

Looking Back; Looking Forward

Rev. Douglas S. Stivison

At our last Annual Meeting, the congregation made the bold decision to change my call from part time to full time and to call Hyo-Jung Kim as Associate Pastor. These decisions reflected a bold leap of faith, committing not only financial resources but the prayers and will of this congregation to active ministry. At the same time, they were an acknowledgement that the church felt it needed to and wanted to change, and that *change* would require a significant infusion of energy, vision, and leadership. It reflected a deep desire to move beyond just getting by or simply maintaining the status quo and to use a phrase that in many ways captures the spirit of these decisions, to “KickItUpANotch.”

The decisions made at last year’s Annual Meeting were an acknowledgement that the church knew it had to address three key issues—the need to reverse the nearly ten year period of decline in our ministry to children and youth, to make our church more visible in our changing community, and to position our church to attract and retain new members. At the same time, it was a call to do all of this while also maintaining a strong commitment to uplifting worship year round, pastoral care, and an all-around deepening of the spiritual life of the church.

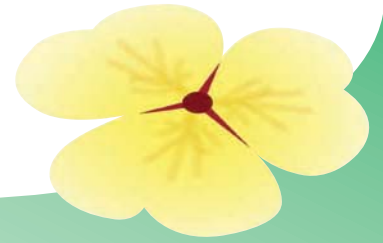
Any one of these goals would have been both laudable and ambitious by itself, but taken together they were truly ambitious. The vote to call me as the full-time pastor of the church was affirmed with a beautiful and moving ceremony in our sanctuary in September which included the exchange of solemn promises along with heartfelt prayers and hauntingly beautiful music. It also resulted in the symbolic addition of my name—as the church’s pastor—to the sign outside of the church.

Looking back at a year launched with such high hopes—and some cautions as well— how did we fare? By almost all measures it certainly was one of the most momentous years in the life of this church that we all love. We had both progress and setbacks, but there was a palpable sense of movement, energy, and optimism in a year marked by new faces, new activities, renewal, and new energy in treasured traditions, at the same time by missed opportunities and lessons learned. But by any measure, it was anything but the status quo.

During 2009, we launched four entirely new church activities that embraced proclamations, service to others, education, worship, and promise to become annual events. We also launched a monthly movie night that has already become a treasured aspect of our community fellowship. Favorite activities like Christmas Is . . . , the Children’s Nativity Pageant, and Fill the Ark were all marked by levels of enthusiasm that this church has not seen in many years.

Our church received an unprecedented amount of publicity and visibility in the community. We had over two dozen articles about the church appear in local newspapers including 14 photographs. We were featured on the Bergen County web site and the Bergen County Executive, Denis McNerney, visited our church to present us with a certificate of recognition. The Rev. Dr. John Deckenback, our





Central Atlantic Conference Minister, preached at our church and officiated alongside of me at the Communion Table. Patricia Espy, Executive Director of the Center for Food Action, worshipped with us one Sunday when she also thanked our congregation for its unwavering support of the CFA year after year. We were also privileged to host the Community Thanksgiving Worship Service in which eleven congregations—three Jewish, three Catholic, and five Protestant—came together in fellowship, prayer, and song. We were blessed with a spirited worship service that was truly “standing room only” as our ushers had to set up folding chairs to accommodate all the worshippers in our packed sanctuary.

We progressed from strength-to-strength with our burgeoning Vacation Bible School. Two years ago our church did not have a Vacation Bible School. Last year, we had nine children in our inaugural effort and this past August, we hosted 25 children as a tangible reflection—both within and outside of our church family—of this congregation’s strong commitment to Christian education and ministry to children. Throughout the year, attendance at Sunday School remained high including through the summer months. Our children were faithful and enthusiastic participants not only in the Christmas Nativity Pageant, but also they worked alongside the adults in our proclamation and mission activities, including Fill the Ark, Stuff-the-Bus, “Christmas Is” caroling and cookie delivery, the Palm Sunday Pancake Breakfast, the Yard Sale, and Lemonade on the Lawn.

In our community life we celebrated three infant baptisms, the reception of two new members, and faithful worship every single Sunday throughout all four seasons. We celebrated the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper every month and we held fitting memorial services for Tom Loftus, Marge Knight, Dot Downe, Thelma May, Ray Waters, and Jean Erbeck. During Lent we gathered for meditations and shared soup-and-bread and held moving services for Ash Wednesday, Holy Thursday, and Good Friday as well as wonderful celebrations of Palm Sunday and Easter. We commissioned Assistant Pastor Hyo-Jung Kim as a delegate to the General Synod of the United Church of Christ and celebrated her licensing to officiate at the Lord’s Table as well as her election to the Executive Council of the UCC—our denomination’s highest elected body.

It has been an exceptional year of activity, growth, vibrancy, and greatly increased visibility in every aspect of church life—proclamation, education, outreach, fellowship, and worship. I am deeply grateful for the faith this congregation has placed in me and for all of your prayers, efforts, and encouragement throughout the year. Working alongside Associate Pastor Hyo-Jung Kim, Moderator Jeanne Martin, and Church Administrator Andrea McWhirr has been a blessing for me, personally, and the combination of our different gifts has been a boundless source of inspiration and energy as we did, indeed, “KickItUpANotch.”