The weeks leading up to August 12 have been among the most difficult in my calling as a pastor. In early July, when we got word that Unite the Right 2 applied for a permit to rally in Lafayette Park, I wanted to ignore the very distinct possibility that fascists might soon be coming just a few blocks from here — on a Sunday. It has been a busy summer here at New York Avenue, so I put their coming on the back burner.

But then, about three weeks ago, elevated levels of anxiety began to set in. *This was really happening.* Others were organizing. Counter-protesters were gathering under the banner of Shut Down DC. Black Lives Matter were starting in Philadelphia and marching down to DC.

The United Methodists were planning a counter-rally called United to Love on the Mall. These would all provide good and needed witness.

Our Presbyterian friends from other churches seemed to think that we at NYAPC would be doing something. Did you know that we have become known as the church *that does something*?

We proclaim a theology that says because God in Christ showed up for the most vulnerable, we too are called to stand in the broken places. Because of that calling to stand with the oppressed in love, and because our church building provides us with the missional possibilities to be present right in the grit of life, during the last eighteen months or so, as a church we have hosted huge outpourings of hospitality for the Inauguration, the Women’s March, and March for Our Lives, as well as showing up as a community for demonstrations against the Muslim Ban, and for immigrants as a Sanctuary Church, for the Climate, for Science, for Education, and the list goes on.

We have been transformed into a community who show up on a broad scale for these demonstrations.

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Some of us bake at home, dropping off donations ahead of time for hungry marchers, some of us volunteer in person, making sure that every person who enters here is welcomed in out of the chaos with a smile and an offer of a clean bathroom, and some join in with the crowds holding homemade signs reflecting in different ways our call to seek justice propelled by the hope that we hold in Christ.

But the August 12 rally felt different. With the vitriol from the Unite the Right supporters and the deadly violence in Charlottesville last year, it felt like there were a lot of unknowns. August 12 had a potential to be scary in a way that the other protests were not.

Two weeks before August 12, my feeling was that we would be open for church as usual in the morning, but close after worship. Because there was a very distinct possibility that people dressed as Klan members or Nazis would literally be walking through our streets, we mutually decided that our mostly African American staff who run the front desk and custodial services wouldn’t be coming that day.

So with that decision, it seemed to make sense to be open with a skeleton crew of volunteers in the morning, making the statement that we as a church wouldn’t back down, but then close in the afternoon when the rally was scheduled to take place. I really didn’t want to show up. I wanted to go home and spend the afternoon doing Sunday things like maybe going swimming or napping alongside our baby. August is supposed to be quiet in DC, right?

But then two things happened. First, nine days prior, we had this wonderful gathering of local church leaders and four lead officers in the MPD and Park Police, including the Assistant Chief. What impressed me and calmed my fears about the day was that the police listened deeply to our concerns spoken on behalf of our members and those who come to the church and experience homelessness. Then as I listened to the other church leaders, it seemed as though no other downtown place of worship would be open in the afternoon. A safe space particularly for the counter-protestors was desperately needed.

Second, just after that meeting, a few of us had one of the hardest meetings I have ever had with Jim, the leader from Showing Up For Racial Justice (SURJ). He turned out to be a rock on August 12. His asks required that we transform our thinking.

Would we partner with their group and as a church be open for the counter-protestors that day?

Their ask was that we would be open far longer than we had planned, from the morning until about 9 pm at night, but they promised the volunteer base to make it happen. That was going to be a relatively easy yes.

The next level of ask was, given that the counter protestors might very well be fleeing Nazis, could we bar Nazis from entering the building? As we were to be a safe haven, the answer would be yes too.

But here is the difficult part that required a transformation of thinking: Jim explained that guests that Showing Up for Racial Justice supports would not
feel comfortable with a police presence. In fact, their very presence would make the church not feel like a safe place. So their ask — Would it be possible that on this day only, except in emergencies, police would not enter the building at all?

