

May 2021 Council Report

The Rev. Amy Gopp, Senior Pastor

Worship and Preaching

We celebrated Immigrant Rights Sunday, Mother's Day, Mental Health Awareness Sunday, and Pentecost during the month of May. The United Church of Christ as a denomination encourages her congregations to lift up the rights, contributions, and stories of our immigrant siblings. I am grateful to Kim Nagy for preaching on May 2 and leading worship that day while I took the weekend off to celebrate a milestone birthday. It was a joy to see Humberto, Annie, and Sonia Carro serve as liturgists on May 2, all the way from Mexico!

Mental Health Awareness Sunday was a significant occasion for our WISE Team and process. The culmination of our 6-week series of conversations on mental health and addiction, the team participated fully in every part of the worship experience and I preached on the overarching themes that emerged from our conversations and learnings together. These highlights will help to craft our WISE covenant.

Sunday, May 30 is a very special day in the life of our congregation! We will baptize 3 youth and confirm 5 youth. The service of baptism was recorded on Sunday morning, May 23 at Tannery Park. I baptized Zoe and Gage Bailey and Noah Dunlap with the waters of our own Cuyahoga River. I scouted out a private spot on the river's edge where we were able to do so with family surrounding us. It was truly a moving and meaningful spiritual experience—one the baptized and their families will not forget! While the sacrament of baptism is to be a public witness, and a communal commitment on the part of not only the baptized but also the congregation, the ability to baptize in the river was phenomenal. We may consider doing so in the future!

After the service of baptism, we recorded the Rite of Confirmation for our 5 confirmands, their parents, and confirmation mentors. Unfortunately, this part of our service had to be done on Zoom yet again this year. While not at all ideal, we were happy to reach this spiritual milestone in the lives of these remarkable young people: Zoe, Gage, and Hava Bailey, Noah Dunlap, and Natalie Roeger. Our confirmation mentors include Jackie Peck, Josh Case, Kelley Gifford, Eileen West, and Fay Ann and Kim Sebaly. Each confirmand provided a faith statement or project and their mentors chose a scripture passage reminding them of their confirmands. The service on May 30 will include all of these statements of faith. Pastor Kim will introduce the confirmands on Sunday as well as describe what the Rite of Confirmation is, and I will charge the confirmands in my sermon. Please plan to attend the coffee hour in honor of our confirmands on May 30 at 11:15 on Zoom. Last, a HUGE THANK YOU to Pastor Kim for her amazing efforts to teach our confirmation classes during a global pandemic!

Last, we will honor all of our graduates in worship on May 30 by sharing their names and photos during the postlude. Please encourage our graduates and their families to send us a photo. There will be a graduation card parade on Sunday, June 6 from 4-6pm in the back lot for those wanting to offer cards, gifts, and well wishes to our UYF graduates!

As I look ahead into June, we will celebrate Founders' Day on Sunday, June 13. While the actual date of our founding is June 16, since that falls mid-week this year, the choice was made to avoid Founders' Day falling on Father's Day. This service will yet again be pre-recorded this year, and Fellowship Ministry will distribute gifts to our founders via home deliveries. Hopefully we can record this service in our sanctuary, should the new lighting be fully installed by then.

Last, on Sunday, June 27, the UYF, with Pastor Kim's assistance, will lead the service based on their summer mission experience. It's always special when UYF leads worship!

Worship and the Arts

We have entered a new era of Church! And a new era of how we worship the living God. How timely, as we celebrated Pentecost on May 23, to consider what "the (re)birth of the Church" might now look like! What are the dreams we are now dreaming? What are our visions, those of both young and old? How might we, as a congregation, open ourselves even more widely to the movement of the Holy Spirit in our midst, in these post-pandemic times?

The Worship and Arts Ministry has their hands full! 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 two sessions on Hybrid Worship organized by the Illinois Conference of the UCC. They are also doing research on the best equipment for our sanctuary and church, including improving our internet access in the sanctuary. Last, a small group from W&A, including Felicia Lumpkin and Julie Swango, our AV volunteers, visited Rev. Ken Gifford's church (Kelley's father) to gain more insight into how another church has set up for live-streaming and hybrid worship. This was a helpful trip; the small team returned energized by a better understanding of how things may look at Kent UCC, as well as the costs entailed.

Worship and Arts also submitted the first grant for external funding from the Living Water Association for a Technology Grant. The committee making the decisions is meeting this month and next, as I understand. This grant would help us fund new equipment and resources for live-streaming and hybrid worship experiences. We covet your prayers!

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

In addition to worship planning, preaching, and recording, my focus this month has been our WISE process and mental health ministry. May is Mental Health Awareness Month and we have planned our focus accordingly. Our WISE (Welcoming, Inclusive, Supporting, and Engaged) Team, facilitated by Jackie Peck with input from Mary Homer, 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.

