Pastor’s Report 2019-2020

This report was submitted before the McLane’s house burned down, making the central metaphor even more poignant.

“Only that which cannot be lost in a shipwreck is truly yours.” Al-Ghazali, 11th Century Sufi

Vermont writer and theologian, Frederick Buechner, talks about the spiritual and transformative power of 12 Step groups, saying, “They make you wonder if the best thing that could happen to many a church might not be to have its building burn down and to lose all its money. Then all that the people would have left would be God and each other.”

To paraphrase Al-Ghazali, “only that which cannot be lost in a pandemic is truly the church.”

Annemieke and Jeremiah McLane gave a concert in our sanctuary on the evening of March 13, 2020 with world-class performances and creative, original arrangements. All that beauty was as usual. What was unusual was the blue tape across every other pew to keep us six feet apart.

The Church Council held an emergency meeting following the concert. Some members could not make it to the church and met with us by video. We did not know it yet, but it was the beginning of the new Zoom era. It was the last time we gathered in the church building.

Within a week or so it would become obvious that the responsible decision was for churches to stop meeting in person, but on March 13th some of us were torn because we felt that even if all else closed, the church should remain open as a safe, supportive place.

The turning point for me came through the wisdom of Bill Burden, the Chair of our Trustees and the Emergency Manager for the town of Strafford. Bill had been studying pandemics. He told us that the only sure way to keep our community safe was to stop gathering. It was the most loving, life-giving action we could take and would serve as a model. (Bill has just died as I write this, leaving us bereft of his wisdom and so many other exemplary qualities.)

We then had to decide how long to suspend worship. It was mid-March. We hoped we could come back together by Easter way off in mid-April but decided to take the extreme measure of keeping the Easter morning crowd at home and opening the following Sunday, April 19th.

It was Friday night and we needed to get the word out to people that we would not be gathering on Sunday. I went home and wrote a letter to the congregation. I will quote from it at length because it says much about our congregation in this past historic year, and also because it is a good reminder for the year ahead as the pandemic continues:

“I feel deep sadness announcing this, but also deep respect and admiration for the wisdom, thoughtfulness and compassion of the Church Council. It was a well-informed, carefully weighed decision, with strong feelings about what a church is called to be in a time of crisis….

“We intend to rise as a congregation to the extreme challenge of this moment to help serve the town of Strafford and come through the crisis as a closer, more resilient beloved community.
“This is a profoundly unsettling and upsetting time. Grief, anxiety, depression, anger, compulsive thinking or news-following, loneliness, sickness—these are all things that the church exists to help us process in a way that transforms suffering into wisdom and that brings us gifts of comfort and light that we can use to help others who are struggling.

“The church leadership has asked that I not meet face to face with people for pastoral care in order to prevent inadvertently spreading the virus, but I am available by email, phone, skype or other video conversation formats.

“Please do not hesitate to reach out to me if you would like to talk or if you would like some spiritual tools to help you through this time or if you simply would like some company for the journey. It would break my heart to think that you were not getting the support from me that you need!

“We may be suspending worship services, but now is a time for us to be of greater service to our neighbors and the world…. 

“This is also a time when we need to speak and act prophetically to defend the poor and marginalized who will suffer most, and to remedy economic inequity, racism, xenophobia and many other forms of prejudice that this crisis may worsen.

“We also need to redouble our efforts to address the climate crisis and stop nuclear and fossil fuel pollution and all the strains human civilization puts on the environment. As this zoonotic pandemic painfully demonstrates, human health depends on the health of other creatures, and the health of creatures depends on the health of the earth. Pandemics will increase in frequency and severity until we heal what we have harmed and learn to live sustainably in harmony with nature.

“In the meantime, we need to develop ways of being resilient and self-sufficient as generations of Straffordites were before us.”

It is remarkable to reread this and see how we have fulfilled it. As I said above, “Only that which cannot be lost in a pandemic is truly the church,” so let’s look at what has not been lost:

1. The Beloved Community of Our Congregation

The Beloved Community was the name Rep. John Lewis, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and others used for a society founded on the ideals of oneness, love of neighbor, the Golden Rule, justice, compassion—in other words the realm of God on earth. This year on Martin Luther King Jr. Sunday, January 19th, we said goodbye to one of our congregation’s core leaders, Gretchen Hannon, as she moved to Maine. Our “Prayer of Farewell” said, “We pray that she will find a spiritual home there that loves and appreciates her as much as we do. We pray that we may all be one and remain united in your Spirit of love, wherever our paths may lead.”
One of our greatest concerns when the pandemic hit us two months later was remaining a close-knit community. Our closeness has actually increased through our weekly Zoom gatherings, and amazingly, Gretchen’s path has led back to our congregation thanks to the pandemic and Zoom. Before the pandemic we held a “longest night” circle for those who were struggling with grief, depression, loneliness or other negative feelings as Christmas drew near. We continued to face grief together during the pandemic. Every week on our Zoom Joys and Concerns we have shared our struggles openly and honestly, and shared solace and light as well.

