

Items for the Governing Board:

- II.A.2.1 Encouraging participation in Gratitude conversations
- II.A.2.3 Thoughts regarding Community-wide Gratitude Event Sept 20 or 21
- III.B Church Trac elimination of shared accounts and implementation of Two Factor

I. Upcoming Activities and Dates

Aug 3-31	9a	Summer Worship at East
Aug 12	12-3p	WDS – Advanced Worship Planning Retreat
Aug 19	6:15p	Rethinking/repurposing facilities (Willimantic Congregational)
Aug 25-26		Toby and I will be away
Sept 5 & 6	7p – 4p	Seeding Hope SNEUCC Event Hartford
Sept 7	10a	Homecoming Sunday (launch of redesigned website)
Sept 20/21	tbd	Gratitude Event?

II. Ministry Update

A. Faith Formation

1. Weekly Prayer Meetings

The prayer meetings have been moved to Thursdays, beginning this Thursday August 7. This is to see if the change of date will be more appealing to congregants. For the most part Rick, Jan, Kathy and I participated. On occasion we have seen one or two others.

2. Houses of Hope

A year ago, we held our first conversation with Austin Theological Seminary to explore the possibility of participating in the Houses of Hope initiative. We agreed then that this initiative sounded like a way for us to get unstuck as our conversations around vision and about our pathway to the future stalled. The initiative has four phases, each intended to help us as individuals and as a congregation to grow deeper in our connection with our Creator, selves, others, and the greater community.

Phase III of the Houses of Hope initiative is a church-wide exploration of gratitude. Preparation and planning for this phase began in late Spring and includes the following components:

- 1) Gatherings related to the Gratitude Pathway.
- 2) Gratitude Worship series.
- 3) Gratitude event and visit by Program Director Phil Dieke.
- 4) Weekly Gratitude communications and stories in the weekly eNews, Facebook, and Instagram.

The following are updates for each of these four activities:

(1) Gatherings related to the Gratitude Pathway

The Gratitude Pathway consists of nine sessions; each session includes activities and questions for personal reflection and a group activity. It includes a notebook/workbook of the activities for each session, and there is an online version with all of the content, videos, etc. that we can give people from the congregation access to (for free).

The Gratitude Pathway is intended to engage the entire congregation. It is flexible to allow us to tailor how we engage this based on what we think will work best for our congregation. We are one of the first three congregations to get this far in the Houses of Hope program, and we are furthest along in the planning for the implementation. **We have flexibility to make this work in a way that works for us.**

The current thinking is that we can offer a variety of opportunities for people to participate. However, we will ask people to pick a group and stick with that group.

- Sunday following worship.
- Tuesday, faithful conversations (tbd? leaders considering)
- Monday or Wednesday evening online.
- Saturday morning, once a month for 3 months.
- Others, if a group of 6 to 12 people want to explore the content together.

I believe the content for the nine modules can be covered in 6 sessions, rather than 9.

The challenge is how to help people understand why these conversations are important, and why participation in this initiative is a way for us to create a pathway for our future. And, choosing to not participate in these conversations and shared experiences, is a choice that has implications regarding our future.

At the deacons' meeting, the feedback that I received was that people do not understand why they should participate, or that participating (or not) has any implication on our future. They do not feel that a connection has been made between personal spiritual practice and how that relates to being the church or connecting with the greater community.

In some ways I can understand this. Communications to date have focused on the invitation to grow deeper and embrace the future. I have avoided a more direct appeal to address long standing cultural challenges related to engaging in difficult conversations and expressing grace, gratitude, and forgiveness for those with whom we have differences. The congregation named this in the 2018 CAT survey as well as the Values and Beliefs conversations. The core capacities, practices, and the process of engaging in these conversations is meant to build trust and give us the tools and the language to listen, share, dream, and show up differently, i.e., to be fully present with those with whom we disagree or may have experienced challenges in the past.

We engaged the Houses of Hope program because we believed that it provides the tools we lack, creates the space for us to grow deeper in healthy relationships with ourselves, others, our community, and our Creator freeing us to be present in this world filled with fear, hurt, and anxiety and opening us up to dream God's dream together.

Suggestions?

(2) Gratitude Worship Series

Beginning with Homecoming Sunday, the Autumn worship series will reflect some of the content from the Gratitude Pathway and is centered on cultivating gratitude as a transformative spiritual discipline. The program progressively moves from personal reflection to communal engagement, aiming to foster a "culture of gratitude" within individuals, congregations, and the wider community. This series will lead into the Stewardship Series, God's Dreams.