This ask initially seemed to go against the theology of hospitality that we extend. How could we say no to hospitality to the very group of people who pledge to protect us? But as a few of us first and then Session a few days later listened more deeply to the concerns, we heard that this particular group of people representing Black Lives Matter, the immigrant community, and community of people with different visible and invisible challenges, were asking this difficult request of us. Because of their life experiences, they were asking us to stand with them and provide a safe place for groups most in need.

That request seemed to go with our theology to stand with the oppressed — but the caveat of no fascist or police presence still felt difficult. I was afraid about what you would say. You surely would have so many questions. It isn’t a decision easily explained. Would you be angry? Would you even be willing to volunteer?

And I’m not saying that you didn’t have questions and that there wasn’t some disagreement, but because our tensions were held in the safety of seeking to be church together, your questions led to discernment that helped narrow down our points of agreement:

To highlight that the safety of everyone involved is always our foremost concern.

To highlight that if there was an emergency, of course the police would be called.

To highlight that if any person was in immediate need, including the police and fascists, they would be welcomed into church.

And to highlight that after this day was over, we would try to be a church that connect the police and these vulnerable groups in conversation. That we might be a place where people feel safe enough to engage one another. I still hope we can do that.

Then you did something amazing. In the midst of the tension of that difficult decision, in the midst of some really rough edges, in the midst of brokenness, you still showed up. You showed up for worship last week with the same attendance numbers as normal.

Three of my female clergy colleagues showed up to lead the service — and you smiled back at us in encouragement of our callings.

Navigating the difficulty of being downtown during the week, and despite surely having other things to do, you gave of yourselves, dropping off food throughout the week for hospitality. One of you sent Goldfish Crackers because your child likes goldfish, and aren’t they all our kids?

You showed up to staff the Radcliffe Room full of volunteers, and our regular guests took it upon themselves as soon as I unlocked the doors to come in and be present with me providing the reassurance of company and the practical skills of knowing where to turn all of the lights to get the building humming into motion.

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You staffed the church in three shifts, some of you staying for a few hours to provide an atmosphere of peace, and a few of you for as many as 14 hours providing that steady drumbeat making sure the bathrooms were clean and the food and water always stocked.

One of you knitted at the front desk. You were a grandmother with muscle.

Some of us stood out front in the rain alternating between joking banter and more tense conversation when it seemed as though people were in need.

When Pastor Emily and I stood outside in an effort to protect the counter-protestors, those of you who command a larger presence than your petite pastors stood up in our protection.

Another group of you ran the custodial cart and filled it with water to bring it to the protestors on scene.

And what brought real respect is when one of you brought the water to the police officer stationed across the street from the church.

Those of you at home sent messages of encouragement.

The second passage from Romans 12, which kept repeating in my mind throughout the whole day like the refrain of a beautiful song:

"By the mercies of God, present your bodies as a living sacrifice... Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God."

I venture to say that in the last eighteen months, we have been transformed. We have been transformed to see our building as central to our mission, and all of that behind-the-scenes work making sure our systems are maintained and everything is paid for is central to our mission.

That because of the work that you so cheerfully give, without grudge or reluctance, without complaint, without all of those what ifs —you gave of yourselves fully and abundantly.

We have been transformed into a people who seek to show up in the broken places. And where we don’t fully understand the brokenness, we see it as our calling to learn more: To listen to stories both from our
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friends who we already know; to our neighbors who may not yet have met, but have a request of us: to show up alongside.

So I ask you three things. These are things that the Vision and Strategic Planning Team have been considering this summer:

How have you been transformed by the work of God in Christ?

How has your faith journey been impacted by the people you have experienced here?

Where do you feel that God is continuing to transform us into the future?

These are not questions with pat answers, but questions that require long discernment and prayer to continue to consider whose we are and who we will be.

