

MINUTES OF 2023 ANNUAL MEETING

January 29th, 2023 11:15 am

Taken by Sanjay Cherian (Clerk)

Quorum

We needed a quorum of 12 eligible voters based on a most recent 6-month average of 21 adults. We had 21 eligible voters present, constituting a voting quorum.

Opening

The meeting was called to order by Moderator Ann Desrochers, at 11:16 am. Reverend Catherine Merrill opened the meeting in prayer at 11:17.

Ann took a moment to recognize Rena Duncklee's 44 years of service as Treasurer and presented her with gifts and a card in gratitude for that service.

Discussion of Annual Meeting Minutes from 2022

Ann reminded the attendees that the cabinet had reviewed these minutes soon after the 2022 meeting while recollections were fresh.

Bill Dunbar moved to accept the minutes, Donna Bretschneider seconded, and the motion passed unanimously.

Review of Board Reports: Our Mission of Ministry

- **Minister:** Rev. Cath thanked everyone for their support over the past year: some overt, some quiet and private. She expressed gratitude for the invitation to serve an amazing community.
- **Outreach:** Amy Razzaboni thanked everyone for all the church does. Every year, we reach out to more people with Take Home Meals and publicity through Megan and Candy. The community is becoming more aware of what we do.
- **Faith Formation:** Ann is happy to have something going on and it's exciting.

Donna moved to accept the reports of the Mission of Ministry as written and submitted, Susan seconded, and the motion passed unanimously.

Review of Board Reports: Our Mission of Stewardship

- **Trustees:** Susan Haight appreciates all the assistance from John, Russell and David Drake with the projects listed in the Trustees' report. She appreciates people in church stepping up.

Bill moved to accept the reports of the Mission of Stewardship as written, Donna seconded, and the motion passed unanimously.

Review of Current Church Initiatives

Boy Scouts of America Settlement and Reorganization plan

- At this time, we are not a sponsor but have facilities use agreement with the scouts. We are not legally bound to any potential settlement lawsuits.
- We are moving ahead with Scouting Sunday with the BSA and continue to invite the Girl Scouts to have a Sunday service, trying to keep as good a relationship with them as we can.

UMC:

- It's hard to report anything at this point as their process has dragged out and has been pushed out to their 2024 national meeting.
- There were recommendations on how to stay or leave. The original committee that made those recommendations has dissolved saying the process has dragged on so long that the recommendations don't make sense anymore.
- We continue to monitor what they ask us to monitor and provide what they ask for.

New or Other Business

Proposed Change to Article II in constitution:

- The original wording was confusing about who this church's assets belong to. Ann thanked Bill for talking to the conferences, particularly the UCC who helps us with asset management.
- The biggest change is in section 2 to say the assets are the local church's unless a donor specifically said it was for one of the conferences.
- Bottom paragraph: if the church ceases to exist, because of our existing relationship with the UCC, they (UCC) will manage assets for the purposes specified by donors.
- Bill: uncovered that one of our trusts is a UCC one but they let us handle it. Another is associated with the UMC. Those two have to go back to the appropriate conference. The rest are ours. He started this because of the UMC situation and wanting to know what happens to our assets if something happens with our relationship with the UMC. The conferences said they've never seen any wording like our prior wording, which is why new wording has been created.
- Peter moved to accept the change to article II as written, Donna seconded, and the motion passed unanimously.

At this point, Ann solicited feedback from participants on how to approach the rest of the meeting.

- Our constitution requires we vote on a budget because we need a guiding light for financial decisions. We also need to vote on a nominations slate. All positions don't have to be filled – the Cabinet can fill vacant positions over time as necessary. The constitution requires closure on budget and nominations at this meeting. We can vote on them as-is and then discuss our situation or we can discuss, then vote. We are required to have a quorum when we vote so we have to consider when people may have to leave to make sure we've voted before we lose a quorum.
 - Donna thinks we should vote while we have people.
 - Jon King asked if our discussion might change what we're voting on. If the likelihood is that we would change, maybe we should vote after discussion while monitoring quorum status. Donna agreed with this conclusion.
 - Ann confirmed that discussion might change the things being voted on.
- Decision: discussion followed by voting.

