

2017 Lead Pastor's Report

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As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. Jesus came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them. —Mark 1:29-31

Healers Healing: Broken and Becoming

Beloved, this has been a heluva year – or maybe what I should say is this has been a heluva yearS. As has already been so eloquently observed by our beloved church patriarch and out-going moderator extraordinaire, Paul Roberts—to whom we owe more than most of us realize—“we did not take the easier, softer way.” This calling to follow Jesus out of the building and into the street; this vision to be sanctuary for today’s seekers (be they SBNRs, Nones, or Dones); this purpose to pursue worship and faith-formation through art, film and popular culture; this spreading of love and care through circles of service; this being Jesus’ hands and feet and justice seekers – this has been very hard and sometimes messy work.

There has been no map, no instruction manual, no easily googled set-of-directions for becoming something completely different than we (or anyone else) has ever been. There never is for trail blazers or prophets. And so, while the gospel we share remains the same as it has always been, we continue to bumble and stumble and babble a bit when we try to say who we are and what we think we are becoming as the 3.0 church experiment known as Sanctuary United Church of Christ.

From my perspective, 2017 was an even harder and messier year than the one before. That is no surprise – for without a map the farther away from the starting point one travels, the more uncertain one becomes of the way. The deeper into an experiment one digs, the more data and failed trials one must process. And, the longer we do this; the more we invest spiritually, emotionally, physically and financially. The larger the investment is the bigger the risk is; and the bigger the risk is the greater is the potential for falling. So the import, the significance of each of our decisions and each of our expenses weighs heavier and looms larger than the one that preceded it.

Despite much positive feedback from people who were engaged, despite many hopeful moments of community and connections, despite plenty of faith-filled attempts at living into our call to ‘be sanctuary’ - we arrived at the third anniversary of our departure from the (still) beloved 400 High Street location aware of how hard it had been and how messy it still felt. At our October 1 Annual Visioning Meeting our core congregation and leadership circle were anxious about sustainability, having made little progress in standard measures of growth; diverted from the vision that had called us out of the institution and into street level discipleship; conflicted about which direction we should turn; and disappointed by the outcomes of some of our efforts. As we faced those disappointments, including the end of the ministries of two staff members in which we had invested a great deal, some wondered if we had enough energy and lay leadership to continue.

But, God always makes a way when there is no way! In a turnaround moment of envisioning the Leadership Circle discovered a new found clarity about what was working and what we believed we were good at. These are characteristics about our ministry which differentiate Sanctuary from other churches and we developed a beautiful way to describe it. We realized that we were really good at “asking deep questions, having deep conversations, making deep connections and developing deep convictions.” We realized that we were doing that in small, collaborative worship circles, through art and film discussion circles, and in service circles such as Medford Cares, Lakota YouthStay and the Recovery Community. We understood that while our Sunday worship remained very small we were forming faith in other meaningful ways and connecting with literally hundreds of people outside of these circles through special spiritual gatherings like Easter Sunrise, Prayer Vigils, Ashes-to-Go and the Medford Overcoming Addiction Kickball Tournament. We celebrated that because of our progressive position in the city and our unique model of ministry we were seeking justice through moral leadership with thousands of folk outside of Sanctuary via social media and organizations like Safe Medford, Medford Conversations, and the Medford Film Collaborative.

We also perceived that, as in any experiment, we needed to further narrow our efforts but strengthen our commitment to that which was working and attracting engagement. We gave ourselves permission to stop trying to be more than we already were, to lean further into that which was working, to connect more fully with those who were already engaged, and to develop leadership from outside of the core congregation that had come down the street from CCWM.

We knew we were standing at a turning point. We asked for help – from God -- and from some of those people who were excited about Sanctuary but were not with us on Sunday mornings. At a beautiful breakfast this past fall – they told us why they thought Sanctuary UCC should continue. “Your open and affirming, extravagant welcome of the LBGTQIA community is ‘everything’.” “I had no spiritual life, ever, until I connected with Sanctuary.” “I have lived in Medford for 20 years, but never felt connected to the city until I started in service through Sanctuary.” In an hour, we were inspired and encouraged and began to heal. Over the next few months we were healing in ways we did not even know were needed – individually, systemically, and spiritually.

We had all become exhausted by how hard it was to rip ourselves away from how church had been and finding our way without a map. We were all worn down by all the cleaning up we had to do of the messiness of grief and resistance to change. We were hurting from the breakage and disappointment. But we began to see a way forward with the fresh perspectives we were getting from people energized by the new way we envisioned (albeit not yet achieved) being church.

