

Ministry Update Report August 2024

A. Upcoming Activities and Dates

Aug 10	9:30a-12	Worship Brunch
Aug 28	6:30p	Weekly Prayer meetings begin
Sept 8	10a	Homecoming, worship returns to 10a and FCCW
Sept 15	2p	John Eliot Commemoration
Oct 5	10a	Blessing of the Animals

B. Upcoming Training and Workshops

When		Who	
Aug 19 & Sept 9, 23, &	8-9p	Facilities Care	Community Safety Training Series Online Registration link or go to UCC.org Aug 19, 2024 08:00 PM Sep 9, 2024 08:00 PM Sep 23, 2024 08:00 PM Sep 30, 2024 08:00 PM
Aug 12	2-4p	FIA Care	Intro to Gender & Trans/Nonbinary Affirmation Online Registration link or go to SNEUCC.org Registration closes Aug 9, alt session Sept 28
Aug 28	7:30p	Stewardship Finance	3 Best Practices for Stewardship in Congregations Online Registration link or go to SNEUCC.org
Sept 14	8a – 5p	FIA	2024 Justice Summit: Politics as an Act of Faith; Middletown and Online Registration link or go to SNEUCC.org
Sept 19	2p	Worship Faith Formation FIA	Hope is here! Spiritual practices for pursuing justice and beloved community Online Registration link or go to PRC.org
Sept 26	2-3p	FIA	Wait, is this racist? Online Registration link or go to PRC.org
Sept 28	10a-2p	FIA Care	Intro to Gender & Trans/Nonbinary Affirmation Online Registration link or go to SNEUCC.org Same Content as Aug 9
Oct 3	2-3p	Care Faith Formation	Managing Stress Before it Manages You Online Registration link or go to PRC.org
Oct 29	2-3p	Care	Healing Fractured Communities Online Registration link or go to PRC.org

The above are all free, unless otherwise noted. Signup for SNEUCC and PRC newsletters and/or review the events calendar on SNEUCC.ORG and webinars page on PRC.ORG for more items of interest.

C. Ministry Update

1. Faith Formation

Confirm Not Conform

Aimee and Paula are looking at the Confirm Not Conform curriculum with an eye on beginning the program this fall. Dates and time have not been set.

Weekly Prayer Meetings

In conversation with Rick Lamarre, we are going to begin a simple, weekly prayer meeting on Wednesday at 6:30p.

He and Jan will host the meeting and look to others to occasionally host as well. The idea is that we as a congregation need to spend time in prayer beyond Sunday worship. Prayer about our individual journeys, prayer about the future of our congregation, and prayer about our country and the world.

We aim to keep it simple, though from time to time there may be song or food, we do not want it to be overly complicated.

Houses of Hope

Earlier this week I read an article in the Austin Seminary alumni newsletter. It read in part “Help us develop a process for congregations to practice discernment, gratitude, and forgiveness. Participating congregations will be paired with a coach to engage in learning and to provide regular feedback... Sound intriguing?”

I reached out to the seminary to find out more about the program and whether they were looking beyond their region.

The program is geared toward a discipling model/adult Christian Education. The idea is to help rural congregations deepen their spiritual practices of discernment, gratitude, and forgiveness as a way of bringing hope to the greater community in a meaningful way. I spoke with the Program Director Tuesday to get more information and the program seems to meet us where we are at given the work we have been doing to discern our future, explore our values, seek God’s vision, etc. The Gratitude and Forgiveness practices seem in keeping with the competing priorities that we identified last year but have not truly been addressed.

I explained the work that we have been doing with the Governing Board and Vision team and we agreed that the discernment module seems to be very much in line with our next steps.

The process begins with a group of 5 to 8 congregants who move through the discernment process. Part of discernment is discerning whether the program is for the congregation – it is also about discerning where we are, e.g., the possible paths for the future. The director shared that two congregations began the process and through the discernment process acknowledged and began to address truths and realities that they had ignored for years.

The commitment is to five 90 minute sessions that are facilitated by the coach. Congregations have the option of working this through in five, or ten or more weeks.