We took a break for dessert, reconvening at 11:43 to view a PowerPoint presentation from Ann.

- Ann wants to convey that we took a hit to attendance during Covid. Attendance starting to rebuild but the number of households pledging and the amount pledged is not recovering.
- Our revenue has benefited from a \$20k-\$30k special gift for the past several years. If we excluded that, we would not have income sufficient to our expenses. She's pointing out that what's keeping us afloat is something we have no control over and gives us no predictability for the future.
- Ann presented how much of our leadership slate is unfilled, though Outreach & Diaconate have done really well. What does this really tell us is really important to us in the church? We have to take a look at these other positions that the church needs to fill to sustain operations.
- Ann asked what our gut is telling us about how we address this. We may need to do something to keep us afloat while we look at long-term strategy.
- Rev. Cath: We need sense as a community about what we want to do. It's not that we walk out of here with an answer but with some commitment to work on it.
- Susan: has been looking at day one of our relationship with the UCC & UMC in our church history. This discussion not isolated to today. There have been 5 incidences from when we were at the meeting house on the hill when they were sure the church was done. It came down to a vote to disband. They always worked around that challenge and found solutions. Unfortunately, it came down to combination between the UCC and UMC, then separation, then coming back

together in 1951. It's important to note it's not the first time we've faced this though our 21st century circumstances are different from prior situations.

- Ann: we need to be creative when we look at things. Our required leadership structure may be overwhelming for the size of church we are now. Do we need a visioning committee / task force to look at the future? We also can't depend on special donations.
- Sanjay: re: special donations, is this a time to stick to what we're doing and have faith or is this God buying us time to make the required changes?
- Bob: is this a time to look at debt financing? Are we going to spend more than we make or stay within our budget, particularly if we don't get that donation.
- Jon: it's clear that we need to be doing something different. Dollars to keep the building open is not what we want to be praying for. There are more important things to deal with. We also have to take care of this group of people, not just financially.
- Ann: doesn't see us as a community doing things to grow debt. We have ideas on what we want to be. The money we would spend doing those things pushes us out of a normal budget and the special donation lets us do those things. She doesn't see us ever intentionally putting ourselves in severe debt.
- Bill: we've always looked at ways to save money like fuel oil – joining the NH coop to get the best price. We're getting better electric rates. We're looking at changing the streetlight & parking lot light solution to save money. We're running out of cost savings opportunities.
- Bill: At time of constitutional formulation, this was a much bigger congregation. Other churches don't have a separate finance board. Is it time to relook at how we operate?
- Ann: her personal goal – we need to figure out what's important to us before we solve problems. She wants to understand what we want our ministry is first. If we create a structure first, ministry won't be a focus.
- Rev. Cath: thinks this is a chance for us to say, "We can choose to do nothing and trust in miracles." Alternately, she thinks the Cabinet felt while looking at the budget, nomination slate, and attendance that this is an opportunity for us to decide what we want, not what we were used to. What do we want to offer our community? It's too good an opportunity to waste. This may mean we try uncomfortable things and experiments that may not be conventional church but are us.
- Peter: has a really difficult time without a plan as that's not how he operates in his own life. He can't formulate a plan for our situation so it's making things tough on us. He 100% likes Ann's proposal on mission first, then structure and plan. He's starting to think of things that he would consider important from ministry performance. The top things to maintain and keep moving forward:
 - Having a minister here every Sunday and keeping a church-like atmosphere. He wouldn't want to do church one Wednesday a month, for example.
 - Outreach, which gets word out to the community
 - Trustees to maintain the building

