



THE SPIRE

EDWARDS CHURCH *of* NORTHAMPTON
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

Vol. 34 No. 2

February 2024

From the Senior Minister

Dear Edwards Church Community,

Recently I reviewed a list of the ministry teams that were already in existence or planned for launch four years ago after the annual meeting in 2020. Some were renamed groups doing close to the same things before and after we adopted the new way of organizing the church. Others were new ideas of interest to several people.

I was reviewing the lists at the request of two dedicated volunteers to confirm which teams are active now and which are not. About half are not. This decrease (or the decision in to never launch a new team) is consistent with the change in the number of folks who used to attend with some regularity and no longer do. A drop off of about one half is the average among churches like ours over the same period.

The ministry of Jesus – which we gather to join in and share with others – has never been primarily about numbers. Yes, reaching more people is important. Having more people experience and understand what it is that keeps us engaged is good. And if you think about what drew you in and kept you coming back, what took you from visitor to regular attender, there was probably a combination of factors, but the one that sealed it was most likely making a friend or two.



For much of the latter half of the 20th century, church growth was almost a given. Now, not so much. There are numerous church growth techniques, seminars to take, and marketing approaches for attracting new “customers” if we treat church growth as an exercise in consumer marketing. There is also another way, which accepts the full range of human experience and offers what Jesus offered – companionship through life’s ups and downs, acceptance of the gifts one brings, grace for the struggles one has, and the promise of a new life of depth and even beauty, when we let go of our need to demonstrate our worthiness or strength. What better place to acknowledge that we need each other, than at church, in the name of the one who said “I call you friends.”

In his book *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*, Richard Rohr describes how a maturing faith accepts as natural our movement from an emphasis on achievement and acquisition (the first half of life) to accepting that some degree of suffering and even death necessarily precedes the arrival of new life or liberation. Moving from conventional “success” the discovery of new life in the spirit, he observes:

Setting out is always a leap of faith, a risk in the deepest sense of the term, and yet an adventure too. The familiar and the habitual are so falsely reassuring, and most of us make our homes there permanently. The new is always by definition unfamiliar and untested, so God, life, destiny, suffering have to give us a push--usually a big one--or we will not go.

Jesus was right up front with the nature of what it means to follow him:

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. (Mark 8:34-35)

In preparation for Easter, which will come “early” this year on March 31, Marguerite and I invite you to test drive several spiritual practices. Each of them is a way of inviting God deeper into your life, to have influence not just on your way of thinking, but also your ways of being and acting in the world. Moving through life, we all need ways to feed our spirits, to deepen our rootedness in a growing awareness of God. Effective spiritual practices cultivate that rootedness. The practices we will share all “work,” but not all work the same or as well for all people, so please try a few.



What I hope for in this coming season of preparing for new life is simple: that the community of this church, through its individual and shared worship and spiritual life, can become more ready, willing and able to offer spiritual friendship to everyone who crosses our threshold. Not just friendliness, but the prospect of making a real friend in a setting devoted to life in the Spirit.

Offering a sincere welcome is a spiritual practice born of the awareness of God’s still-speaking voice in each one of us, whether a life-long regular church attender or a somewhat skeptical spiritual seeker. In some monastic communities, the most experienced monks are the greeters, because they know that in every stranger coming to their door, there is something of Christ to welcome.

During the childhood and early adult lives of most of the members of this church, participation in organized religion was the norm. Believing in God was a given, not just in your head but in your pattern of regular practices. Now, it is increasingly counter-cultural. Perhaps it is a coincidence, but we are also living during an epidemic of loneliness and isolation. The Surgeon General of the United States, Dr. Vivek Murthy, has sounded the alarm, calling on all of us to cultivate more connections with more people. For him, it is a matter of national and individual health. For us, it is a first principle, loving God and our neighbor as ourselves.

In faith, with hope, for love,

Michael

From the Bridge Associate Minister

My goodness! How could it be that by the time you are reading this I will have been serving as your Bridge Associate Minister for a whole month. And what a wonderful month it has been (even with my first Sunday with you being snowed out.)

