

**Living Water Association, Ohio NorthEast,
Ohio Conference, United Church of Christ**

REFRESH RENEW RESTORE

Be a resource and support for the health and wellbeing our congregations, that we may grow into communities of healing and grace embodying Christ in the world

2020 ANNUAL REPORT OF THE ASSOCIATION'S MINISTER OF FAITH IN ACTION

This past year has been one of the most interesting and challenging many of our ministries have faced. Despite the global COVID-19 pandemic, virtual technology has provided us the opportunity to continue and rework nearly all of our congregation's community engagement ministries.

The formation of a Faith in Action Steering Team has been one of the most important benchmarks in the Faith in Action ministry of our Association this past year. This new Steering Team had its first meeting on October 28, 2020. This team's major responsibility is to support the development of a strategic vision for the Faith in Action ministry of our Association. In direct alignment with our Association's purpose, our Faith in Action vision will be *"To support, resource, and empower our congregations to turn faith into action by building strong, resilient, beloved communities."*

A Community Empowerment Toolbox is currently in the early stages of development. A team is still being assembled and planning what this toolbox will look like. I have been sharing and reworking toolkit ideas with pastors and community leaders across our region and denomination. Already in the works are plans for curriculum items (toolkits), demonstration projects, learning experiences, and pilot congregations. Our goal is to have the first draft of an outline and descriptions of the toolbox before the end of this calendar year.

Anti-Racism became a renewed priority for our Association. This past May, the consciousness of the nation was awakened once again to the issues of systemic racism by the public lynching of George Floyd. It was expressed clearly by many of our clergy and congregation members that our Association needed to act. In response, we issued an introductory essay on anti-racism; held an evening of Sacred Conversation; created a list of resources; hosted a summer reading program on Ibram X. Kendi's book, *Stamped from the Beginning*; and began the 21 Week Anti-Racism Challenge. This was in addition to supporting Anti-Racism work with congregations across our Association.

An opportunity has arisen to develop a new vision for Prophetic Witness. A number of clergy and congregational leaders from our Association have joined David Long Higgins and me in the forming of an Anti-Racism Network at the Conference setting. As this initiative continues to develop, we are in the early stages of discussing the possibility of other forms of support for ministries of Prophetic Witness operating in collaboration with the Conference.

Regional engagement in the Greater Akron area has continued. This year began with efforts to design and implement an initial regional community engagement project within the Akron area. This included building strong organizational partnerships in the Akron area; supporting the

restoration of Cascade Valley neighborhood's Elizabeth Park; establishing a neighborhood park organization; designing and developing a publicly owned permaculture food-forest; and partnering with First Congregational Church of Hudson to host a volunteer day of service.

Akron Area conversations on the eviction crisis continued into the summer. In partnership with the East Ohio Conference of the United Methodist Church and Fair Housing Contact Service, these monthly gatherings included representatives from more than 12 area congregations, five of which were member-congregations from our Association. These conversations laid the groundwork for supporting local media reporting on the eviction crisis and partnering with the Summit-County Eviction Taskforce. These community-wide conversations also provided the potential for a number of projects in the works, including the formation of a Social Action ministry at First Congregational Church of Akron and the development of a region-wide rental assistance fund hosted by Fair Housing Contact Service.

An "Organizing 101" workshop was offered as a follow up from our annual meeting in November of 2019. We were privileged to partner with Greater Cleveland Congregation and First Congregational Church of Akron to provide a three-hour introductory workshop on community organizing and social change on January 25, 2020. The event was well attended, with 22 participants, 18 of which were from 11 member congregations. Feedback surveys showed a unanimous approval of the event and clear interest in attending similar workshops in the future.

Community Engagement and Mission Grants continue to be offered to support the outreach ministries of our member congregations. Applications and guidelines can be found on our website at <https://livingwaterone.org/grants-applications/>.

I continue to connect with congregations through preaching, providing workshops, supporting community engagement initiatives, and exploring visions of new outreach ministry and missions.

Deepest thanks to the Faith in Action Steering Team for their support and guidance.

Deepest thanks to all of our clergy and congregational leaders for your steadfast witness and clear conviction. Thank you especially for the fantastic ministry I have witnessed. Thank you all for the opportunity to serve as your Minister of Faith in Action.

Yours Faithfully,

Michael Anthony Howard