

Moderator's Report 2017

I have been moderator for six years, concluding my term limit. Over the past twenty-five years I have served as moderator for thirteen (or almost half my life as a member of the church). These past two terms have seen dramatic changes in the Congregational Church of West Medford (CCWM), now doing business as Sanctuary United Church of Christ (UCC). In 2013 we invited Rev. Wendy Miller Olapade to lead us. We then went through the Crossroads program and voted to sell our property at 400 High Street. We did not take the “easy way” out and vote to close and give our financial resources away. We determined to move into a storefront and continue to serve our community in innovative ways.

That move was challenging in many respects including developing a new, far smaller church space in a storefront. We saw some long-term members depart to join congregations that worship in traditional environments and offer classic religious music, choir, and Sunday School. We wished them godspeed, encouraging them to remain members of Sanctuary and to support our mission efforts in the community. Some have.

We learned to appreciate the many challenges facing the institutional church, catholic and protestant, evangelical and progressive. We had experienced them as a “pillar church” with an impressive but aging building and a shrinking congregation. We had implemented many innovations in the organization of CCWM and in the building to attract and retain members, but we were fighting a losing battle. We eventually recognized that dramatic change was necessary to survive.

Since moving to 458 High Street, we have simplified worship and changed our focus from maintaining the building and trying to bring people in to it, to carrying our faith out to the community.

It has been a fast-evolving process. A few more members slipped away to return to more traditional worship as they knew it many years ago. We began innovative new community programs in 2016. *Faith and Film, Art Church, Music for the Soul, and Dinner Church.*

In 2016 we hired a full-time community minister to extend our reach into the community at many levels. Over the next year it became increasingly apparent that having a second full-time ordained minister was not succeeding as we had envisioned, not moving us closer to essential growth and sustainability. Our film and art programs, however, were attracting community members. They included people who might be members of another church or denomination, or who had eschewed the institutional church of their childhood (for a multitude of reasons) but were attracted to the mission of Sanctuary and its “Deep Questions, Deep Conversations, Deep Connections, and Deep Convictions.”

Our new worship services, with an emphasis on conversation, attracted some wonderful people, but not the numbers we needed to grow meaningfully. We found others who wanted to participate in and support our missions, whether *Faith & Film, the Arts Ministry, Lakota YouthStay, Bread of Life* in Malden, the *Outdoor Church* in Cambridge, meals for the *Shortstop Shelter for Youth* in Medford, *AM2PM* in Medford, or the newly evolving *Medford Cares*. It is truly amazing what a small number of people can do for their neighbors. It was obvious that for Sanctuary to grow and carry out more of its mission, we needed increased participation from the community at large.

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Over the past six months some very talented community members have invested considerable hours and effort to help Sanctuary accomplish some goals and, particularly, to plan to accomplish more.

What seems like a virtual revolution in Sanctuary's organization proposed in the bylaws this year is actually a high-speed evolution. I have long been fascinated by Stephen Jay Gould and the theory of evolution he espoused, "punctuated equilibrium." The theory (as summarized by Wikipedia) proposes that most evolution is characterized by long periods of evolutionary stability, which is infrequently punctuated by swift periods of branching speciation as opposed to the popular idea that evolutionary change is marked by a pattern of smooth and continuous change. Sanctuary is in that "punctuated stage." Substantial change is occurring rapidly and dramatically, and evolving into something that is actually much of what we had envisioned. We have members of the community, some of whom are active members of other churches and other denominations, who want to see Sanctuary grow and succeed, and they have already invested considerable time in helping us to do that. They want to invest themselves in what we are doing in our community, and are supporting Sanctuary with real commitments of time, self, and money.

