

News from the Fall Meeting of the Covenant Association

Imagine a tire store being renovated into a church. That is where we met when Woodside Church in Flint hosted the Covenant Association on November 2nd. In the United Church of Christ, congregations covenant together into Associations; the Covenant Association has just over 40 congregations. If you're curious about the wider church, an Association meeting is a great place to start!

The theme of this year's meeting was Church, Do You Love Me? After an opening message from the hosting pastor, we were treated to music from an LGBT choir. The keynote speaker, the Rev. Dr. Roland Stringfellow, then presented on Brave Spaces: Theology of Inclusion. Some of his points included that all *people* but not all *behaviors* (e.g., bullying, using racist slurs) should be welcome in the church; it is not Christian to love the words of God's law more than the people God loves; and the point of church is discipleship (helping people follow Jesus) rather than duplication (helping people be "just like us"). He encouraged us to talk about inclusion with others by sharing common values, speaking from experience, speaking from a faith perspective, and being our authentic selves. He also mentioned some additional resources, including one on "Liberating Religious Liberty".

After a gluten-free, vegan lunch, the youth spent time with the Rev. Dr. Stringfellow, while the adults heard a panel discussion. The panelists were the Rev. Phiwa Langeni, the founder/director of SALUS Center in Lansing; Leon El-Alamin, the founder and executive director of MADE Institute in Flint; and Melanie and Margaret Harner, co-founders of the Washtenaw Interfaith Coalition for Immigrant Rights. The discussion ranged from intersectionality to the corrections system to refugees (and a whole lot more!). I was particularly intrigued by some of the work MADE does with former prisoners.

And you can't have a meeting without a business meeting...One of the major presentations was the Association budget. The group reviewed the budget questioned the faithfulness of sitting on a significant bank balance year after year when that money could be used for ministry. This year's budget, which was approved unanimously, spends down about half of that unrestricted reserve, mainly through four increases. The Prophetic Integrity grants were continued at the increased amount of \$6,000 that was voted as an increase for 2019 (originally budgeted for \$2,400 for 2019) at the spring meeting. A new Congregational Assistance NOW fund was created at \$10,000, with NOW standing for Need, Opportunity, and Witness. A New Church Start-Up Support fund was created at \$5,000 (with plans to assist a new home-based UCC in Mt. Pleasant). Finally, the amount budgeted for Association meetings was doubled so that we can continue to learn and grow through speakers, etc.

Church anniversaries, including our 155th (through we were accidentally listed at 160), were honored. Justice & Witness grant recipients were announced, but I neglected to note the recipients; I believe SALUS was one of them. Recipients will report back at next year's fall meeting.

The spring meeting for Covenant Association will be closer to home, at Haslett Community UCC on April 25th. Remember, our congregation is generally entitled to 2 or 3 lay delegates in addition to clergy delegates, and we rarely send any. Hope to see you there!

P.S. Two quick updates from the Conference (Michigan-wide) meeting in October...The diaper drive collected 4,353 diapers for the Diaper Bank in Jackson. The Ann Arbor delegate I mentioned in our prayer concerns, who was hit by a car when he was crossing the street, spent 11 days in intensive care and was released to a physical rehab facility to continue recovering.