- Faith Formation.
 - Finances follow the rest.
- Susan: agrees with Peter. If you try to put yourself in the shoes of a person in our community not affiliated with church, there are still a fair amount of people in town who consider this church important to their lives and are attached in some way. We have to try to reach the other generations who have missed out on messages over time. She thinks faith formation is going to be a significant piece of building that up. She thinks we do a wonderful job of community outreach and that the community recognizes that. She thinks it's critical to future success.
- Rev. Cath: would the task be easier with more people?
 - Peter: yes.
 - Rev. Cath: it's not a skill we have about how to talk to people about what we like here and all the things that we enjoy. Is this a skill we need to build?
- Peter: is there an impression in the community that the church will always be here, fund itself, so don't worry about it? Are we missing opportunities to impress on people that we need to fund things we are doing and keep the church alive.
- Nancy: we have no trouble getting people to come help who don't come on Sundays.
- John Panto: we're not doing anything wrong. There are societal things happening that we're suffering from. Church is not a priority for young families who are overloaded, have had bad prior experiences, etc. He recalled Peter asking last year who's coming up behind us?
 - Sanjay: we may not be doing anything wrong but we may also not be doing everything we need to. We could be doing everything we're currently doing right and still disappear if we're missing something crucial.
- Peter has been thinking. How do churches further south succeed? They have a different demographic situation and a different environment.
 - Sanjay noted that more conservative churches are the ones that have less trouble growing and surviving in these times. He felt that conservatism may be an easy answer for churches further south but that our situation may be an opportunity for coming up with a more universally-welcoming response consistent with our experience of God.
- Rev. Cath recalled her experience meeting the people who staff the Ghost Train race. She felt they were church people who were just not church people. We can step back and see what we're trying to share. The grandmother who was here for worship today was blown away not just that we were welcoming of her but that we knew each other's names and stories and laughed at things showing intimacy and vulnerability. She doesn't think we need 100 people here for worship. 35 would be nice.
- Amy noted that when they're building a house and get to know families over 6 months, she gives them an overview of the town and tells them about the church. She thinks of those families, the ones who came here were actively looking for a

church. There are a lot of places where families are but she doesn't know how we'll reach them and get them here. They're in a different world.

- Rev. Cath: would add to Sanjay's comment about needing a different offering. A church can be prosperous and growing that attracts 30 year-olds or 60 & 70 year-olds. We need a different pitch for each.
- Amy: speaking to them, she knows we want to reach them but personally doesn't know how as she learns about them. Her customers are just here for schools and then will leave when kids are done. Many aren't investing in the town & local relationships.
- Rev. Cath: there are church consultants we could hire to come give us advice. They tend to come with their own strategy that has been successful for them in the past.
- Sanjay: invitation may not be the right first step because we tend to invite who is like us, i.e. mostly older people. We may need a first step that gets us comfortable with an uncomfortable form of diversity.
 - Donna: invited a neighbor who came but never came back. She doesn't want to be too pushy or to be a salesperson for the church. She doesn't know how to get the message across without being overbearing.
 - Bob: years ago our parents brought their kids to church and that's how the next generation was brought in.
 - Peter: is sure there's a ratio like 1 of 100 invitees will come.
- Donna: has been to other churches. When she goes to her parent's home, she was going to church where they got married. She didn't feel welcomed there. There are visitor's pews so you don't sit in someone's accustomed pew. She thinks our church is totally not like that at all.
- Susan has been discussing this with her own daughters who grew up here. Stacy is experiencing many churches in Florida and not finding a welcoming environment like she found here. Kerri said part of the problem is that they are not believers in her generation. They believe that when you die, you die, that's it. How do we overcome that with young people moving into town who don't even know we're here.
- Sanjay: unbelievers may not be our primary target. We may want to get believers in that age range who might then attract the others in their peer group. If he was his younger self, he might not be attracted to a church of older people, not knowing what it has to offer him. He talked about his personal experience that bad things happen to him every week but often somebody else has to point out that it was bad. Christian faith has been so stabilizing that it has become natural to have a positive attitude and roll with circumstances without despairing. That's what he would like to offer to future generations and why he personally feels church is valuable. What can we offer that will help them in their lives? He feels we needed parallel tracks: figuring out how to fund ourselves for the coming year and a separate one to revisit our long-term faith mission and reason for existence. He feels the latter requires ongoing regular work bringing results back to the congregation, not just going away and coming back in a year. He's willing to work hard on the latter if there are other parties interested.