A final image to leave you. Even though the staff couldn’t be here last Sunday, they ran around the building making sure everything was ready, from the mops to labeling sets of keys. Evelyn McMillan, who has worked here for 38 years, wanted to make sure we had extra coffee for all of the guests, because coffee provides energy, because coffee provides comfort, because coffee helps build community, and because she lives and breathes the mission of this church. As a reminder of the work that we do together, she labeled each one “Justice Coffee.”

Friends, it is here that we seek to be transformed by the renewing of our minds, and it is here that Justice Coffee is served.

Amen.
Response to Family Crisis at US Border
June 18, 2018

Dear NYAPC Congregation and Friends,

We find the politics and practices separating immigrant families crossing into the US to be a gross violation of our human rights and our faith. Thanks to the encouragement of some of you, we as pastors feel called to respond. We respond in different ways, Roger addressing the atrocious use of Scripture to defend these policies and what Scripture enjoins us to do, and Alice writing as a parent and as the pastor to children and youth.

Roger: When Attorney General Jeff Sessions quoted the Apostle Paul last Thursday, June 14—“obey the laws of government for God has ordained them for the purposes of order” (Romans 13)—to justify the horrendous practice of separating parents from their children at the US border, he took his place in a long line of abusers of this passage of scripture. In the 1930s and 40s, many German Christians invoked this same passage as a scriptural mandate for obedience to Hitler’s Third Reich. South African Christians invoked it in support of apartheid. And during the Viet Nam War and the civil rights movement, some Christians deployed this passage against those who advocated civil disobedience.

In response to Sessions’ use of Romans 13, many have pointed out what he overlooks: that in the same passage, Paul points to the law of love (Romans 13:10) as the higher scriptural demand. They are surely right about that. But deeper engagement with Paul’s thought provides an even more robust response to the Attorney General’s appalling use of scripture to justify a monstrous practice.

In Gal 2:19-20, Paul insists: “I have been crucified with Christ and it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me.” To be co-crucified and co-risen in Christ entails living in union with the excluded, the vanquished, the profane, and the godforsaken—and also to exclude oneself from the realm of privilege. It entails radical identification with all who are crucified by power and violence, and a radical confession of our own participation in all such crucifixions. Just as important, to be crucified with Christ and co-risen in Christ is to live as if death and its surrogates have no power over us. In my mind, this entails not only radical love of God and neighbor, but also a willingness to put ourselves at risk for the vulnerable—who would certainly include migrant children and their parents. Indeed, Christians are called to radical identification with children and parents who have been forcibly separated by governing authorities.

In his Letter from Birmingham Jail, Martin Luther King observed that “a just law is a code that squares with the moral law. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law...an unjust law is not rooted in the eternal and natural law...any law that degrades human personality is unjust.” I believe Romans 13 can and should be read in conversation with King’s words. In Romans 13, Paul contends that good government serves God’s eternal purpose when it pursues justice and restrains evil for all of its citizens, and in so doing checks injustice and tyranny. Interestingly, though Caesar is not mentioned in this text, we can surmise that he is a target of this discourse—it was Caesar, after all, who crucified Jesus. We can be equally sure that, in Paul’s view, the church provides in this world a counter witness to tyranny and violence.

In the coming days and months, New York Avenue and all our Presbyterian and ecumenical kin will be asked to discern what it might mean to counter tyranny, violence and unjust laws. In particular, we will be asked to risk standing with children and parents at our borders and against atrocious policies that are being enacted against them.

Alice: I write to you as I sit beside our sleeping baby girl. Our son is safely at his preschool. I know where they both are, and know that they are safe and growing up in an environment that supports their growth and development. As I see children being separated from their parents and caregivers, as a Christian, a mother, and a human, I believe we must speak out. I keep thinking what if this happened to families within our church? What if this happened to my children?

There is no greater terror that a parent can feel than being separated from one’s children: to not know about their whereabouts, to not be able to hold and comfort them when they are in distress. In the brief moments that I have lost track of my son at the park, I know that feeling of panic. I know many of you know that feeling too. I can’t even imagine the physical and psychological effect of panic.

