

## Leadership Concerns

In 2013, our church began a UCC program called Crossroads in order to discern our future path. Like many mainstream churches, our congregation was dwindling and the invested funds were being spent at an alarming rate. Crossroads was an intense, significant year long process which involved the entire church meeting in several groups of approximately 10 members each. There were also regular meetings at the MAUCC office in Framingham to compare notes with other churches who were undertaking a similar process.

Out of this process, we designed and voted on a chosen path which including sale of our church property at 400 High Street in 2014, a commitment to continue with the UCC, and a choice to move to a storefront at 458 High Street with a new vision to be a different kind of church.

We evaluated a number of possible models of new church leadership. We chose one which involved the entire congregation in a commitment to a new structure which was more appropriate to our reduced member size and would offer new ways of being a welcoming, inclusive church (as we had always been) in the context of our faith as action-oriented followers of Jesus. We named our transformed church “Sanctuary, United Church of Christ,” wrote new bylaws to reflect our changes, and set concrete milestones so that we could be realistic about our progress.

We recognized at all times that we were undertaking a very bold and risky move. We set a number of milestones in terms of attracting new members with the goal of obtaining financial sustainability on pledges within 5 years (2019).

We felt protective of the financial commitment of our ancestors as we made our new plans. We agreed, and remain committed to, the idea that a church which lives on its investments is not the kind of church which is needed in the world today. We set a goal of sustainability or the church would close when we reached an invested funds balance of \$2.2M. At that point, we felt it would be responsible to allow a different church or the UCC to use our funds to serve in a way that we had been unable to achieve.

As a congregation, we have always been committed to a bold and meaningful way of following Jesus that would be welcoming to all. We were not, and have never been, a new church start. We were not, and have never been, a parallel start, where old traditions and services are maintained for the former congregation and bold new ideas and ways are offered to a new congregation. This is a very significant difference which at this time does not seem to always be understood or appreciated by some. We understood and sometimes disagreed with changes that were made in our church but we understood that change was necessary.

There are many members that have not always felt respected through this transformative process. For a variety of complex reasons, our church has become for some a painful and difficult place where we do not always feel welcomed. Some of the former members chose to leave for other churches, some remained members with continued interest, and others remained active. This does not mean that any of these members were not committed to the new concept but some felt that they were not welcomed, heard or respected as the church was portrayed more and more as a “new church start” which it is not.

A huge change in a church such as this will naturally result in disagreements and changes that will not please all. But in that context it is necessary to speak to each other with respect and understanding. It is important for new members to seek out the institutional memory of long-time members so there is an understanding and appreciation of what has come before. Some of our long-time members have not experienced that respect or understanding and have been hurt by the words and actions of a few. We are asking that the pastor and the leadership circle give more concern to this and allow us to contribute in a meaningful way to this incredible undertaking to which we have so heavily contributed with our time, talent and treasure over many years.

We suggest that we reconsider our current leadership structure and begin to allow this church to be lay-led as it always had been and should be. This is not a concept that has been well understood as we went into a new model and we have created a structure which is heavily pastor-led by default. This has not been healthy for our beloved pastor nor is it appropriate for our limited leadership especially when there are members who have the ability, energy and willingness to be more involved. To disrespect and reject them and their ideas is not leading to a positive result for our church. We recommend that an inclusive model take into account those who have devoted much of their adult lives to the life and wellbeing of this church and that we discern new ways of being a kind, welcoming and respectful community as Jesus would have us do where all members are encouraged and supportive to be action-oriented followers of Jesus.

### **Pine Ridge Ministry/Lakota Youthstay**

In light of this idea, one highly successful ministry that our church has maintained through all of this is the Pine Ridge Ministry. In 2012, we made our first trip to Pine Ridge with appropriately 20 members of our church family. At the time, this was more than one third of our congregation. Prior to the trip, this group, with a number of other supporters, participated in book studies, films, and other educational events which were open to the public. When they returned, they were changed deeply in their hearts and minds and felt a strong calling to do more for our Native brothers and sisters. They shared a new and spiritual way of understanding to our congregation. This experience not only deepened the faith of these participants but also brought new members and participants to our community that was truly amazing and powerful. We reveled in our new ways of thinking and our increasing commitment to being the hands and feet of Jesus in the world. The Lakota YouthStay was born out of this Pine Ridge Ministry.

This strong ministry continues today with yearly volunteer trips to the reservation to work on building projects and relationships. The ministry continues to inform, teach and lead many to new and exciting spiritual paths for our church. As a result of the increased spiritual understanding that we have developed through our relationship with the Lakota people, in the past two years we have been blessed with the opportunity to bring over 20 Lakota youth to Medford. The Lakota Youthstay has been a transformative experience not only for these youth but for their families, our church community and our greater Medford community as well. A substantial number of people have participated through hosting, contributing, volunteering, and learning about Pine Ridge. We have received amazing respect and attention locally, regionally and nationally for this unique and transformative program. The Lakota YouthStay program was awarded the Haystack Award for Social Justice by the regional UCC conference in 2018. The fact that so small a church can do such amazing things is respected and recognized. We are proud of this ministry and the opportunity it provides for our church to practice our faith in such a concrete, meaningful and transformative way.

The Pine Ridge Ministry, including the Lakota Youthstay, is a 100% financially self-sustaining body. There are a substantial number of volunteers, both church members, community members, and advisors on the reservation, who have offered their time, energy and resources to the program. In January, 2018, the Leadership Circle voted on an enhanced budget to grow and expand the program and gave specific goals for the program to accomplish. We are proud to say that every goal was accomplished this year and the program is flourishing. The Youthstay team was given a goal to raise \$25,000 and it exceeded that amount by organizing a very successful auction fundraising, seeking individual donations and obtaining several grants. All other Sanctuary ministries were asked to fundraise and become self-sustaining. To our knowledge, not one other ministry of this church has done so to date.

Recently, the Leadership Circle has argued that the program has become too successful, too big and too demanding of Sanctuary resources and has voted to end the program as a ministry of Sanctuary. They claim that the program draws too heavily on the limited resources of our church despite the fact that 4 new employees/consultants were hired throughout the year. The YouthStay program was promised administrative support and the skills of a professional grant writer. Throughout the year, the majority of the work for the program was done outside Sanctuary by volunteers. The Youthstay program was provided assistance from Sanctuary for tasks such as designing and printing flyers for the auction and several community presentations, printing YouthStay brochures, processing donations, handling credit card transactions at 2 community events, updating the website, event set-up for several community events, utilizing Sanctuary space for host family orientation and several YouthStay activities when the Lakota youth were here in Medford. We recognize that

Sanctuary was going through a difficult period of staffing and transition which may have resulted in less assistance than promised and anticipated.

The effort which brings Youthstay to life throughout the year is provided primarily by volunteer time, in leadership, in hosting and other volunteer events. We do have a commitment to work with the Sanctuary staff and LC to further reduce any perceived burden through finding volunteers in the community to create flyers, brochures, etc. and by requesting access to the website and LYS mailing lists in order to make the flow of work and necessary changes independently without Sanctuary involvement. We are open to discussing other changes as well.

If Sanctuary votes today to remove this ministry, it will very likely end this beautiful and sacred effort that has touched the lives of so many both here in our community and on the Pine Ridge reservation. It will be a huge disappointment to the young people on the Pine Ridge Reservation, to the many people who love and participate in this program, and to the future of our church. We should not let personal feelings, disagreements and resentments color our vision and our ways of following Jesus.

We encourage all to continue to be in dialogue in this important conversation. Within a faith community, no disagreements are irreconcilable for nothing is impossible with God.