

April 2021 Council Report The Rev. Amy Gopp, Senior Pastor

Worship and Preaching

I always breathe a big sigh of relief after Easter. I absolutely *love* the Lenten season--from the ashes to the reflection to the washing of feet and the Last Supper to the palms to the prayer vigil on Holy Saturday. And there is nothing quite like Easter morning! But as a pastor, this is also one of the busiest seasons liturgically. My intention every year is to provide a rich spiritual landscape for everyone in the congregation, in hopes that there will be “something” for everyone. As always, I welcome your feedback from our Lenten journey--the worship experiences, the faith formation classes, and the devotional materials provided for your spiritual edification. This year was especially poignant due to the pandemic, our cultural and political divisions, and the racial reckoning we are currently undergoing. My prayer is that you personally and collectively experienced healing and wholeness for body, mind, spirit, and that it was truly a spiritual season of recovery.

Admittedly, after I gave the Easter benediction this year, in front of only a camera and two other persons, I couldn't help but feel a deep sense of sadness and grief over not being with you in person, not being able to celebrate our Risen Lord together, side by side, in our place of worship. While I haven't spoken much about it, preaching to an empty sanctuary, or to a lone camera on a tripod, has been extremely challenging. But I do see all of your faces in my mind, and can even conjure up your voices and expressions. Preaching in this manner has been a huge lesson in adaptiveness, communication, and connection. In many ways it is a completely different artform. I pray I have done it justice.

I will speak to other worship services in April in other parts of this report.

Stewardship and New Funding Streams

On Sunday, April 18, our Stewardship Ministry led worship to remind us all, in this Eastertide, of the outpouring of gifts our generous God continues to grant us! Their leadership of stewardship efforts across the life of our church is exemplary. They are intentionally making the connections to *all our God-given resources*. While their primary purpose is to encourage our congregation to respond to all that God has done in our lives, including financially, they are also lifting up the stewardship of our bodies, our time, our talents, our households, our families, and our planet. Kudos to this small but mighty ministry as it leads the charge for all of us to understand that we give to God because we have already been blessed.

The Stewardship Ministry will also help us begin to think about financial stewardship and generosity in new ways--moving us beyond the offering plate. As many of you are already aware, relying solely on the offerings placed in the offering plate, or online, or as a check in an envelope mailed to the church, will be enhanced by our intentional efforts to find other revenue streams. It is a new day, Church! And it is exciting! This is an opportunity for us to get creative, to do some research, apply for grants and other sources of funding, as well as look more strategically at our assets. How might we make better use of our building, for example?

I cannot encourage you, as those serving on Council, strongly enough--please commit to this new way of thinking and “being the church” in these times. We can be proactive as we make a slow return to in person worship and activities. Our congregation will look different! Membership may

no longer be how people relate to our congregation. There will be many who worship online or participate in an outreach project or social justice initiative. But they may not be “members” who tithe or pledge. We have a wonderful chance to begin thinking about how we might ensure the future of our THRIVING church in so many ways by also thinking outside the box on how we will fund our critical mission.

I have asked Karen Carmany, Chair of Stewardship, to help pull many folks together to begin this conversation. I have also spoken with the Budget Ministry about this new step. If you know of any grants we would be eligible for, or would like to do some research, please let me or Karen know.

We can do this! I am excited to help move us forward as a true community center--reaching out from our congregation to our wider community. In a post-pandemic context, we can no longer count on traditional forms of church giving. But we can count on the God who never stops giving!

Worship and the Arts

The Worship and Arts Ministry has been very hard at work. The entire ministry is actively engaging in new ideas for worship in these times--live-streaming, pre-recorded online, in person, and hybrid. They have attended one session already on Hybrid Worship organized by the Illinois Conference of the UCC and will attend another this week. They are also doing research on the best equipment for our sanctuary and church, including improving our internet access in the sanctuary.

HUGE thanks to Worship and Arts for submitting the first grant for external funding! Last Friday we sent an application for a Technology Grant to the Living Water Association. Fingers crossed! This grant would help us fund new equipment and resources for live-streaming and hybrid worship experiences.