A member of the congregation said that when this time is over he will look back at our Sunday morning Zoom gatherings as one of the things that got him through. If the church is what remains in a pandemic, clearly beloved community is part of it.

2. Working to Promote Beloved Community in the World Around Us

Another enduring characteristic of the church is our work to create beloved community around us, a world of compassion, mercy, equity, sufficiency, health, justice, peace…

Our Deacons Fund helped struggling people meet their needs before the pandemic and every bit as much during it. Our Mission Committee has continued to support food shelves, farms and other organizations in Strafford, the Upper Valley and beyond.

Several church members are providing leadership for the pandemic response in town, and many of us have been offering rides, checking on neighbors, shopping or delivering food. The Coburns have done extraordinary, heroic service, and the town would not have been able to handle things nearly as well without the years of Bill Burden’s leadership and without the Neighbors Helping Neighbors systems that were already in place.

We had four communication workshops in the fall learning to talk about difficult, controversial issues in a way that strengthens community rather than divides us. We used those skills before and during the pandemic, around the Parish Hall circle rug or on Zoom or in town meetings.

Last fall we held a joint outdoor service at the Town House with the UU congregation led by the Rev. Jim Antal, the author of the book Climate Church, Climate World that we had read together in the spring. The townwide group, Strafford Climate Action, grew out of the book study.

We participated in a gathering of 100 Strafford citizens in front of Barrett Hall as part of the global climate strike on Friday, September 20th, and that demonstration continued every Friday for months. We used our communication training to host a discussion about the Strafford Climate Emergency Resolution that we helped pass at Town Meeting in early March. We used our new signboard in front of the church to support those efforts as well as publicize events.

Marcia Bushnell shared her art and research relating to the global refugee crisis during worship one Sunday in October, and George Kinder returned to talk about creating a Golden Civilization, focusing on democracy, media, the economy and leadership.
Many of us participated in an Upper Valley-wide climate conference on January 11th, and then on January 19th we celebrated Martin Luther King Jr. Sunday. After refreshments our Fulfilling Our Vision committee led us in a conversation about two topics that the church has been considering: declaring the congregation to be open to and affirming of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities; and taking action to support Black Lives Matter and antiracism. The people in attendance overwhelmingly supported both actions but the pandemic diverted our attention.

Then came a series of police killings of people of color that set off protests in over 2000 cities and towns, including Strafford. The church organized a Zoom meeting to discuss education and action and out of that meeting an independent town group formed. It is working on town policies, holding discussions and hosting outdoor gatherings in support of Black Lives Matter.

Building the Beloved Community remains at the core of who we are and what we do.

3. Spiritual Growth and Personal Transformation: Having the Heart and Mind of Christ

As Gus Speth and many others have said, transforming society into something like the realm of God on earth requires a transformation of human consciousness, a spiritual awakening to a new developmental level that sees the interconnections and oneness of all living beings and all the earth. This is what the great spiritual teachers of all traditions saw, including Jesus.

Those teachers pointed to a Way, a path of inner transformation that was essential in order for people to be able to live by the Golden Rule. The mainstream church lost this vision over the millennia, but now in our time of need this principle of our religion has been resurrected.

Our Heartfulness Contemplative Training Circle continues to meet on Zoom. The pandemic and social upheaval have made the need for spiritual support and growth greater and clearer.

Pre-pandemic we read The Wisdom Way of Knowing by Cynthia Bourgeault and had just started the Lenten reading of Season of the Spirit by Martin Smith. During the pandemic we shared resources about the Welcoming Practice with the congregation, including a brilliant short audio introduction by the co-founder of our Heartfulness Circle, Mark Kutolowski.

The Desert Fathers and Mothers were 2nd and 3rd Century Christian masters of inner transformation. Thomas Merton said they were like people who were swimming from a shipwreck—the violent, decadent society around them—but once they reached the shore they knew their calling was to turn around and save others. Learning how to grow toward having the heart and mind of Christ will only increase in importance over the years ahead.

4. The Spiritual Arts

For this reason music, poetry and all the arts will also increase in importance in the church as we go through the coming shipwrecks. The arts are lifeboats, transforming and transporting us.