I have met many of you, at church, on Zoom, in activities and on the run. You are a warm and welcoming faithful group who take seriously Jesus' invitation to follow him, and meet up with him, in both expected and unexpected places. Thank you for welcoming me on the bridge of transition. That bridge can at times feel nerve racking (what is going to happen now?) and also comforting (we are well connected with our past, our present, and the just around the corner, yet to be known, future.)

This month I read a daily reflection by Richard Rohr. It has stayed in my mind as I have been thinking a lot about hope, faith, and love. The reflection was entitled The Inefficiency of Faith. Here is the part that got my attention.

"I am talking about just holding the tension, not necessarily finding a resolution or closure to paradox. We must agree to live without resolution, at least for a while. This is very difficult for most people, largely because we have not been taught how to do this mentally or emotionally. We didn't know we could—or even should. As Paul seems to say (and I paraphrase), hope would not be the virtue that it is if it led us to quick closure and we did not have to "wait for it with patience" (Romans 8:24–25).

I think opening to this holding pattern is the very name and description of faith. Unfortunately, in Christianity, faith largely became believing things to be true or false (intellectual assent) instead of giving people concrete practices so they could themselves know how to open up (faith), hold on (hope), and allow an infilling from another Source (love).

We must move from a belief-based religion to a practice-based religion, or little will change. We will merely continue to argue about what we are supposed to believe and who the unbelievers are. We need contemplative practices to loosen our egoic attachment to certainty and retrain our minds to understand the wisdom of paradox."

With the idea of faith as opening up, hope as holding on, and love as allowing the infilling from another Source, I look forward to our Lenten season here at Edwards Church. You will find much about it in this issue of the Spire and in our weekly email messages over the next two months. From my experience, faith formation is built on practices, connections, contemplation and actions. Here, in your company I am experiencing the great opening, holding and allowing, that deepens faith for all ages! In faith and hope and love, Marguerite

Annual Meeting of the Congregation

The Annual Meeting of the congregation of Edwards Church of Northampton will take place **on Sunday, Feb. 11, 2024 immediately after the Sunday worship service.**

Attendance will be both in person and via Zoom. **In person participants will gather in Addis Hall** for a light lunch and the in-person portion of the meeting. **A Zoom invitation will be emailed on Friday, Feb. 9, 2024.**

Matters to be discussed and voted on include:

- i) approval of minutes of the annual meeting of the congregation on January 29, 2023 and special meetings on April 30, 2023 and November 19, 2023;
- ii) reports of the officers, committees and ministry teams within the church regarding their activity in the prior year;
- iii) reports of the church staff;
- iv) the financial condition of the church and the proposed budget for 2024,
 - a. which will include discussion of:
 - b. authorizing approximately \$55,000 of funds, representing the unused portion of the operating budget for 2023, to be used for building and grounds long term projects;
 - c. authorizing approximately \$24,000 of funds as New Way Funds allocated to Outreach, representing the amount available as the remainder of the 5% of the 5-year rolling average of the value of the investment account, after other deductions from that 5% for our 2024 operating budget; and
 - d. authorizing an additional \$50,000 allocation of funds from the investment account, over and above the 5% provided under the New Way formula, as an allocation to the New Way Funds account for Outreach.
- v) continued operation using the new structure of Elected Core Ministry (ECM) and ministry teams, first authorized at the Annual Meeting in 2020 and continued since then;
- vi) election of the ECM and officers for the coming year;
- vii) the report submitted by the Bylaws Team; and
- viii) authorization for business meetings of the congregation and any board, committee, or ministry team engaged in the work of the church to take place by any electronic means, such as Zoom, that offers real time video and audio communication among all parties involved in the meeting, and otherwise as permitted under Massachusetts General Laws, and ratification of the actions taken at congregational meetings held in a “hybrid” format on April 30, 2023 and November 19, 2023 and any meetings of boards, committee or ministry teams since March 31, 2023; [<https://malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleXXII/Chapter156D/Section7.08>]

ECM Meeting Minutes

January 10, 2024

7:15-8:45 PM

Facilitator: Leon

Minutes: Sheri

Opening Devotional: Jack

poem written by a pastor from his past

Approval of previous minutes: All

approved with suggested changes

Welcome Marguerite Sheehan: All

we look forward to working with you!

