St. Paul’s Community CHURCH

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April 28, 2023

Dear Faith in Action Grants Team,

St. Paul’s Community Church fully supports Kathleen McDonnell, member of St. Paul’s, and Tony Vento, member of St. Patrick’s Parish, in their application for the Faith in Action grant through the Living Water Association.

St. Paul’s has a long history of providing services for the homeless, underhoused, and marginalized in our community.  Historically, our Ohio City neighborhood was lower income;  a number of social service agencies are located here in close proximity to one another due to the large homeless population.  However, our neighborhood is shifting; lower-income homes are being replaced by high-price condos, and the area has received an infusion of middle to upper class singles and young families that like the area for its proximity to downtown.  This rapid pace of gentrification has exposed large divisions in the community regarding race and class.

These divisions reached a head regarding a proposed drop-in center for homeless youth.  Lutheran Metropolitan Ministries (LMM), a large nonprofit, owns a building within two blocks of St. Paul’s that is the proposed site of the youth drop-in center.  Because of our close proximity and similarity in services, St. Paul’s was invoked early on in the debate around the youth drop-in center.  Some of the neighbors complained that social service agencies “attract” an unwelcome population to the neighborhood.

St. Paul’s Community Church supports the youth drop-in center as a much-needed resource in our community.  Though the vitriol and heightened divide this issue has exposed in the community reveals fault lines around the issues of gentrification, privilege, race, and class.  Over the last few years as pastor I’ve witnessed a neighborhood that has buried its trauma with new development.

On a personal level, my ministry has grown immensely by shepherding St. Paul’s through this current season.  I have learned from people like Kathleen McDonnell, who has consistently modeled a relationships-first approach.  Through continuous dialogue with Kathleen and others in the congregation, St. Paul’s has endeavored to be a bridge in the neighborhood and a safe space to promote further dialogue.  We have not shied away from our support of the youth drop-in center, while at the same time we have tried to understand the concerns of those in opposition to the project.  In this way we have tried to be “advocates for all” – i.e.  not neutral, but advocates for people on both sides of this issue to have their voices heard.  Being in community does not mean that we will all agree or that there will be no conflict; rather, conflict can be catalyst for transformation and growth.

Through our own experiences working with the homeless and underhoused, we have learned that the best way to address people’s concerns and to expand the attitude of welcome is through relationship-building: relationships are the foundation that allows for healing and transformation.

For example, over the last year members of St. Paul’s have attended several neighborhood meetings with people speaking in favor and against the youth drop-in center.  After each of these meetings, members of St. Paul’s met with those who had spoken in opposition to better understand their concerns.  This opened up new opportunities for understanding on both sides, including the need for organizations to stay accountable to residents.  After one neighbor spoke about a person without a home sleeping on her porch; Tim, our Director of Outreach at the time, gave her his number and said, “If this happens again, call us. We probably know the person and will talk to him.”

St Paul’s is seeking partnership with St Patrick’s Roman Catholic Parish for this project.  St Patrick’s is also located in close proximity to the proposed youth drop in site.  Both churches have strong reputations and long histories of acting to benefit the wider community.  However St Patrick’s has taken a more neutral stance toward the youth drop-in center, and several of the neighbors who oppose and support the center are members of the parish.  By partnering with St. Patrick’s, we can best model reaching across divisions.  Another partner includes the Franklin/Clinton Block Club, which includes both St. Paul’s and the proposed drop-in center within its boundaries.  Many of the neighbors who oppose the drop-in center are also active participants in the block club.

To date, the proposed youth-drop-in center has been fought over in the courts and through the media.  Recently, Lutheran Metropolitan Ministries won an appeal so that they do not have to seek a zoning variance to operate the center out of the proposed building.  The building still requires a lot of construction for it to be used as a youth drop-in center, and opposing neighbors have vowed to fight the project every step of the way.

St. Paul’s Community Church, with our community partners, will strive to create spaces of dialogue within an atmosphere of tension and hostility. Through these spaces of dialogue we can envision and model the kind of community God desires for each of us.

In Faith,

Rev. Emily Culp Ashby

Senior Pastor, St. Paul’s Community Church UCC