In the proposed bylaw revisions, we are asking that people be able to join Sanctuary and participate in discernment and decision making in one of two ways: 1) traditional membership for people who consider themselves followers of Jesus and; 2). a new kind of partnership for those who may be active members of other churches or faiths, or do not see themselves drawn to traditional institutional church membership but who are able to commit to Sanctuary's mission and purpose. Partners can serve as an officer, participate in the Leadership circle, and be actively involved in all our efforts, including Medford Cares and Lakota YouthStay. (Only the Moderator and the Trustees would be required to be members of Sanctuary.) This is a significant opportunity for engaging broader public support and the best road to long-term growth and sustainability.

At the same time, in conjunction with proposed staffing and support systems changes we can envision new opportunities for worship. We already have the possibility of three families with young children willing to experiment with "messy church." Our 4th Sunday Fellowship has morphed into Breakfast Church and that model is seeing some strong engagement. Implementing these new efforts in marketing, development, and communications with experienced professional lay staff will enable the pastor to invest her time where her training and skills can make a unique difference.

Several other major issues merit your attention as well.

FINANCIAL POSITION

For the past six years we have budgeted for costs that we thought we might need to incur so the congregation would have a full view of our financial situation. In recent years we have been under budget consistently and have drawn down less from the invested funds than had been expected. Today our *Statement of Financial Position* (formerly known as the *Balance Sheet*) shows a record \$3,893,000. This includes our largest unrestricted invested funds holdings in history, \$3,147,000. Despite drawing down \$510,000 total over the past two years from our unrestricted invested funds, the market value of our unrestricted funds is \$75,000 larger than it was two years ago! This

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is due largely to a very favorable market; our unrestricted investments grew around 15% in 2017. We should note that the excellent investment alternatives offered by the United Church Funds (UCF) with their low administrative costs, and our prudent budgeting, also make a significant difference. Our *Statement* could actually be over \$4,000,000 because the parsonage, currently valued at \$350,000 on the *Statement of Financial Position*, likely has an actual current market value of \$500,000-550,000. It's merely a question of someone having enough time to document that. That should be reflected on next year's *Statement*. We cannot reasonably expect such investment performance to continue, so we are better positioned now than we likely shall be for at least several years to invest for the long-term growth of Sanctuary.

Our financial position also enables us to pursue important opportunities to build the base of participation in and financial support for Sanctuary. Thus, in 2018 we propose to hire a marketing and development manager (70% "full time") whose primary responsibilities are to increase public awareness of and personal and financial support for Sanctuary and to manage a small staff of other specifically skilled part-time paid and volunteer workers to build a base of recurring financial support for all aspects of Sanctuary, including *Lakota YouthStay*. Because of the proposed implementation schedule, costs for 2018 should be roughly only \$25,000 above last year's budget for primarily the community minister. Thus we will have roughly half a year to develop and begin testing this program, which would cost roughly \$48,000 more on an annual basis going forward. The expectation is that the investment in this program will at least pay for itself in 2018, if not more, with much higher expectations for 2019.

PARSONAGE

Since before 2013, we have regrettably deferred some necessary maintenance and repair and all improvement costs for the parsonage, not for lack of money but for lack of volunteers able to take some responsibility for planning and overseeing the repairs. In 2017 we appropriated \$15,000 to begin significant necessary repairs to the parsonage. Rev. Wendy investigated the necessary repairs and potential improvements to the property including major repairs in the kitchen and bath, and adding a second bath, which would considerably increase the market value of the house. Thus we are proposing to set aside, outside the recurring budget, \$50,000 to be spent this financial year on repairs and major improvements to the parsonage with the full expectation that such improvements will require up to an additional \$50,000 to be appropriated in the 2019 budget. The congregation should be fully aware of the need to cease deferring critical maintenance and improvements and be prepared to invest \$100,000+ in the parsonage. With the gains we have achieved in the market over the past two years, there is no better time to finally do what we should have done several years ago but could not for lack of human resources. We believe the property value would increase to >\$600-650,000 in market value with the improvements. We hope that we will be able to assemble a small committee of volunteers to oversee the effort, including some people whose terms expire on the Leadership Circle.