When I think of the children kept in these detention facilities apart from their families, I feel so angry and ashamed. In that egregious situation, I can’t imagine a child at any age understanding what is happening to them. They must be feeling such powerful fear—a fear that results in the physical loss of sleep and appetite, and fear that will inevitably create anger and distrust. This is a fear that will have a lasting effect for their entire lives.

As I read about the baby being ripped away from the breast-feeding mother, my entire body ached. How could we allow such a violation, to rip a child literally away from her love and life-source? Those of us who have

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been fortunate enough to be able to breastfeed a child know well that a baby who has only been with her mother cannot simply switch between a mother’s milk and formula. No child can simply go from being fully with a mother who she knows and trusts to being with a complete stranger. In such a situation, a child simply cannot thrive.

There are conflicting reports about how the children are housed, some including cages. Others say that the children’s detention facilities are well-maintained full of toys; even yet, except to help with personal needs, the caregivers in these facilities are not allowed to pick up or hold a child. This kind of environment where children, including toddlers, are left to cry without support is a violation of who we are as human beings. We cannot stand by.

We at NYAPC have been blessed with many children and families fully engaged in the life of the church. We are blessed to see the children come forward each Sunday for the Time with Children, and the teachers and I are fortunate to spend time with them in Worship Play and Sunday School. Our children are seeking to be activists in their own right. In worship play, they often ask us to read “The Youngest Marcher” by Cynthia Levinson, a telling of the youngest children in the Civil Rights Movement. By asking to hear this story again and again, they are seeking to engage in the work of the church, in how to stare in the face of injustice and say that evil will not have the last word. Our kids really do want in their own ways to live out our calling from Micah 6:8 “to act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with [our] God.”

Almost two years ago, NYAPC became a Sanctuary Congregation, covenanting to support those most vulnerable, especially immigrants and refugees. The Biblical tradition is extensive on this point; we think most poignantly of Mary and Joseph taking Jesus Christ away from Egypt from the violence of Herod. Two weeks ago I preached on Deuteronomy 24:10-21 and its refrain to care after the “alien, the orphan and the widow.” These were the groups most oppressed then. Today, these immigrant families are desperate for our prayers put into action.

As a Sanctuary church, our sign board outside of the church has read “Immigrants and Refugees Welcome.” Looking to the passion of our kids, youth, and the many adults in the church, I wonder how we can further engage this mission and calling together? How might we continue to stand up for those whose human dignity is being violated? How can we work together to put a halt to separating families? How might we halt the practice of keeping people in detention facilities at all? Detention facilities are the wrong place to house people, beloved children of God, who are seeking to come to this country to escape violent situations and economic tragedy. Detention facilities are not the place for people trying to reunite with their family already in this country. We as a country must be better than this. We must be better for the sake of our children and for the sake of our common humanity.

Roger and Alice: In the coming days and weeks, we seek to hear from you about how we can respond as a congregation. We do encourage you to write and call your representatives and tell them what you think of these policies. We are also looking for concrete ideas on how we can stand together as Christians against this gross violation of justice.

Here are a few resources we have found helpful both from our denomination and from the wider community of faith:

From the meeting of the 223rd General Assembly of the PCUSA. This is the Commissioner’s Resolution to Stop the Separation of Families: https://www.pc-biz.org/#/search/3000471


Biblical References to Immigrants and Refugees compiled by the United Church of Christ http://www.ucc.org/justice_immigration_worship_biblical-references-to

Storypath: For children’s books linked to theology and scripture http://storypath.upsem.edu/?s=immigration

From Faith in the Public Life, a Response letter to Secretary Neilson from Women of Faith: http://fpl.actionkit.com/cms/thanks/family-women?
action_id=470313&akid=.25716.uXOTd2&ar=1&rd=1

Standing together,

Roger and Alice

Families protest at Russell Senate Office Building
Reunite the Children!
Protest in the Russell Senate Office Building, June 23

![Protest in the Russell Senate Office Building, June 23](image)

Rev. Alice Tewell participating with her son Christopher (wrapped in a thermal blanket.)