We are extraordinarily blessed in this area. Before March 13th Annemieke McLane had been offering not only weekly worship but also monthly concerts of beautiful music. They were made
possible in part by the church’s Manheim Fund for the Arts. It also underwrote a singing workshop with Peter and Mary Alice Amidon early in Lent.

Some churches suspended their music programs once they stopped gathering in person, but Annemieke has worked harder than ever to keep the choir meeting by Zoom and to provide recorded music for the on-line worship services, making sure we all have access to the solace, inspiration and transforming power of music. The choir has recorded many songs for online services and Becky Bailey has put them together in lovingly crafted videos.

We also are blessed by other forms of creativity. Mel Goertz organized an evening in October for local writers to share their work that was a high point for both the readers and their audience. Mel and Herbert’s haiku, and Jane Prescott’s, were a weekly feature of our bulletin and we continue to have haiku in our online service. Now we have added an art form—the short video.

If the pandemic is a shipwreck, not only have we saved the arts, they have helped to save us.

5. Worship

I would have said that worship was the most important component of church—that if nothing else got saved in a shipwreck, worship would be. The pandemic revealed a more complex truth.

Our Zoom gathering for Joys and Concerns is separate from the prerecorded videos and texts of the worship service. The Zoom gatherings are consistently well attended, but the numbers “attending” worship videos and texts vary widely from week to week and from element to element. Few people take in the entire service even though it is often shorter than our in-person services. We have much to learn in order to understand what this means about worship.

We had many wonderful moments in worship in the sanctuary before March 13th, including two Christmas Eve services, each magical in its own way, many beautiful moments provided by the choir, two services led by our neighbor, the chaplain and spiritual teacher Rachel Guaraldi, and two joint services with the other churches in town, to name just a few highlights.

During the pandemic the Rev. Deadra Ashton preached and many lay readers and story tellers and singers have enriched the online services. We were able to offer more worship opportunities this Holy Week and found creative ways for people to share their Easter spirit.

Worship continues to be important to the church, and I hope that, as a result of the pandemic, we may find ways to make it better serve the needs of the congregation and town.

6. Children and Youth

Children and youth provided much of the joy in our church in the last year, so we need to begin by thanking the parents who brought them, and Annemieke, Danette and Joey who taught them, and the many teens who looked after the younger ones.
The spiritual exploration sessions focused on love of neighbor and what it means to be a good neighbor in both a local and global sense. The children studied and performed the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech and sang “We Shall Overcome” in this context. They also performed a related skit at the Lords Acre and an original pageant by Annemieke entitled “One Voice” that featured narrators Greta Thunberg and Malala Yousafzai.

A new series of sessions began considering the question, “How can stories from different faith traditions help us to understand how to be a good neighbor?” The plan was to look at stories from Hinduism, Judaism, Abenaki, Islam, Buddhism and Christianity.

Then came the pandemic and children were on screens so much that we decided we could serve them best by scheduling fewer programs, although we continued a Time with Children in the online services and lessons for special Sundays. Once school was over we had a series of story times reading and discussing fabulous books including Wangari's Trees of Peace, Enemy Pie, Boxes for Katje, Beatrice's Goat and Stone Soup.

We also had performances on film by children and youth during the pandemic, including Laila Reimanis on flute, several children reading the alternate Lord’s Prayer and two brilliant skits by one family acting out the Palm Sunday and Pentecost scripture passages.

**Conclusion**

The first concern in any shipwreck is to save the children. That principle weighed on our hearts both before and during the pandemic. We are concerned as a congregation about the future of our nation and the earth. We want to make a better world for our children and we also want to help them prepare to live in and serve this world. The pandemic has made us even more concerned about providing children and youth with the support and resources they need.

We yearn to help them, but like most churches today we are finding that fewer families participate in our activities, before the pandemic and even more now.

So I end this report in the same way that we are ending the year, with big questions that we will be pondering in the year ahead. We need to refine them but here are some examples:

- How can our church best serve children, families and teachers and all people of our wider community in this crucial time?
- How can we help people find the comfort, guidance and strength needed for whatever challenges or tasks life gives them?
- What role can we play to establish the realm of God’s love on earth?
- How can we help bring about what Dr. King called the “revolution of values” and “restructuring of society” that God’s realm would require?
- How can the church support our individual spiritual journeys of transformation?

I am eager to explore these kinds of questions with you. I am so grateful to be serving in this beloved congregation and the town that has been my home for most of the past thirty-seven years. I look forward to continuing the journey together, wherever our paths may lead.
Grace and peace,
Tom