AV Upgrade/Music Team: Mark and Adam

- tweaks from installer not yet done
- protective case around control panel will be installed
- music meeting rescheduled, so upcoming
- Adam adds that we had some organ work done, console rotated!

Finance Team update: Leon

- has not met for a few months
- Sabra has been sending the financials regularly
- 8 million dollars approximately in portfolio, and looks like a bit of a surplus around 55,000 dollars at end of year!
- what to do with surplus? in the past, we used this money as capital fund money. proposal to use this extra to apply towards B&G
- 10,000 will be reserved for scholarship this coming year
- 24,000 trailing surplus of new way funds to outreach and we are also recommending another 50,000 to outreach from the new way funds for this coming year. with the leftover 32,000 dollars, then outreach will have 106,000

Investment Committee Report: Leon

- meets quarterly so no recent meeting..
- we are looking into investing 500,000 to wayfare for low-income housing (as a loan)

New ECM members: Mark and group

- Sandra Coyne confirmed
- Jeff Prince confirmed

Outreach update: Michael/Jack

- 20 regular grants given yearly
- down 2 members, so looking for a few new members
- committee appreciates support of congregation
- uplifting to move around issues and figure out where we can be most impactful
- community has shown great appreciation

Thriving Congregation Update: Sheri

- not meeting regularly, as the grant-funded project is over
- we will continue breaking bread dinners

Rewriting By-Laws update: All

- there is a report for the annual meeting
- plan is to amend the bylaws to reflect our change in structure
- for next year, the team will discuss definition of membership
- zoom meetings: proposal that we can vote online

Annual Meeting preparation: All

- Mark and Heather will co-facilitate
- we will divide up the meeting into sections and Mark will give us our assignments.
- ECM annual report: Heather will do
- the reports for annual meeting will be sent out this weekend
- Addis hall: do a dry run prior to meeting to make sure the technology all work.
Mark and Michael will check this out
- serve some light sandwiches at the meeting

Other Business?

- B&G issue: some standing water in diaconate closet discovered, and also some in kitchen drain; plumber is on it.
- First Night: to consider for next year, we went over the limit of how many were allowed in the sanctuary; awkward to have to turn angry people away; we will ask the Arts Council for extra help next year. we may also ask that no-one be scheduled from 10-11 as that just makes close-time for the building awfully late

Closing Prayer: Mark

prayer of honor to God

Next Meeting Date: Tuesday February 20th, 7:15 pm

Agenda: Mark

Minutes: Heather

Facilitator: Jack

Opening Devotional: Marguerite

Closing Prayer: Michael

Lenten Mid-Week Gatherings Practicing Spirituality

This Lent we are offering a mid-week opportunity to come to our sanctuary, settle our hearts and souls for a while in good company, and experience a mix of offerings *from and for* Edwards Church members and friends, centered on the theme of “Practicing Spirituality.”

Some of the spiritual practices that we will be experiencing and talking about (or sitting in the silence with) include: walking the labyrinth, singing as a spiritual practice, “pray as you go”, the hands on spirituality of making prayer shawls and healing quilts, and listening to sacred texts with time for silence and reflection.

We will be having a “kick- off” on Wednesday February 7th when some of us are going to join St John’s Church in their monthly Taizé Service. That service begins at 7pm. All are welcome! No need to call ahead or even go as a group, though that would be fun. Marguerite and Michael will leave Edwards at 6:45 to walk up the hill.

The following Wednesday, February 14th (yes, Valentine’s Day) is Ash Wednesday. We will have a service here at Edwards. Again, at 7pm.

After Ash Wednesday, the quiet mid-week gatherings will be Feb 20, 27, March 6, 13, and 20th. All these gatherings will begin at 7 and end at about 7:40 – time to be together and time to get home again before too late!



The Lenten Devotionals Have Arrived!

Our congregational Lenten Devotional from the UCC has arrived. It is called **Bend** and it is yours for the taking and using this month. As one writer said “I learned about the extra beatitude from a church camp friend, one belatedly added by some anonymous wag in the twentieth century. “Blessed are the flexible, for they will not get bent out of shape.” On this note, let’s develop our flexibility and our openness to what is happening now in our lives and in our church and what is “around the bend.”

