

ACE Article – November 25, 2015 – Deb Blood

NOTE: This is the first in what will be an on-going series about the many vital and vibrant ministries of the churches of the Maine Conference, UCC. We welcome submissions and suggestions of articles and pictures. Our focus will be on those churches that are doing a new thing! Let's share our good ideas, and talk about experiments that have succeeded, and those that have failed! Just send in your ideas to Beth Campbell at conference@maineucc.org. Can't wait to see what's going on!



Centre Street Congregational Church

On a chilly, gray November morning I left Ellsworth and headed for Machias. I was going to lead worship and preach at one of our farthest Down East churches. Little did I know I was in for a treat! The drive was gorgeous! Shoreline and mountains wreathed in clouds to my right, and bright red blueberry fields to my left. I learned a lesson: always leave time on the way to church to stop and take pictures.

The beauty of the morning continued as I was warmly greeted at Centre Street Congregational UCC and heard the Youth Bell Choir and Adult Choir rehearsing. The sanctuary at Centre Street is lovely: light and bright, warm and welcoming. The congregation not only let me take their picture at the beginning of worship, but insisted on a selfie!





The music was grand, and this is a singing congregation! The hymns sounded great. The children were flawless as they played the bells. [There's a video with this article that you can watch of them playing "We Gather Together".] ([Centre Street Cong Church Children's Bell Choir](#))

We worshipped and praised God, and then had a bountiful and delicious coffee hour.

You wouldn't know it to read this, but Centre Street is without a Pastor right now, and they have been for some time. They have been through some disruptive and difficult times in recent years. And yet, this is a vital and vibrant congregation. The sense of the Holy Spirit is strong - you can feel it as soon as you walk in. How is this possible?

Here is what their Moderator, Cindy Huggins says:

"First, we're learning how to be the church, instead of just attend the church. Over the past several years, we drifted into a pattern of attending worship services and committee meetings—but very little else. We focused on what happens inside the building—food pantry, AA, Washington County Children's Chorus, Weight Watchers, Machias Bay Chamber Series, etc. All that stuff is great, but it really amounts to community people renting church space—not the church pursuing its own mission. That is gradually changing, thanks to some superb church leadership (including our Head Deacon). We just finished our second extended book study—last spring we did Zealot, and this fall we did Crossan's book on the Lord's Prayer—and we'll be doing Molly Baskette's 4-week study on Ecclesiastes in January. We opened up the church on the afternoon of Halloween, including a "rest stop" with coffee and snacks for adults, and over 300 kids came through the door. We're launching a ride program for elderly folks who don't like to drive in the winter or after dark. We're running monthly public suppers—free! And the big thing is that we're taking over the Machias Food Pantry on December 1, so that it will really and truly be a church mission for the first time in several years.



We are blessed to have Susie Maxwell, a recent graduate of Andover-Newton, join us last spring, and we're in the process of getting her licensed. She's preaching twice a month for us and doing a fantastic job, and we're using lay preachers for the other Sundays. In January and February we'll be launching a well organized Volunteer Program that will move us into a more sustainable, long-term operation model.

The budget has improved significantly, we're averaging about 45 people on Sunday mornings, the

church office is open 3 days during the week, and there's lots of good energy floating around. (Lots of prayer, too. Lots and lots.) On Friday we're holding a special service for Transgender Day of Remembrance, as part of our Open and Affirming ministry, and we recently held a workshop on domestic violence awareness and prevention. Oh, and one reason that all of this activity is actually working is that we're learning to effectively use social media — a weekly e-newsletter, a strong Facebook page, a new Web site in development. And we've launched a GoFundMe page to help support our Face Lift Campaign, which is targeting \$150,000 to paint the building and install exterior signage. (For next summer, we're planning an SOS — Save Our Seats!— campaign to raise money to install new pew cushions in the sanctuary and buy cushioned folding chairs for the vestry.)”

Phew!!! There is a lot going on – and it is all driven by the members of the Church in relationship with God, who is calling them to grow in mission and faithfulness in the midst of a very challenged community. They are embracing the need to change their perspective and ministries in response to their surrounding community. By leaning into the Call that God has for them and their Church, the members and friends of Centre Street Congregational UCC are making a big difference! [And having a lot of fun while they do it!]

After a delicious lunch at Helen’s Restaurant, I made my way home. It was a long drive in rain and fog, but my spirits were high after such an energized and joyful morning. It was definitely worth the trip! Please hold Centre Street Church in your prayers, and if you’re ever down east, stop in!