Mental Health Ministry/W.I.S.E. Process

The mental health crisis that has arisen during this pandemic and increasingly complex mental health needs are clearly before us. We must take them seriously. Becoming a W.I.S.E. congregation could not be more important, timely, or relevant than it is now.

Our WISE (Welcoming, Inclusive, Supporting, and Engaged) Team, facilitate by Jackie Peck, is faithfully working toward achieving our goal to become a WISE congregation for those living with mental health and addiction challenges and their families—so they feel welcomed, supported, valued, and included in the life, leadership and work of our congregation. The vision to become an official WISE congregation is one of the mission priorities of our Strategic Plan. Although the pandemic slowed down this process, we will realize this goal this year! We encourage everyone serving on Council to participate in the Wednesday evening sessions on Mental Health and Addiction Recovery on Wednesday evenings from 7 – 8:30pm. These conversations are rich!

The intention of the WISE Team is to engage with the whole congregation as we begin to draft a WISE Covenant for Kent UCC. We sincerely hope that your voices will be a part of crafting the language and commitments for this covenant. There is not one of us who has not been impacted by mental health challenges and/or addiction. Destigmatizing our dis-ease and sharing our full humanity openly and honestly is part of becoming WISE, and part of being a church family.

The W.I.S.E. team will soon be working on a covenant to be presented to the congregation for support and approval. Mental Health Sunday is on May 16.

Green Team

The Green Team, chaired by Julie and Jimmy Wallace, is also working toward its strategic objective for Kent UCC to become a “Creation Justice Church” committed to and living out creative justice in our theology, worship, and congregational life and practices. Again this year the Green Team helped craft a meaningful and inspiring Creation Care service in honor of Earth Day. Inclusive of concrete ways we can all better care for our planet home, as well as the theological and biblical grounding for doing so have been lifted up throughout the past year. We hope the trees delivered to your doorsteps last Earth Day have taken root and the “better practices for a new earth” demonstrated in this year’s worship service will inspire you to take seriously our first calling as people of faith—to *serve* God’s Creation. I encourage all Ministry Chairpersons to take seriously this commitment and calling—if there are any ways you are not employing green practices, please prayerfully consider doing so, and encourage others to do the same. It’s really not a choice, but our moral responsibility.

Social Justice and Advocacy

Our Social Justice and Advocacy Ministry is also living out its goals from our Strategic Plan to guide Kent UCC to becoming an unabashedly anti-racist and pro-reconciling church. With ongoing book studies, film discussions, anti-racism trainings, and many of the members of the committee joining local anti-racism initiatives in Kent and across Portage County, they are serving as bold witnesses for us all. We are committed to forming even deeper partnerships with the Portage County NAACP, the Kent Interfaith Alliance for Racial Reconciliation, the Black United Students at KSU and other local groups so we, together, can provide our congregation and community with resources and tools to serve others and make the world a more equitable and loving place.

As we watched the verdict of the Derek Chauvin trial, we applauded each time we heard the word “guilty”—aware that justice has not yet been achieved, but that at least one police officer was held accountable for his white supremacist and inhumane actions.

On April 12, we met with Rev. Dr. Velda Love, Racial Justice Minister for the UCC denomination. We will move forward this fall with ongoing trainings led by our national church and Dr. Love’s Racial Justice training.

Outreach Ministry

What an amazing outreach mission we have now completed! Praise God! We celebrate the dedication of the Habitat for Humanity house built by Kent UCC and 10 other local churches!! A project begun in August 2019, what a joy and blessing to watch the Hummel-Tucker family receive the keys to their new home! Not only have we helped to house a family, but we were also a part of an ecumenical endeavor to demonstrate what the love of Christ looks like when people come together in common service and purpose. Huge thanks to our Outreach Ministry for leading the way. Participating in this Apostles’ Build with Habitat of Portage County is yet one more way we have truly practiced resurrection—even in a pandemic!

Our Outreach Ministry is also committing to the King-Kennedy Community Center, as they raise money for their new gymnasium to be built this summer. In one of the most underserved areas of our community, Kent UCC is stepping up to participate in this significant outreach effort. I also applaud their collaboration with our Social Justice and Advocacy Committee related to this project!