*The devotionals are in baskets at the back of sanctuary. Please take one per family.
If you need one mailed ask Kyla in the office.*



Prayer Shawl Ministry

Blessing of the Shawls – Sunday February 11th

It is time to bless the shawls! Our prayer shawl ministry has been busy creating prayer shawls for those in the community needing a remembrance that in their sickness or grief or time of trouble they are not alone! The group blesses each of the shawls when they are made or when they arrive at the church

AND they also ask that our congregation add words of blessing and love before the shawls are sent out to the world. We have chosen **Sunday February 11** for this congregational blessing. Thank you for your prayers and encouragement of this church healing and prayer ministry.

Sunday Friends Time

Sunday School morphs into Sunday Friends Time! We want to be friends with you!



Because who really wants to go to "school" on Sunday, we are changing the title "church school" to **Sunday Friends Time**. This is not just a wording change. It also helps all of us, children, youth and adults, to remember and celebrate how Jesus said, and we believe, "I no longer call you servants. I call you friends." We are here to "friend" each other in Jesus' spirit and name.

Our church is committed to making all our times, with children, youth, and adults, safe and sound, we are now asking you the adults to join us in Sunday Friends Time so that we can have the recommended 2 adults supporting the children who gather in the Edwards room most Sundays.

Marguerite will be with the children most Sundays (except Communion Sunday and the one Sunday she is not in the building). Will you consider being the second adult with her? Also, on that Sunday when she is not in the building she will be putting together a theme/ bible reading/activity for the group that someone (you perhaps) can easily pick up and enjoy sharing with the children.

Please check in with Marguerite about how you might be a friend on Sundays at ffminister@edwardschurchnorthampton.org



Our Edwards Church youth group is up and running this winter! Ella Stocker (youth group leader) and Marguerite are looking forward to meeting with any youth who would like to engage (or re-engage) in friendship, fun, and church and community service. We hope, over this winter and spring, to connect with our local food pantry (Manna) right here at Edwards, Cathedral in the Night, and hopefully as the crops come in, with gleaning in the community. But all that depends on what you, the youth, and interested adults want to “cook up and serve.” We are meeting after worship on February 25. Spread the word. Invite a friend or a someone you would like to “friend.” Let us know if you hope to be there and if you forget at the last moment, just show up on Sunday. Contact people are Ella at ellareilystocker@gmail.com and Marguerite at ffminister@edwardschurchnorthampton.org

Lenten Book Study – Would you like to join us?

Our Lenten book study now has a book, a place and a time. You are invited to join us! The book is **An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith**, by Barbara Brown Taylor. We will be meeting at church on Tuesday evenings during the Lent. If the weather is bad, we may resort to Zoom meetings. Dates are Feb 27 and March 5, 12, 19 and 26. Time will be 6:30-8pm. We will be reading and reflecting on 5 short chapters each week. We can order books for those who need them so please let me know if you would like to attend so we can get you a book. The introduction to the book is quite inviting. “If you are tired of arguing about religion, tired of reading about spirituality, tired of talk-talk-talking about things that matter without doing a single thing that matters yourself, then the pages that follow are dedicated to you.” I hope you can join us! In peace, Marguerite

NORTHAMPTON PARENTS CENTER

WEEKLY SCHEDULE

ALL GROUPS ARE 9:30AM-11:30AM (EXCEPT FOR THURSDAYS WHEN THE BABY GROUP STARTS AT 8:30!)

MONDAY
INDOORS
@ NPC

TUESDAY
OUTDOORS @
THE YMCA
PLAYGROUND

INDOORS @ NPC
IF THE WEATHER
DOESN'T
COOPERATE!

WEDNESDAY
INDOORS
@ NPC

THURSDAY
INDOORS
@ NPC

WE ARE
WHEELCHAIR
ACCESSIBLE!

LOWER LEVEL OF
EDWARDS CHURCH 297
MAIN STREET
NORTHAMPTON

PLEASE USE PUBLIC PARKING
AND THE REAR ENTRANCE. LET
US KNOW IF YOU NEED
ASSISTANCE!

If you're able to join it would be great to have you! Here is a look at the upcoming schedule.