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The second phase looks at Core capabilities. This is a series of 4 sessions that can be done as a virtual conversation or as workshops. At this point congregations can add to the core group; however, the total number of participants will be 12 or fewer.

The third and fourth phases are congregation wide explorations of the practices of Forgiveness and Gratitude. There are materials that are provided to the congregation, however (working with the coach) congregations have a great deal of latitude in how they move through these materials. These phases also include components that encourage engagement beyond the congregation, into the community.

Here are three videos, available on their home page that briefly summarize the program

Houses of Hope Introduction Video <https://vimeo.com/838440921> 2:05

Discernment <https://vimeo.com/838443223> 2:57

Dream Building Hope <https://vimeo.com/838445020> 3:19

The challenge of course is identifying the 5 to 8 people who would be willing to be part of the core group.

2. Faith In Action

Doing Justice

Interfaith Conversations and working toward Justice

The community conversations continue as we broaden the circle to include more congregations and conversations.

The approach, one on one conversations and sharing stories are consistent with the desires of the congregation to seek the needs of the greater community, do justice, love our neighbors, and be more relational. A question is how and when to begin practicing this within the congregation – the approach is compatible with finalizing our vision, discerning our future, the Do Unto Others worship series, and the Houses of Hope process.

Loving Our Neighbors

Backpack Blessing Sunday

This Sunday at East Woodstock we will bless the school supplies gathered by our two congregations.

John Eliot Commemoration

We are finalizing plans for a commemoration of John Eliot's visit to Woodstock. The plans are for a 45 minute event the afternoon of September 15 on the South Common, a prayer gathering at the rock(s) on the 16th, and a presentation to school children on the 16th as well. Donna's connections have been instrumental to bring the Nipmuc people into the conversation to help shape and to participate in the events.

Next planning meeting is Thursday August 8 in the Eliot Library.

3. Care Ministry and the Deacons

The deacons continue to meet monthly and have been instrumental in making summer worship a success, despite several challenges.

Evolution to the new role is happening, though slowly, as it has been a challenge forming new teams. We do have three people interested in being the core group for the altar guild.

The deacon's fund currently has an \$11,000 balance. We are prayerful that conversations with the school administrators in the late spring will lead to ways that we can support the needs of people in the greater community with related needs.

In July, I planned and presided at the outdoor wedding of Keenan Rivers and Lela Miller (Diane Miller's granddaughter). We also supported East Woodstock by planning and leading the Funeral for Harold Bishop.

4. Worship

Summer Worship

At East Woodstock 9am

Aug 11, 18 and Sept 1 Kevin Downer
Aug 25 Noah Gourlie

Based on feedback from several congregants, the Governing Board's participation in July worship was well received. And the deacons did a great job hosting and shepherding the various guest preachers in a year in which we experienced multiple challenges despite our efforts to plan ahead.

Summer worship this year required a great deal of behind the scenes, follow up communication, and intervention on my part to ensure that Sunday worship's liturgy is completed, music identified, and bulletins published. Even then, guest preachers made multiple last-minute changes that increased stress and uncertainty immediately prior to worship, which diminishes the worship experience of leaders and participants.

(Personal note to correct a common misconception: July is not and has not been a time of "vacation." Some years July is more demanding than others, as has been the case this year.)

There are several lessons learned regarding the planning of summer worship. There is a disconnect between the idea of worshipping jointly and the fragmentation of responsibilities for planning and preparing for worship. One suggestion is to have a single blended team that is accountable and responsible for planning and preparing for worship. And alternative is to shift the responsibilities such that the congregation responsible for the speaker would also be responsible for finalizing liturgy and producing the bulletin. Finally, we should have a joint debrief in the fall to share our observations and learnings, as much of what it takes to make worship happen during this time happens behind the scenes and is unknown to many.

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Autumn Worship Planning August 10

A dozen people have confirmed that they will attend the Worship Planning mini retreat that is being held at our home Saturday. We will gather between 9:30a and 10a.