Pastoral and Spiritual Care

My primary and constant concern is the spiritual health and wellbeing of our congregation. I pray for God's guidance as I do my best to offer spiritual care, support, and sustenance to our church family in these terribly difficult times. I have had to do so in new and creative ways, as you know. I trust that the Holy Spirit is moving among us in powerful ways—I have witnessed and felt this deeply—and continue to trust in that comforting and unifying Spirit even though we are not yet able to be together physically. My hope is that during this time of pandemic, people are open to new spiritual practices that will support and sustain them. The pandemic has offered the church an opportunity to live out congregationalism in even deeper ways as it has not been possible for me alone to serve the needs of all our people during this time. Our Diaconate, Stephen Ministers, and each of you have been instrumental in ensuring we are cared for and feel God's love embracing us.

Wider Church Engagement

The Rev. Nayiri Karjian, our Living Water Association General Minister, met with Council on March 22. She presented new governance models, as she did several years ago. Her ideas and information were well received and we are moving forward with a new leadership structure. A team will be formed to help lead the way. Barbara Werstler, Jeff Roeger, and I met with Nayiri again to discuss next steps. We look forward to exploring how we as Kent UCC will live into this new era of organizing ourselves and being the church. THANK YOU, Council, for taking this leap of faith!

Our WISE Team has met with UCC Mental Health Network members from the national church setting. We even have our own liaison, Dr. Vicki Harvey, from the network. It has been a marvelous connection and we feel very supported in our mental health and addiction recovery efforts.

Rev. Dr. Velda Love, Racial Justice Minister, met with the Social Justice and Advocacy Committee in mid-April, as mentioned above. She will offer training this fall and into next year and has committed to walking with us to become an anti-racist congregation.

The Living Water Association's Spring Vitality Festival was Saturday, April 24. While I had registered, I could not attend due to the need to record worship outside that morning. However, it was recorded and I look forward to watching it as the topic is of critical importance--how to "be the church" in these changing times.

I continue to serve on the Living Water Association Commission on the Ministry and the Discernment Working Group. These meetings are every other week on Thursdays. While a big commitment, it is a wonderful use of my gifts and skills and I am truly honored to serve the wider church in this capacity.

The National UCC Offices, under the direction of Traci Blackmon of Justice and Local Church Ministries, have asked me to help facilitate the UCC Women's Table. We meet quarterly. This is an important group as there is no longer a women's desk or women's ministry position on the national staff.

2021 Objectives

As a reminder, I have set my intentions on five key objectives, aligned with our Strategic Plan:

1. **Spiritual development and growth** (Caring for Our Congregation and Faith Formation and Spiritual Growth mission priorities; Spiritual Care of Our Members and Expand Bible Study Opportunities ministries)
2. **Keeping us all connected** (Caring for Our Congregation mission priority; Small Groups ministry)
3. **Becoming a WISE congregation** (Community Outreach and Care mission priority; Mental Health and Addiction Recovery ministry)
4. **Becoming an Anti-Racist congregation** (Social Justice and Global Engagement mission priority; Racial Justice and Reconciliation ministry)
5. **Participatory, elicitive and visionary leadership and governance** (living fully into our mission and claiming our vision to “Be the Church” and beloved community)

Future Dates

April 29 - May 8 - Pastor Amy on vacation (first time since Christmas!)

May 2 - Pastor Kim preaching (Pastor Amy off)

May 9 - Mother's Day

May 16 - Mental Health Sunday - worship led by our WISE Team/MHM

May 23 - Pentecost Sunday - Strengthen the Church special offering received

May 30 - Baptism and Confirmation Sunday/Trinity Sunday

June 13 - Founders' Day

We are guided and inspired by our congregational vision of a beloved community where everyone is celebrated just as God made them, and where all of creation flourishes in the compassion, healing, justice and love of Christ.

Our mission is to love and transform lives by the grace and guidance of Jesus Christ as we do justice, embrace faithful love, and walk humbly with God.

What we have to offer is what people most need, especially now as so many experience loneliness and social isolation, fear and anxiety, grief and longing for what they have either lost or fear losing, and a sense of great uncertainty and even terror about the future. Let us commit fully to our mission and vision.

Thank you for your ministry and your witness!

Respectfully submitted,

Rev. Amy Gopp