

There Goes the Neighborhood!

Then God said to Samuel, 'See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle.' 1 Samuel 3:10

2015 was an “ear-tingling” moment for the Neighborhood UCC.

The congregation has a long history. Gathered in 1765, when the City of Bath was known as the Long Reach on the Kennebec River, the congregation had occupied six different buildings in just under 250 years – a new location every 50 years or so.

In 1970, two downtown congregations merged and built a new building on the edge of town. It was a huge building, with a sanctuary that seats 450, and a parking lot to match. It had 10 Sunday School Rooms, which, in 2014, provided a separate room for each student on the average Sunday.

The building served as a community center, the home of Bath’s AA community, Food Pantry, and numerous other community groups. Since 2010, the congregation began using the large meeting hall and kitchen to develop the Neighborhood Café, a free restaurant that serves over 100 meals on Tuesday evenings. Still, the congregation found it necessary to rent space to several tenants, and the business of property management distracted from the core mission.

In 2013, the congregation entered a process of discernment, guided by the simple question, “Where is the best location for us to do our ministry?” They considered all options, from staying put to operating without a building. In the summer of 2014, they decided they wanted to be back downtown, sold the big building, and purchased a small restaurant on the busiest downtown intersection. By Easter Sunday they were open for worship. Now equipped with a professional restaurant kitchen, The Neighborhood Café re-opened in May, and is in the process of expanding to daily operation, with the aim of building relationships among all neighbors.

The decision to move resulted from years of discipline, prayer, and focus on the questions of relevance: *What is the point of our existence? How is our world different because of our church?*

Such inquiry yielded a concise expression of the congregation’s purpose, expressed as a possibility, three simple faith statements, and core values to be used as tools for accountability. The congregation refers to this as The Neighborhood’s “Spiritual Essence:”

Possibility we create: Healing for ourselves and all our neighbors

Faith Statements we hold as true:

God calls us to surrender, to let love and grace change our lives.

Jesus Christ appears to us in our neighbors and in all creation.

Holy Spirit gathers and nurtures the community for love, power, and healing.

Practices for which we are accountable:

Faithful risk, dignity, respect, loving-kindness.

Embracing “faithful risk” keeps the ears tingling, both in the congregation and in the whole community. Prayers are most welcome for this church, at peace on the edge of limitless possibility.