On Sept 21 Phil Dieke from Houses of Hope will preach on the Shape of Gratitude. On Sept 28 we are seeking three, brief testimonies about gratitude. And on Oct 5, World Communion Sunday, we will hold brunch church. The rest of the series is on hold as I need more detail about session 6 and am having a conversation with the Houses of Hope team Aug 6.

(3) Gratitude event and visit by Program Director Phil Dieke

Program director from the Houses of Hope will be in the area in late September. He is excited to visit our congregation and we are working on creating several events related to his visit.

- a) He will preach on Sunday Sept 21 about the shape of gratitude
- b) We will arrange for someone to take photos and record conversations regarding gratitude and the houses of hope. The Houses of Hope core team will all be invited to be part of these conversations, as well as others from the congregation. We are working with Phil and through Nichola to find a videographer. Phil will send questions to help shape the conversation ahead of time.
- c) A community-wide gratitude event. What if First Congregational Church of Woodstock held a community-wide gratitude event on Saturday morning (breakfast/brunch?) or Sunday afternoon? In conversation with Phil, I reflected on the current challenges in the community related to the ongoing budget challenges, lack of feeling comments on Woodstock Proud related to the Town and selectmen, and the comments from the Commission on Aging's Senior Survey about not feeling valued. What if we invited the new head of School from the academy, Roseland Cottage, Roseland Park's new care takers, the leaders of other community organizations and the Town to celebrate, recognize, and express gratitude to the unsung heroes whose effort and presence make Woodstock the town that we are. In addition to a brief program, conversations, we could have a wall of hope where people share their hopes for the community and large map of the town where we invite people to identify the locations for which they are grateful (and then share on a note briefly why). Funding for this could come from some of the Houses of Hope money we received and Phil said that they may have some money to help with costs as well.
- d) He will stay with Toby and I.

(4) Gratitude communications

I am working with Nichola to schedule a series of communications about gratitude and the Houses of Hope initiative. They will begin appearing in the weekly email, on Facebook and Instagram this week.

The intent is to heighten awareness of the conversations, share teachings and gratitude practices, and deepen our exploration of gratitude.

In addition, based on feedback from the deacons, I asked that they review the message we shared with the congregation during June, regarding Houses of Hope and the Gratitude phase; and recommend specific ways to modify the message to answer their questions and concerns.

3. Adult Bible Study

It was proposed in the Spring to continue the conversations regarding Bible Study, exploring one book a month and holding one session a month. I will announce signups next week on the first or second Saturdays beginning in September. If we have at least 6 people sign up we will begin this.

4. Youth / Family Programming

It is time for us to revisit how we are supporting families and youth. the most likely path is to seek a coordinator for faith formation and/or to approach East Woodstock or Putnam to explore a creative collaboration.

B. Faith In Action

1. Quiet Corner Interfaith Community Organizing Study Group

Monthly conversations of the Windham County Interfaith Action Alliance Sponsoring Group (a working title) continue. The next conversation is August 28 at 4pm.

We continue to work toward a two-pronged strategy 1) to engage questions of justice and action now, e.g., housing, refugees, etc. and 2) an event in October at Temple Beth Israel. These congregants have expressed interest in these conversations.

2. TEEG

Blessing of Back Packs is this Sunday at East Woodstock. August 18 is the target date for presenting TEEG with the funds from the Town Wide Tag Sale.

C. Care Ministry and the Deacons

We are moving forward with granting access to the individual deacons to Church Trac. So far, 3 out of the 5 deacons have individual access.

D. Worship

Summer Worship

July worship appears to have proceeded well, and last Sunday at East Woodstock was a joyous celebration of joint worship between our two congregations.

The August theme is “Prophetic Imagination: Envisioning a Community of Justice and Hope.” Following worship, we made chalk art, which Nichola posted on Facebook and Instagram. Each Sunday will feature a similar creative act of engagement.

I am preaching the first four Sunday and Pastor Gary will preach Labor Day weekend.

September7 – October 19: Pathways to Gratitude

See above.

Orders of Worship are completed through October 5, and Music selected for the first two Sundays..

This series will also look forward to and dovetail with the Stewardship campaign.