The good news is, we were smart enough to ask some of those people to join us in thinking strategically about Sanctuary’s future and Sanctuary’s sustainability. Here were beautiful new perspectives – seeing not the mess, but the message of love and faith and grace, of care and connection and communion. Here were energetic affirmations – feeling not the loss of what had been, but a celebration and joy for what was to be. As Joanna Begin has observed, we knew that we needed to do something different, and we had been doing a lot of talking about it but we did not yet have the eyes to see the way. We really needed those outsiders viewpoints, their new pairs of glasses, to be able to break through and envision God’s new way forward. And so it was that through the Strategic Planning process we found ourselves in this moment, re-booting again the Sanctuary ministry plan and staffing model and gearing up for actions and decisions that will lead us to sustainability and impact.

We are at watershed moment. I know, I know - I have said that before and you may be scoffing at these words since I seem to say it every six months or so since we walked out of that huge stone edifice and freed ourselves to be the new thing that God has called us into. But when you are in an experiment there are a lot of watershed moments – a lot of moments when you reconnoiter and reassess and regroup for recovery. That is what experiments are like! And that is what healing is like. Its never a precise path or a simple, single certainty. Healing is a process and its un-certain. Healing starts on the inside and can be kind of icky on the outside until it happens but eventually it strengthens that which has been healed and readies it for renewed engagement and service.

We are at a watershed moment of regrouping, recovering and restarting – again! Praise God! I am convinced that this healing in which we find ourselves will be at the heart of our future and our formation as Sanctuary. As we have been healed so we will have healing to offer. As we find recovery, so we will have recovery to offer. As we build out community and connection, so we will have connection to offer. As we form in faith, so we will have faith formation to offer. In our faith tradition, healing takes many forms. God the Great Healer, in relationship with us, tends to the healing of body, spirit, mental health, community, and nation. So through our relationships will we have to offer healing of spirits, community and nation.

We don’t have to be perfect people to be healers and we don’t have to be a perfect church to be a healing community. Henri Nouwen offered the brilliant image of Jesus as a wounded healer and invites us into this paradigm for our ministry and our service. “The great illusion of leadership” he writes, “is to think that [one] can be led out of the desert by someone who has never been there” (*The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society*).

Our proposal for staffing is an investment in our healing, our recovery, our communion and our faith formation. If we are successful, I will be freed to preach and teach and lead us deeper into the kind of circles and faith formation that will re-make people’s lives. Mary Luti wrote an Affirmation of Faith that inspires my hope for

this little experiment that we so dearly love for it names the kind of faith that Sanctuary has been called out to offer – faith in God who is maker and re-maker of all that is, maker and re-maker of tables and tales, maker and re-maker of imagination; faith that everything can be (and should be) reborn, remade, refilled, rediscovered, retrieved and restored - including restarts and upstarts like Sanctuary United Church of Christ. May it be so.

An Affirmation of Faith by Mary Luti

We believe in God,
maker and re-maker of everything that is,
in whom there is always more,
and more to come;
and by whose wonder, work, and will,
even the dead find life.
We believe in God.

We believe in Jesus Christ,
maker and re-maker of tables and tales,
in whom the welcome is wide,
the feasting free;
and by whose weeping, words, and wounds,
even the lost are found.
We believe in Jesus Christ.

We believe in the Holy Spirit,
maker and re-maker of imagination,
whose eyes see over the horizon,
beyond the end;
and by whose urgency and fire,
even the truth gets told.
We believe in the Holy Spirit.

Therefore, we also believe
that everything that lives can be reborn,
all hidden things can come to light,
all broken things can be remade,
the empty larder can be filled,
and promises gone stale and hard
can taste like bread again.

And we believe the old, old Story can be told again
to thrill sad hearts like rediscovered love;
that even lost and frightened lambs like us
can be retrieved, restored to courage,
and declare the Truth
that makes the tyrants tumble
and the captives free.

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*In humility for all that they have offered, I thank God for every moment of service, every thoughtful word, every hard conversation, every graceful forgiveness, every word of encouragement given to me and to the community as a whole by those who have served in ministry and leadership this year. Especially want to acknowledge those whose terms on Leadership Circle are ending: Paul Roberts, Bruce Roberts, Amanda Coughlin - without whom we literally would not have made it.*

*Thank you as well to all the beloved ones who have served on, baked for, cooked for, shopped for, recruited for, tabled for and more: PPRC, Nominating Committee, Lakota YouthStay, Medford Cares, Arts and Inspiration, Outreach, Bread of Life/Outdoor Church Sandwiches – thank you for all the hours, labors, cookies, greetings, sharing, leading, discovering, caring, organizing and showing up!*

*Medford has been blessed by all of these things and many, many more! May God continue to bless us with great leadership and caring companions.*