MINISTRY

I would like the congregation to fully appreciate that we acted wisely and well when we selected Rev. Wendy Miller Olapade as our Lead Pastor roughly five years ago. We have moved two blocks geographically, but light years spiritually and psychologically. We know "Church 2.0," as our parents knew it, still exists and still meets many people's religious and social needs. We also know

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that Church 2.0 does not meet the spiritual needs of many of our neighbors no matter what denomination, if any, and of fewer and fewer young adults. The decision to move to a storefront was revolutionary as we embarked on a trip where we knew the destination but not how we would get there. It is a continuing experiment with important meaning far beyond ourselves. It is important to the lives of still unknown neighbors in the greater Medford area, and on Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. It is important to the future of the United Church of Christ in the tri-state area and in the world at large. It is important to the Christian Church as we know it in a period of dramatic shifts in public attitudes. And it is important to US.

Wendy could not have known the highways and byways she would be traveling over the next five years. Fortunately, she has almost boundless energy and enthusiasm, and a strong faith. All have been called upon as she helped us sell a venerable building, led us down Massachusetts Route 60 to 485 High Street, into a "sanctuary" she designed from scratch and built with drywall. She has given us the opportunity to see what we think can work and to move on from what does not work. She has faith in what we are attempting to do. She regularly asks the Leadership Circle if we still have faith in her and her leadership, and our answer has always been yes. I find it hard to believe what we have gone through in the past five years. Wendy has understood the need for strong leadership in Sanctuary and in our community because we are currently fewer than we need to be to be sustainable. She is committed.

I believe relatively few ministers would have been able to lead us through the dramatic changes we have experienced. This year the Leadership Circle did not propose a salary increase for Wendy, not because she doesn't deserve one but because there was so much on our plate (as you can see by the agenda for the Annual Meeting) we literally did not have time to address it. If Sanctuary approves the proposed changes in bylaws and the new budget, the pace of change will accelerate. We will hire trained professionals to provide critical marketing, development, and communications knowledge and experience to grow community awareness and support of Sanctuary and participation in its programs. I would strongly encourage the new Leadership Circle and the Congregation to thoughtfully consider a meaningful salary increase for Rev. Wendy if we come close to achieving our goals in 2018.

LEADERSHIP

We are going to experience significant changes on the Leadership Circle as several of the people who have been leaders of the church since before the move are cycling out according to the bylaws, having fulfilled their maximum two consecutive terms. Pending approval of the new bylaws, several new partners of Sanctuary have volunteered to stand for the Leadership Circle. We are lucky and grateful to have them.

Thank you to Rev. Wendy for her commitment to Sanctuary and her faith. She has invested more than anyone could reasonably expect. I would also like to thank everyone who has served Sanctuary this past year, especially on the Leadership Circle. Most particularly I would like to thank the people who are completing their second term. Amanda Coughlin, who recently moved to Framingham, served the Congregational Church of West Medford as Moderator in what seems like light years ago. More recently, as Treasurer she has been incredible in completely reorganizing our entire financial management system, including guiding us through a new online version of

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QuickBooks, and restructuring the accounts. She accomplished this while migrating from managing 400 High Street to managing 458 High Street and a very different model of church. She has made life easier for our future Administrators and Treasurers. She has been a rock and she will be missed. Thank you also to Bruce Roberts who has served as Vice Moderator and provided excellent counsel for strategic planning over the past six years, as well as for all his work on Pine Ridge.

As I wrote last year, in situations like ours “next year” should always be more challenging – and successful -- than the past year. Sanctuary needs your support, our support, more now than ever before. There are tremendous opportunities available for us to make a real difference through our contributions of time, talent, and treasure. It has been an honor to serve you during a period of rather bold decisions that can have such a positive effect on our neighbors wherever they may be, and on us.

Paul M. Roberts
Moderator
January 24, 2018