October 26 – November 30: Dreaming God’s Dream: No gift too small, not dream too big

"Dreaming God’s Dream: No Gift Too Small, No Dream Too Big" is based on the Stewardship theme for this year. The worship series is designed to encourage congregations to see their individual and collective acts of generosity as essential parts of God’s larger vision for a more just, inclusive, and loving world. It challenges us to reimagine stewardship—not merely as a matter of money—but as the whole of how we live out our faith. The series asserts that every contribution—even those that seem small—is imbued with divine potential, pointing to the transformative power that emerges when communities unite around a shared dream.

III. Communications

A. Communications Coordinator

Nichola Johnson joined us July 1 and has quickly jumped in and is making a creative and joyful impact.

She has crated an Instagram Account and has been posting to this multiple times a week.

B. Security of ChurchTrac, etc.

In light of the recent spoofed/phishing emails that impacted two congregants, I spent time since Friday responding to several inquires from congregants. I also spent most of Monday deep in the weeds of the logs of Google eMail, Workspace, and ChurchTrac. And reviewed the email lists for various google groups, our eNews letter server, and archived online directory (InstaChurch), and old Church management system (Church Windows).

At this time what I can say is that the logs do not reveal suspicious activity or logins from ip addresses outside our area. In addition, some of the email address that received the bogus emails

were not in our databases and included individuals with no association with the church. Coincidence does not point to a conclusion, nor a cause.

As best we can tell, our church systems were not hacked or compromised. The incident appears to be an issue with their personal email accounts. The Scammers utilized their personal address books to send the phony claims. Because the individuals are members of the congregation and happened to have other church members' email address in their contacts, multiple people from the church received the bogus request for gift cards.

Based on this incident:

We are adding an article to the weekly eNews to remind people to be cautious and of the deacons and deacon fund as a resource. Specifically, members of the congregation, if they have such a need, could appeal to the deacons for assistance or the deacons fund for support (therefore it is unlikely a member of the congregation would make such a request). And leaders of our congregation will never ask for gift cards, etc. for an urgent need, as we will use the deacons' fund should such needs arise. So, if people see such an email, it is extremely likely a scam. And they should always check in with the person by a means other than responding to the email.

C. Website

Nichola and I met with Amber to review the new website design and talk about how Nichola and Amber can work together going forward.

We are targeting September 7 to launch the new website. It will be a significantly simplified navigation with a cleaner look.

The Governing Board and Deacons are invited to review the draft and share comments and thoughts with Amber.

We will bring over the essential content, and continue to improve and innovate the website from there. This will move the website off of Wordpress to a simpler Content Management platform as well. Amber is looking into the question of hosting, as there is a possibility that we can host the website with the content development application company, rather than GoDaddy.

If the hosting shifts. It will mean some backend work to connect Workspace, our Emails, and Mailchimp. All doable, the timing just needs to be coordinated.

D. Online Worship

In early September, Bruce S., Steve, Nichola, and I will meet to discuss the content of our online worship. We wish to clarify and standardized what is presented in the online recording. We know that people who come do check out the online worship videos before they visit. And we also know that most viewers do not stick around or watch the whole video, many move through prelude and readings.

We also will explore the question that has emerged several times about incorporating all of the music from worship. Our direction on this is to continue to offer a much shorter online presentation that includes the message – and post a second video of all the music later in the week. (possibly only to Youtube).

E. Stewardship

The Stewardship Team will meet August 21 to plan the fall campaign. The theme has been identified, Dreaming God's Dream.

And the UCC resources were acquired and posted to the Stewardship folder. We will make use of sample letters, worship materials, etc.

The tentative schedule includes:

- Aug 21 – Sept 10 review membership list
- Sept 15 send out letter to inactive people
- Oct 8 – 16 compile campaign packets
- Oct 19 Campaign Launch
- Nov 9 Pledge Sunday
- Nov 9 – 30 follow up with people who have not pledged

IV. Other/Misc

A. August 19 Workshop/Presentation

August 19th, the Windham Association is hosting a conversation entitled "Renewal through Repurposing" with Rev. Patrick Duggan from the UCC Church Building and Loan Fund.

This is a reprise of a presentation he did a year or two ago at Super Saturday. It is open to all clergy and congregants who may be interested in exploring the needs of the greater community, thinking differently about the resources and assets that we have, and utilizing our facilities creatively.

The presentation will be at the Willimantic Congregational Church and will include a simple meal before hand. Arrive 6:15pm, eat 6:30pm, program starts 7pm, program ends no later than 8:30pm.