- Peter: has been dealing with people who don't even know we have a fire station or where anything in town is. We have proof of what Sanjay said earlier when we met Marjorie & Dave Drake at the church who are like the rest of us. It is personally tough to reach out to younger folk even at work when they have such different perspectives. On how to get more people here, let's say we don't get more people in. What do we want to do? Do we want just the people here at this table to decide where we want to go for the next year. Yes, we want to reach out and bring more people. We want services, music, outreach, etc. Shall we move forward with the budget we have and try to accomplish that and at the same time try to bring in more people knowing we are the type of people we're catering to and are interested in this church and this group of people. Our friends are here. There were nods around the table. Ideas require a lot of work. He doesn't know if even our successful ventures have brought people in. Outreach has regular successful events but brings in no new people to worship.
- Rev. Cath: getting better at invitation is maybe a 3-year plan. We need something that says we need to raise \$5k from non-members for a 1-year plan. We could have a short-term plan for financial reliability.
 - Peter: can we try to take advantage of spreading of the word among supporters. If you really like this church, would you consider donating \$100-200 for the church for a year? Even if we were trying to raise money to fix the exterior, we could put it on our website.
 - Jon: we've been talking about this problem for at least 5 years. We've talked about lots of things, tried a lot of things, not tried a bunch of things. We should work on the assumption that we are where we are and who we are. Once we solve this year's problem, we can worry about what's next.
- Candy: what about a church advisor who could bring us out-of-the box ideas?
 - Rev. Cath: there are church consultants who solve widespread problem of church attendance with ideas like reserved visitor spots, welcomers at doors, etc. Some of it is improving online presence. Some is having everyone ask 10 people to get 1 person to come. They help you get your elevator pitch together.
 - John P: there are resources on the conference website and podcasts.
 - Ann: consultants are very expensive.
- Ann: what she's hearing is what we want to do is to grow the number of people in the pews. We have reconnected with former attendees in our age group who are still our friends. To the best of our knowledge, nothing's changed. They may come for special events. They haven't helped with our bottom line. What are our goals? Getting them back? Getting their money?
 - Jill: doesn't think we're getting back people we've lost.
- Sanjay: talked about how we may need discontinuous change in that the BCC that is right for 2033 may be so radically different from us that there's no incremental path from here to there. We may not be the right people to make that change. As an example of radical change that's not a recommendation, he talked about publicly declaring failure and inviting people of Christian faith in

the community to come here and create the church that meets their needs with us as support, not the primary decision-makers. It could potentially result in a church that no longer feels like home to us but is for future generations.

- Rev. Cath: wants to honor Jon's point - how many more years do we want to go on the same hamster wheel? Sometimes it takes an "oh crap!" moment to force change. What she's heard today is great images: what's the church we want in 10 years? What in your life do you want church to be? When you meet someone who's a church person, what 2 sentences do you want in your pocket? What set of questions could you ask that would connect a person with the church? The focus for a brainstorming committee can't be, "go off and find the answer" but "go off and find the questions." They would come back periodically with, "Here's the latest batch of questions, how does it help us see a discontinuity opportunity, etc."
- John P: if we're going to raise money for this church, it has to be for the mission of the church, not keeping the lights on. It has to stay focused on helping the community. Ann: to balance things, the need to keep building open is our reality. We have to have a building to come home to.
- Jon: what is our mission? Sunday worship? Outreach in various forms? Living the word? Maybe we line up some other things. What's the cost of doing each of those? Outreach costs only lights & heat but it can scale. Sunday service does not scale [downward]. You can't shrink it to save money. If you don't have Sunday service with a minister, in 3 years we'll be voting to disband. If you're asking for money, we're ultimately asking for people in the pews. They'd be there if they wanted to be there is what we're understanding. So, getting people in the pews is not the answer to our mission. Fixing the outside might be all people care about for the church. Maybe we can reach them there.
- Jill: if we raise money for a steeple, how does it help our mission of Sunday worship? Jon: if people are willing to help with the building, take that help where we can get it and use our resources for ministry.
 - Peter: if you have a bright, shiny building, it attracts more people. A falling-apart building makes people think there's nothing going on there.
 - Jon: years ago, when we created a new shiny high school, tons of kids who had gone to private school came back and they had to expand.
- Jill: if we're going through the effort of raising funds, it may be a matter of framing. Can we say we're raising funds for the church, promoting good things we do, but not earmarking funds? It gives us more flexibility with how we spend what comes in.
 - Peter: knows there are people who would only give to maintenance of the building and doesn't want to exclude them.
 - Jill agrees that if we know our audience, we can target our appeal.
- Susan: are we talking about a capital campaign?
 - John P: talked about the benefits of doing one.
 - Rev. Cath: doesn't think we're ready for capital campaign.
 - Sue: notes that many people know about our parsonage sale and are wondering what we did with the money.