After our recent 6-week discussion series on Wednesday evenings, which had an excellent average of 22 persons in attendance, the team led us in worship on Mental Health Sunday. Our youth serving on the WISE team also participated. The sermon was crafted based on the learnings from our discussions in both the congregational series and the meetings of the WISE team. The intention of the WISE Team is to engage with the whole congregation as we now begin to draft the 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.

On Sunday afternoon, May 23, our UYF walked in solidarity with NAMI, our local mission partner, from the church to the downtown offices of the Mental Health and Recovery Board/NAMI, in honor of mental health awareness. The local representative of NAMI, Lori Zerhouane, walked with us as well! We are excited to renew this partnership with NAMI. A huge

thanks to our UYF for organizing this walk and raising funds for NAMI and our mental health efforts. We had many youth as well as adults join us on a hot Sunday afternoon!

Social Justice and Advocacy Committee

The evening of our May Council meeting is the one-year anniversary of the murder of George Floyd. In our horror, rage, and grief, we have taken this event seriously and prayerfully and mobilized even more boldly as a result. Our Social Justice Ministry continues to make an anti-racist prophetic witness. While Kent UCC has always been about this work, we have all learned much about dismantling white privilege and uncovering white supremacy. Our Social Justice and Advocacy Ministry is thoughtfully and strategically 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 on Thursday evenings (led by Jen Case), 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.

After this spring's initial meeting with Rev. Dr. Velda Love, Racial Justice Minister for the UCC denomination, we look forward to ongoing trainings led by our national church and Dr. Love's Racial Justice training this fall.

The office space for the Portage County NAACP is ideally room 110 in our Sunday School wing. Our church historian, Susan Hansford, has been organizing our historical documents and was in the process of archiving many of these files when the pandemic hit. This office space will need to be negotiated now if we are to prepare it for the NAACP.

Stewardship and New Funding Streams

Over the summer, the Stewardship Ministry will begin, in earnest, to help us all 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 highlight this new direction again this month, as 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 will no longer be the only way 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” in the traditional sense, meaning those who officially “join” the church and 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. As of this past month, I have not heard from anyone yet.

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!

Marketing and Communications

The Marketing and Communications Committee met to put plans in place for a new format of *The Messenger*. We are redesigning the newsletter for different content. Our hope is that it will be much shorter and more concise, focusing on our mission, ministry and strategic plan—which is to say lifting up stories about the ways we are living out our mission and strategic plan as a way of keeping us on track, on the same page, and inspiring us in our ongoing ministry efforts. We will have more images and pictures and thus more color. It will also be mobile-friendly. Terri Silver is the new editor of the newsletter and has joined our Marketing and the Communications Committee which has been a true blessing. The committee is also considering the newsletter coming out quarterly instead of monthly.

We also reviewed use of Engage with the new changes on our website. By all reports, people are much more comfortable with the online format and are becoming more familiar with it. There is still work yet to be done to help members feel more confident in using the membership directory part of Engage. If Council has any feedback on Engage, please let me or Kelley Gifford, Chair of the committee, know.

Pastoral and Spiritual Care

As Governor DeWine and the CDC changed the current COVID guidelines, lifting many of the safety measures in place for the past year or more, I have heard from many of our congregants. Most of us are eager to return to in person activities and worship, while still others are hesitant and will wait to see how things go before returning. This has been a pastoral care issue for the past year—making sure everyone feels safe—and as we begin to think through a reopening of the building for ministry, new concerns will emerge. Not everyone will be on the same page. I ask for the Council's support and loving engagement of all our members, wherever they are on this journey, as we make yet another set of adaptations this summer.

For many, including our youth, having little human contact outside of those we live with has become a spiritual and mental health concern. I have received many requests for referrals for professional help. My primary and constant concern is the spiritual health and wellbeing of our congregation. I pray for God's guidance as we continue to meet people where they are—both antsy to return and having mixed feelings about doing so. Over this summer, and it promises to be a strange and interesting one, I will do my best to offer the spiritual care, support, and sustenance our church family needs. 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. My hope is that during this time of pandemic, people are now 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, will meet with our leadership team, once they have been charged to begin their work by the Council, to look at our

governance model. Barb Werstler will present the team at the May Council meeting. 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.

I continue to serve on the Living Water Association Commission on the Ministry and the Discernment Working Group (DWG). 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. This past week our very own Sophia Hayden met with the DWG and was approved as a Member-in-Discernment with our Living Water Association!

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” in beloved community)

Future Dates

May 30 - Baptism and Confirmation Sunday/Trinity Sunday

11:15 Coffee Hour for our Confirmands on Zoom

June 13 - Founders' Day

June 27 – UYF Sunday

July 5 – 4th of July observed for staff, office closed

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. Let us commit fully to our mission and vision.

Last, thank you all for your generous birthday wishes! I was so touched to hear from so many of you. And I praise God for another year of life, love, and possibility with you!

Respectfully submitted,

Rev. Amy Gopp