The agenda includes:

1. Time of Gathering
2. Welcome and Opening Worship
3. Time for Listening and Sharing
4. Review of Autumn Themes and Resources (including the Worship Team's group study)
5. Exploration of Ideas and Hope
6. Closing Thoughts and Prayers

Autumn Worship

The themes and readings have been identified through the end of November. Orders of Worship have been completed through the end of September, and the plan is to complete the Orders of Worship through November 3 by mid-August.

September 8 Homecoming Sunday will include a blessing of teachers and students as well as communion.

Autumn themes include:

- Sept 8 – Sept 29 Sacred Earth, Sacred Worth
- Oct 5 Blessing of Animals and their Care takers
- Oct 6 – Nov 3 Do Unto Others
- Nov 10 - 24 Imagine Together (Connect to the stewardship theme)

Worship Design Studio Reboot Your Worship

In the late spring, at my request, the Creative Worship Team agreed to explore the six-part group study from *Worship Design Studio* called *Reboot Your Worship*.

Here is why. It is helpful and healthy for teams to have a shared experience and common base from which to reflect on our practices, processes and approach. It is also helpful and healthy for teams to evaluate how they are doing from time to time, and to do so from a shared set of expectations and a shared vision.

Sessions include:

1. Intentional Spiritual Journeys
2. Enhance Congregational Participation
3. Sensory-Rich Communication
4. Deeply Spiritual Leadership
5. Attention to Flow
6. The Politics of Change

The congregation has a richly diverse group of people who bring many perspectives and strongly held opinions. Yet lacks the language or the means to filter the individual perspectives through a shared understanding of how the many, diverse talents, experiences, and expectations can be

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harmonized to lead the congregation in experiencing meaningful, spiritually grounded worship of our God of Love.

Over the last few years, I have presented and proposed books and other alternatives for the group to read or work through together. These have not gained traction.

As part of our subscription, Marcia McFee offers this six-part series. It includes videos and additional materials to read. It also includes groups exercises that the team can use to apply the learnings as we work on a series together.

D. Communications

Calendar and preparation for Autumn Communications

Lisa has been asked to use this time in August to plan and draft communications for the fall, especially for the known, recurring events.

She is reaching out to the leaders for the Craft Fair, Christmas on the Hill, Stewardship, etc.

The goal is to create a rolling calendar that identifies what needs to get communicated when and to update and/or create communications-related items in advance to allow time for more creative thought and intention to our communications.

Please contact Lisa with communications content and plans for the fall.

In addition, I continue to maintain the website, so updates to webpages need to be shared with Lisa and with me. To that end, detailed, lengthy communications of basic information are better placed on a web page that a shorter article can point to.

Church Track 30-day trial underway

Suzanne has arranged for a 30-day trial of Church Track as a Church Windows replacement. During this time, we will begin configuring Church Track move/upload some of our membership and contact data and explore the capabilities.

Church Track also brings with it website creation and hosting tools. We hope to explore these as well.

E. Other Updates

Stewardship

The Stewardship Team (Kathy P, Ruth T., Marylou) will meet August 21. Among our tasks will be to review membership and make recommendations for people to be considered inactive. This list will then be shared with the Governing Board and Deacons.

In addition, the team will be tasked with identifying people to speak on a given Sunday to share a story. If you feel inspired or know someone we might ask, please let the Stewardship Team or I know.

Noah applying to become an MID

Noah Gourlie's Local Church Discernment Committee has faithfully met and worked with Noah over the last 18 months to help him deepen his sense of calling. On August 20, Noah will go before the Windham Association to seek to be considered a Member In Discernment (MID). Doing so, sets the stage and begins the formal process that will likely lead toward ordination.

Lisa's Annual Review has been completed.

Time Away/Time Off

July 29 through August 2 I was on silent retreat at the St. Joseph Abbey in Spencer. I appreciate the opportunity for this much overdue time for contemplation. I found the time truly renewing and refreshing, insightful and meaningful.

I will also take some time off next Wednesday and Thursday (August 14 and 15). And the last week of August.