- Bill: is hearing that we have a great Outreach program but what is it? We collect money and give it to other groups that are not here in town. What do people in town need? Do they need someone to come talk about how to take care of a distant elderly parent? How do they deal with a kid that has ADD? Those are outreach programs. As an example, the library had a Pokémon thing that is now so big they have to make a second session. He remembers that when they had Tad Putney's child reading stories the library was packed. What do people need? How do we take care of people who are dealing with death?
 - Susan: agrees. She recently wanted to open the church as a warming center but didn't know how to do it, particularly by herself?
- Bill: our community is Brookline? How do we take care of people who are hurting here in Brookline?
- Rev. Cath: agrees but this comes back to Ann's point that if we have 20 people and only so much money, to do this, we have to let go of something. We're running out of stuff to let go of. Or we have to find energy within us to do it or to find someone in the community who has that energy. If we have bigger visions for ministry that are compelling to people and would draw them to participation, how do we get from here to there? Is this something where we say we have 3 years before we drain the endowment so let's spend the next 3 years on a spending spree. We go for it and in 3 years we either have a great church or a great going out of business sale.
 - John P: thinks it's the best thing he's heard today.
 - Jon K: agrees. We keep doing what we do, do more of it, create a support group for people with parents far away, etc. It forms another community. Each of our activities is a community. If we spend 3 years just making communities of people, then we're doing our service. We say it will somehow survive.
 - Jill: if it doesn't, we gave it our all.
 - Jon K: some percentage will come.
 - Sue: we have to spend money to make money. We can bring people here and give them an experience that makes them want to be here.
 - Bob: we could take some outreach money and use it to bring expert speakers here. We could have a walking group and put it on the church sign.
 - Bill: Erin had organized something like that in Hollis but Covid put an end to that. We don't have to spend money to get speakers in. Home Health & Hospice might send people.
 - John P: do we sponsor sports teams, civic organizations, etc. to support local communities?
 - Bob: Could we bring in psychiatrists to talk about children with disabilities? That's a need.
- Rev. Cath: her sense is what has sparked the most light and joy in this room over the last hour is this idea that we're the community so let's be the community church all-in. That's going to take some infrastructure and the only people who

are going to respond right now are an in this room. There are things we need to do to become better outreachers to this community.

- Candy: we have these events, are we inviting people to Sunday worship so maybe event participation does lead upstairs?
- Rev. Cath: for the people in this room, what do we want? Then how do we find out more strategically, how do we find out what the community needs? And what would church look like if we blew up the church and saw how the pieces landed, i.e. radical change exploration? We're proposing pulling money out of cash reserves to fund this year. Furthermore, at 1:30 today, she has nobody to point people to when she is asked to have a moderator contact them. Cabinet approval as of today's close is Rev. Cath, Amy, Susan, Bill, Jill, and Candy.
- Peter wants to do one thing at a time. First, Peter moves to vote on approving Bill's proposal on funding our budget deficit with cash reserves. Bob seconded the motion.
 - Bill: the shortfall before tapping cash reserves is \$50k. We have \$74k in cash reserves. We would have to use \$39k of cash reserves to get to within 10% of balance.
 - Jon: is it fair to say if trends continue, we'll be out of cash reserves next year?
 - Bill: what happens historically is that at beginning of the year, we start using cash reserves but then it starts building so we've never used all of it.
 - We voted on Peter's motion to approve the proposed budget. It passed unanimously.

