

**Report of the Minister of Faith in Action  
To the Council of Living Water Association, Ohio NorthEast,  
Heartland Conference, United Church of Christ  
Saturday, Sept 19, 2020**

Since our last meeting, I have continued to preach and connect with congregations throughout our Association. Below is a summary and update of some of the highlights of my work over the last few months.

**Akron Area Initiatives**

Since our last Council meeting, I have led the following initiatives in the Akron Area.

- Sunday of Service: This past Sunday, I helped facilitate a major volunteer day with First Congregational Church in Hudson, the newly formed neighborhood park organization I founded—Friends of Elizabeth Park, and the Akron Parks Collaborative. The event brought 31 volunteers from numerous area interfaith and nonprofit organizations. A key element of the day was a moment of reflection about redlining and the importance of undoing nearly two centuries of environmental racism and racist city planning.
- Elizabeth Park, Community Empowerment Garden: Continuing the work that began last year with the Akron Parks Collaborative and a number of local Akron organizations, we are nearing completion of the first phase—the base layer—of the Elizabeth Park Community Empowerment Garden. This garden will be an edible, permaculture garden, designed to regenerate the soil; add a layer of protection against the erosion of the Little Cuyahoga River; revive a sense of community pride; memorialize those in the area who have been lost to suicide and violence; provide educational programming about environmental racism, the history of racist city planning, and the relationship between the health of the soil and the health of the community. Several new organizations and neighborhood associations have submitted applications for funding for the next two year-long phases of the project and the education around it. I plan to use this project broadly as a major resource to demonstrate several elements of the Community Empowerment Toolbox I will be working with the Faith in Action Steering Team to complete.
- New Ministry Social Action Ministry at First Congregational Church in Akron: As an offshoot of the previous Akron Housing Discussions, I am now working with Rev. Nanette Pitt and a small group of interested members to form a new social action team out of First Congregational Church. Currently, we are organizing a three-week neighborhood Zoom discussion titled “Middlebury Neighborhood Roundtable.” The plan for this program will feature neighborhood organizations and include discussions about racism, city planning, community building, environmental sustainability, and community engagement.
- Future Engagement Planning: With a full year of organizing in the Akron area, I am planning to continue conversations with ministry leaders from our Akron area

congregations in the hopes of building a strong coalition among them for a regional engagement project. Three important parts of this will include: (1) direction from our Association's newly formed Faith in Action Steering Team; (2) buy-in from our congregational leadership from the beginning of the project development process; and (3) a clear and workable commitment that similar programming can be done in other areas of our Association.

- Tentative Cleveland Area & Stark County Regional Engagement Plans: Several plans are already in the work to begin planning for regional projects in other areas of the Association. Tentatively, I have been in conversation with a number of organizations and ministry leaders about a possible regional program in the Cleveland area. A new clergy support group has developed in Stark County. This group is also interested in possibly planning a Faith in Action project in their region.

### **Building a Faith in Action Steering Team**

Since our last meeting, I have been putting together members of a Faith in Action Steering Team. The Faith in Action Steering Team will provide support, guidance, and oversight of the development and implementation of the Living Water Association's Strategic Plan for Faith in Action, led by the Minister of Faith in Action. The primary role of Team members will provide advice, ensure delivery of outputs, and evaluate the achievement of outcomes. This team will also assist in strengthening several of the already existing channels of support and resources we provide for congregations. These include our Mission and Community Engagement grant programs and renewing the Association's Prophetic Witness through strategic action programs. Planning is in the works for the first meeting to be held by the end of October. The members of this team include the following:

- Maren Koepf, Chair (Member of Federated Church of Chagrin Falls);
- Rev. Mike Bone, Scribe (Minister, Christ UCC in Orrville);
- Rev. Janet Ross, Chaplain (Chaplain, Amistad Chapel, Cleveland);
- Rich General, Grant Teams (Member, Avon Lake UCC);
- Rev. Amy Gopp (Minister, Kent UCC);
- Rev. Jeremy Wanton (Minister, East View UCC, Cleveland);
- Rev. Michele Humphrey (Minister, Imani UCC, Euclid);
- Rev. Brent Gundlah (St. Paul's UCC, Navarre).

### **The Community Empowerment Toolbox**

As a fellow with the Church Building & Loan Fund's Adesé Fellowship, I have been developing a framework for the design of a Community Empowerment Toolbox. I have given a number of presentations to national leadership and innovation programs, including receiving feedback from many members of the National Setting. This toolbox will provide support and resources that *empower our congregations to empower our communities*. Since the plan is to use specific skills that most congregations already have or work hard to build, I refer to it as the *inside out framework*. The working tagline is to "turn the Church inside out and taking the sanctuary to the streets." With the

direction and support of the Faith in Action Steering Team, building the toolkits for this toolbox will become a top priority.

### **Anti-Racism Work**

Over the last few months, I have lead a number of initiatives and provided a number of anti-racism resources for the Association. These include:

- An essay in response to the lynching of George Floyd;
- A summer program and book study on Ibram X. Kendi's, *Stamped from the Beginning*;
- A list of resources on our website; and
- Helping lead and facilitate the newly forming Anti-Racism Network for the Heartland Conference.