

## Welcome to Sullivan County!

Remarks by Anne Wood, Pastor, Jeffersonville

Three years ago, when many of you were here for my Commissioning service, I welcomed you back to the garden – in a reference to the Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young song from Woodstock. If you drove in the short way this morning, you drove right past Bethel Woods, the sight of Woodstock. But no matter how you drove here this morning, you had to pass by a lot of rot in this garden – empty storefronts, farms abandoned and left to go fallow, dilapidated homes falling into ruin. Back in the '80s and '90s, secondary cities in New York State got a shot in the arm with state funds to revitalize their downtowns and they have been able to bounce back. The tertiary cities got no such funding and so Liberty and Monticello, the cities of Sullivan County, continue on hard times – and their surrounding communities suffer as well.

With few job opportunities, over the past 30 years, the young people of this county have had to move elsewhere, leaving a rapidly aging demographic. Our churches are left with the same demographic issues and many think we are dying from lack of faith. But quite the opposite is true. With few young adults in the community, there are few young adults in our membership. With attrition rising due to age and death, every member of these churches has to be active faithfully to keep these churches going, unlike churches in more urban areas. These churches are still here – because of the faithful activity of each of its members.

There are 8 PCUSA churches in Sullivan County – none of them large – but still alive. Of the 4 churches that were here in Jeffersonville five years ago, three remain. The Lutheran church on the south end of town closed about four years ago. And, of the three remaining churches in town, it can be said that this PCUSA church is the healthiest.

These 8 Sullivan County PCUSA churches have become the heart of their towns... THE place where the community gathers and is nourished. This church hosts the Boy Scouts, the Girl Scout council, Alcoholics Anonymous, the social action group called the JEMS, which stands for Jeffersonville Enhances More of Sullivan, as well as housing the local Thrift store and one of the most active Food Banks in the county.

This is worship. This is mission. These 8 churches are God's outposts in a wilderness.

I hope, on your way here, besides seeing the social decay, you also saw the green. It is beautiful out here. God's country. This area is very similar to Vermont and the Berkshires. But while urban and suburban Boston have enjoyed and supported their green reaches, keeping them vital, New York and its suburbs have failed to do the same. One third of the people living here in Jeffersonville live in Section 8 housing. With healthy job prospects for young people here so low, heroin addiction is rampant. Trust has been lost because of the abuses this county has suffered at the hands of outsiders who have come in and laid waste, leaving the spent shells of their visits behind. Government won't prosecute some of the worst of these cases because they're afraid of the abusers. Trust has been lost because justice seems to be gone.

So I challenge you. I challenge you to expand your concept of 'Mission'. Expand it into the areas where devastation isn't as obvious but where the thread of hope is much more tenuous. Look into yourselves and expand it even where there is less chance that your efforts will leave you feeling warm and fuzzy. And most challenging of all, expand it on an individual, personal level, without the help of a support group around you. Help us bring trust and thriving confidence back to life here. Help us share God's light in the darkness. We welcome you. And I thank you for coming to this meeting.