of everyone being too "doctrinaire." We need to listen, learn and understand how we can best serve God's mission for us in terms of the needs of our community, and beyond.

We should all thank God for giving us Rev. Wendy Miller Olapade. Rev. Wendy came into a very dynamic yet difficult situation and was inspired by the possibilities of what WE could do with God's help. She has gone above and beyond the call of duty, recently bearing too much weight on her shoulders in this effort. She has had invaluable volunteer help, and we expect to support her with more professional staff and volunteer help going forward.

Some of our members have said they do not plan to continue with CCWM and Sanctuary, our new ministry center. They intend to seek a new church home offering a traditional sanctuary and programs. We appreciate those feelings. Personally, I will miss 400 High Street, and the religious music program that was our pride for many years. I will miss the traditional Sunday morning services that I have been comfortable with for decades. (We have made many changes in the past five years that have been enthusiastically accepted by the congregation.). I might visit attend a more traditional church service elsewhere, at least occasionally, to meet some of my preferences, but I am a strong supporter of Sanctuary. And I will miss those friends who elect to not continue with CCWM/Sanctuary in some way.

If you decide to attend worship in a traditional sanctuary, that does not mean you can't also be a part of our new Sanctuary. This is an exciting, bold new venture that is generating a lot of interest in and beyond the Mass Conference. It is truly breaking new ground. The challenges we have faced for the past thirty years are all too familiar to many established churches and denominations. There will be some missteps, but the opportunities to make a real difference for many people in our community, and in our own lives, are immense.

It will be different. It will be exciting. It will be challenging. It should be rewarding. Very rewarding. It will also be part of a long, rich tradition of the Congregational Church of West Medford living its faith, responding to the changing spiritual needs of West Medford. In 1872, CCWM started with 26 members. In 2014 CCWM "doing business as" Sanctuary, United Church of Christ" may start with about that same number. Just imagine what we might be able to do.

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A neighboring UCC congregation that had almost twice our membership -- and many wonderful members -- sold their building and closed a little over two years ago. That was and is very sad.. We might be smaller, but we perceive an exciting new mission for us. So many of you have done so much for your church, our church, over the past decades, and especially during the challenging journey of the past several years. I know you will be an important part of Sanctuary going forward.

Less than an hour ago, I participated in my last service in 400 High Street. (I will be in Texas at a conference next weekend.) It was a wonderful, moving service. As I walked out the front door I realized that if I walked back into that same sanctuary a month from now, it would not be the same at all. The building is important and beautiful, but the people who walk in and out every Sunday (and hopefully other days of the week) are what make the church truly special. The worship services Rev. Wendy conducted in Fellowship Hall showed clearly we do not need an organ, stained glass windows, or rows of pews to have a deeply moving worship service. YOU are what makes CCWM special. And will make Sanctuary special and successful.

Sanctuary honors the achievement of our CCWM's forbearers over 142 years. I feel privileged to be a part of this congregation, and am proud of the bold decision you have made. I look forward to worshipping and serving with you in the months and years ahead.

Gratefully,

Paul

Paul M. Roberts
Moderator of the Congregational Church of West Medford