Please come and check out these upcoming events! It would be great if you were there.

SAVE THE DATES!

3 FAMILY FUN NIGHTS!

MARK YOUR CALENDARS FOR
THESE FREE UPCOMING SUNDAY
EVENTS AT NPC!

4PM-7PM
MUSIC @ 5:30PM

FEBRUARY 11TH, 2024

MARCH 24TH, 2024

APRIL 7TH, 2024

MUSIC WITH
LITTLE ROOTS!

MUSIC &
PUPPETS WITH
TOM KNIGHT!

OPTIONAL
POTLUCK! BRING A
DISH TO SHARE OR
JUST BRING
YOURSELVES!

 Save the date!! 

Northampton Parents Center

SPRING AUCTION

 CAN YOU DONATE TO
THE AUCTION OR
VOLUNTEER TO HELP?
LET US KNOW!

 ONLINE!

 MARCH 19-
MARCH 28

Spring auction!
Donations
and
Volunteers
Needed!

If you are an
early riser and
have a little
one it would be
great to see
you there!

EARLY BIRD INFANT GROUP

THURSDAYS AT 8:30AM

*Come anytime! There is no such thing as late, and you are always
welcome to stay for our regular 9:30AM-11:30AM playgroup!*

JOIN NPC PROGRAM ASSISTANT
LINDSEY KING FOR A FREE
WEEKLY DROP-IN GROUP FOR
INFANTS AND THEIR CAREGIVERS!
COFFEE AND TEA INCLUDED!

EMAIL QUESTIONS TO
LINDSEYNPCASSISTANT@GMAIL.COM



FEBRUARY BIRTHDAYS

Marc Abel, Ruby Smith, Sandra Rossi, Dan Shanahan, Deanna O'Connor, Kimberly Schlichting, Margaret Allen, Tracy Teague, Marc Waller, Brian Swift, Ana Haughey



Note: In an effort to protect the digital identities of our community members, we will no longer publish dates of birth in the newsletter. Contact the church office directly if you would like to obtain this information.

Is your birthday missing? We'd like to include everyone, so please call the church office and let us know your birthday!

Pastoral Care

There is no substitute for personal contact. Marguerite and Michael enjoy meeting in person. There need not be a special reason to meet. We can sit inside or out, take a walk, whatever is comfortable. Please email anytime or call us at the church office (413) 584-5500 or on our cell phones.

Michael	minister@edwardschurchnorthampton.org	cell: 413-531-9729
Marguerite	ffminister@edwardschurchnorthampton.org	cell: 413-687-1418

February 2024

NPC = Northampton Parent's Center
RVS = River Valley Sangha
FoH = Friends of the Homeless
B&G = Building & Grounds

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
				1 8:30 Infant Group 9:30 NPC 6:30 AA 7 Choir	2 11:30 MANNA	3 11:30 MANNA
4 10 Worship 1 Young Adults	5 9:30 NPC 6 RVS	6 9:30 NPC 7 Gamblers Anon.	7 9:30 NPC 12 Bible Study 7 B&G	8 8:30 Infant Group 9:30 NPC 6:30 AA 7 Choir	9 11:30 MANNA	10 11:30 MANNA
11 10 Worship 11 Annual Meeting 1:30 NCMC	12 9:30 NPC	13 9:30 NPC 3 Prayer Shawl 7 Gamblers Anon.	14 9:30 NPC 12 Bible Study 5:30 FoH	15 8:30 Infant Group 9:30 NPC 4 Care & Visitation 6:30 AA 7 Choir	16 11:30 MANNA	17 11:30 MANNA
18 10 Worship	19 9:30 NPC	20 9:30 NPC 7 Gamblers Anon.	21 9:30 NPC 6 Investment 12 Bible Study	22 8:30 Infant Group 9:30 NPC 6:30 AA 7 Choir	23 11:30 MANNA	24 11:30 MANNA
25 10 Worship	26 9:30 NPC	27 9:30 NPC 3 Prayer Shawl 6:30 FF COP 7 Gamblers Anon.	28 9:30 NPC 12 Bible Study	29 8:30 Infant Group 9:30 NPC 6:30 AA 7 Choir		