Nominations and governing structure:

- Rev. Cath: is it okay if Bill writes checks, Candy answers the phone, Amy, Sue, and Jill support Rev. Cath when requests come in, willing to trust that we will find someone to step into the leadership position? It's not healthy for a congregational church not to have a lay leader but she can understand why it has to be that way for a while. She's willing to go forward for a while without someone in that position. One of the things a moderator does for her is air traffic control, where she can hand off a problem. Doing it for herself makes it harder to do worship and CE. Also, it's not healthy for people to do a job for so long that they come to annual meeting to step down and we never see them again because they're so tired.
- Peter: so, do we change our governing structure before we vote on board?
- Ann: right now, we're chasing our tail. The concern is that we're still leaving here without movement. She noted that Sanjay had softly volunteered to help with visioning our future. Peter's thought on restructuring leadership would be another group. Ann would be willing to put in a smaller amount of time as a transitional moderator if she knew the other things would absolutely be happening on an ongoing basis. She wouldn't do it if she thought she'd be in the

same place next year. She doesn't have the commitment necessary to be part of interim solution.

- Jon: does the number of unfilled positions cause a problem? Is it a constitutional crisis?
- Ann: is not worried about the constitution. She's worried about a people crisis. Work needs doing and we can't keep loading it onto a part-time pastor. She wants Rev. Cath focused on worship, not administration. We can't guarantee we have someone Rev. Cath can hand problems over to.
- Rev. Cath: would put her hand up on community visioning team? How do we reach out & build infrastructure? She thought she heard that Sanjay was willing to work on that.
 - Sanjay: no, that's not what he was talking about, which was the broader spiritual mission of the church, of which community visioning is a subset.
 - Jon & Donna said they'd be willing to be on a community visioning team.
- Sue: would be willing to help with restructuring of the board.
- Peter: we should proceed with one more cabinet meeting. The next meeting would be how to restructure the governing board. Everyone is welcome. Jill & Jon emphasized that we'd have to publicize the meeting and the desire for congregational attendance and engagement.
 - Amy: so even if we restructure, we still have to fill positions?
 - Ann: in the meantime, there are still tasks that have to be done that shouldn't fall on Rev. Cath.
 - Amy: so are we going to restructure them enough that someone would be willing to fill the restructured ones? If nobody's interested now, will they be interested after we restructure?
 - Jon: we have to figure out first what we need done, then what combination of positions solves that. If the scope doesn't change, it doesn't matter what we call the positions.
- Bill: has been documenting all financial things that have to be done and by when.
- Amy: so then a potential candidate would know what they're signing up for and maybe be more comfortable with it.
- Rev. Cath: Ann has reached out to people including slicing the moderator job into different subsets. She doesn't think there are enough positives to induce anyone to take it.
- Peter: doesn't think we're going to solve it at this meeting or the next meeting. The best thing we can do is to detail the responsibility of a moderator so people can consider it.
 - Ann: every role in this church is detailed in the appendix to the constitution.
 - Bill: it's in the appendix so it can be changed more easily.
 - Ann: as long as the change is not massive.
- Susan moved to accept the existing slate of nominations, Donna seconded, and the motion passed unanimously.
- Jill: are we going to promote the content of that cabinet meeting at upcoming church services to invite participation?

- The consensus was yes.
- Jon K: we should also send a separate email about it.
- Rev. Cath: and it will also in the worship bulletin email.
- Jill: there's still a hole on spiritual direction.
 - Sanjay: withdraws his proposal. We are who we are. The community engagement efforts people have been discussing today are clearly the part of it that matters to this body. There's no widespread interest in the part that's not being discussed that's of interest to him.
 - Peter: it might be worth having a discussion about what Sanjay is talking about. He noted that he doesn't currently understand what is in Sanjay's mind but has a feeling it's worth discussing.
 - Sanjay: clarified that the issue is priorities. When we get past the immediate initiatives on community building & staffing, he's willing to participate in the spiritual discussion.
 - Candy: would want to get involved with that discussion because it's very personally important to her that we get people upstairs, noting with amusement that "upstairs" applies both literally to worship in the sanctuary and figuratively to heaven.

Other Business:

None

Peter thanked Ann for being our moderator for many years and noted that it's very appreciated.

Rev. Cath closed us in prayer at 1:37 pm.

The meeting was adjourned by Ann at 1:40 pm. Donna moved to adjourn, Jon seconded, and the motion passed unanimously.