

Community Minister's Report 2016
Presented to the congregation for February 5, 2016, Annual Meeting

Risk taking is not for the faint of heart. Even with the most precise polls, sage advice, and thorough research, the act of taking a risk still induces an overwhelming amount of tension, apprehension, and suspicion. Most of these visceral effects have a lot to do with the fact that chance is erratic and adheres to no rules. Because of this, risk taking requires a strong will, a steady mind, and a steely gut.

Every day, I am thankful to God that Sanctuary United Church of Christ is not faint of heart. This congregation has proved that despite the tension, through the apprehension, and beyond the suspicion, it is indeed a risk taker. Sanctuary has remarkably authenticated this claim to be true, namely by electing to make for itself a new home: one out of a towering structure and into the town streets; away from a majestic labyrinth and toward a mysterious laboratory; forth from a humongous organ and into a humble storefront. Sanctuary is no stranger to taking risks.

Recently, the church again proved its mettle. In the spring of 2016, Sanctuary took the risk of calling me as its Community Minister. After multiple interviews, numerous discussions, and much deliberation, the leaders and pastor of this church elected to choose me: a young, queer, Black, immigrant Methodist, who resides outside of Medford -- someone who is every bit different and every bit a risk. However, therein lies the beauty. I am different and risky, but so is Sanctuary.

Sanctuary is young, sometimes inexperienced, but always intrigued. Sanctuary is queer, most times not looking like a "real church", but always committed to "keeping it real". Sanctuary is an immigrant, sometimes foreign and out of place, but always settled in its purpose. Sanctuary's message exists on the margins, most times sticking out, but always sticking up for what is right. We *are* a new kinda church for a new kinda world; a peculiar church; a different church; a church that understands that if there is a chance that something can bring even a shred of goodness into the world, it is a risk worth taking.

I am proud to report to the Annual Meeting that Sanctuary has taken such risks and, by the grace of God, has yielded positive results. Through the Spirit's inspiration, the mission and vision of this church went beyond 458 High Street, to the people and places that needed a little sanctuary. Three important communities were impacted by our commitment to care for Medford and beyond: educational circles, neighborhood circles, and social justice circles.

Educational Circles

Sanctuary UCC has established and nurtured thriving relationships with Medford High School and Tufts University. Respectively, the connections to these educational institutions were started through key members of the community. Sanctuary UCC was introduced to the Black Student Union and Gay Straight Alliance through the guidance counselor of Medford High, and in like manner, the University Chaplain of Tufts extended a branch to Sanctuary. Through attending numerous club meetings and a number of chapel offerings, Sanctuary was able to make a huge splash in these educational waters. For its annual Candlelight Interfaith Service, I was invited to give the benediction to the one thousand students that assembled on Tufts' hill. And for the GSA's annual "It Gets Better" assembly, I gave a message of hope and unity to first year high schoolers. Both relationships have been reciprocal in the way that many of the students from both clubs have volunteered at Sanctuary-led events, and with the Leadership Development Initiative chapel student involvement is expected. All in all, Sanctuary, Tufts, and Medford High School are poised to have a prosperous year of collaboration.

Neighborhood Circles

Medford Square has been buzzing with energy, and Sanctuary has taken part in a lot of the excitement. In so doing, we offered hospitality, community, and charity.

During the heat of the summer months, Sanctuary was on the city streets as a participant of Circle the Square. Amongst the many businesses and corporations, Sanctuary was the only faith community present, always taking a creative approach to the festival's theme.

As the temperatures dropped, but still not the enthusiasm, Sanctuary was a substantial contributor toward the West Medford Halloween Block Party. The church reimagined its space and was transformed into a haunted museum. Volunteers from Medford High played as ghouls and goblins, scaring the socks off those who dared to enter.

And during the most wonderful time of the year, Sanctuary took part in a celebration put together by the West Medford Chamber of Commerce. Along with our storefront neighbors' Holiday Flash Sales event, we offered hot cocoa, warm cookies, and heartwarming carols.

Social Justice Communities

Sanctuary is devoted to speaking truth to power and making every effort to bring forth equity and fairness to all, especially for those in Medford and surrounding areas. This commitment has manifested itself in a multiplicity of ways; however, two of them that are new this year are Bread of Life and Medford Conversations Project.

Bread of Life is an organization that focuses on mitigating the food insecurities of folk from Malden and surrounding communities. A couple of Sanctuary members were not sure how we would be able to help out with this effort, but took the risk to form a team despite the odds. Now, not only do Sanctuary members regularly volunteer at Bread of Life, but have also found a partner in Shiloh Baptist Church.

Medford Conversations Project is a grassroots effort that hopes to usher unity and understanding through the art of dialogue. Through facilitated discussions, the mission of the project is to promote a healthy strategy to break down the walls of prejudice and discrimination. Sanctuary has been involved with the project through its starter events such as Envision Medford and World Cafe, but at a higher level, both pastors have been taken leadership roles on the steering committee for the project's biggest event yet. Over the course of six weeks, Medford residents will hold moderated conversations about race and ethnicity. The city is talking, Sanctuary is listening, and together we can make this city better for all.

Risks are what got us here and I believe risks are what will keep us here. I am full of pride when I reflect on all of the great work we have done together. In great ways, we have been able to match an overwhelming amount of endeavors with an overwhelming amount of enthusiasm. For this, I am thankful and I am brimming with confidence for what we can be for the each other and the city in the immediate future. As we journey further into this new year, may we continue to take a chance on hope, throw the dice for peace, and take a gamble on love.

Amen.

In sincerity,

Rev. Lambert N. Rahming, Jr.