Seeing the Changing Face of Shaw
by Martha Davis

A dozen NYAPC Deacons and members saw at first hand the developments in the Shaw neighborhood which have displaced long time African-American residents. The August 21 tour was conducted by ONE DC in this area which historically was a center of African-American commerce and culture. (ONE DC is a community group supported by Presbyterian Self Development Of People funds; see [www.onedconline.org](http://www.onedconline.org) for more information.)

We viewed the new building at 7th and S Street which was to leverage new affordable housing at 7th and Rhode Island Avenue, a promise which still has not been kept by the District. Further down the street, a large new apartment complex at 7th and P Street NW has replaced the Section 8 subsidized Kelsey Gardens complex. While the 54 low-income Kelsey residents were offered the right to return to the new building, the redevelopment lasted seven years, and most of the original residents by then were established elsewhere, didn’t feel welcome in the new environment, or had passed away. Only 20 of the original residents returned. Another former Section 8 complex at 8th and R Street is transitioning to market rate, encouraging long-time residents to leave by strictly enforcing unreasonable house rules.

These developments mirror the changes in Shaw as a whole. Over a 10-year period from the early 2000’s, Shaw shifted from 80% Black to a population now with only 30% Black residents.

A new concept presented to our group is the “Root Shock” experienced by those displaced. It is happening out of sight in DC today (see the book by that name by Dr. Mindy Fullilove.) Similar to the effects of transplantation in plants, displaced people suffer trauma when forced out (economically or socially or legally) from their long-time neighborhoods. This is an issue overlooked in the typical housing policy debates. The NYAPC group agreed that the tour opened our eyes to the extent of social, political and economic change occurring just a mile and a half from the church.
The Downtown Day Services Center
Alice Tewell and Roger Gench

We are thrilled to officially share with you that on behalf of the District of Columbia, Mayor Muriel Bowser has announced a $1.7 million grant to build a Downtown Day Services Center. The Downtown Day Services Center will be housed at The New York Avenue Presbyterian Church and will be managed by the Downtown DC Business Improvement District (BID). After an extended process of collective spiritual discernment by the Session and the Trustees, we believe that this center is a way for us to participate in God’s liberating work in the world—to do justice, to love mercy, and walk humbly with our God. The center will provide critical services to individuals experiencing homelessness as well as lease out our under-utilized Park Level space.

Here is what Mayor Bowser said: “As we continue our work to make homelessness rare, brief, and nonrecurring, the Downtown Day Services Center will enable us to reach more individuals and get more residents connected to the resources and supports they need to stay safe and secure permanent housing . . . This center is one more way we can provide individuals experiencing homelessness with the respite and resources they need and deserve.”

For decades, NYAPC engaged in ministry to those experiencing homelessness and in critical need. On Sundays, we offer the Radcliffe Room breakfast and fellowship ministry, and on weekdays we provide any guest with an open and welcoming environment with access to clean bathrooms, water, and a place to relax. We enthusiastically support this new Service Center because it will provide an increase in services that those already coming to our church need and that we as a church cannot fully provide. The center will provide food, showers, laundry facilities, computers, housing assistance through Pathways to Housing DC (Pathways) www.pathwayslohousingdc.org, behavioral and medical health support, legal assistance, and social workers.

The center will operate in the Park Level (basement) of the church building, with center hours Monday-Friday from 9 am to 5 pm. These daytime hours will provide much needed supportive services when nighttime shelters are closed. The guests of the Services Center will be encouraged to use the ADA-accessible door on the New York Avenue side. The Service Center guests and all who come to NYAPC will share the use of the main elevators. The Downtown BID staff will provide hospitality and significant guidance to the Service Center guests about how to navigate to the Park Level Space.

The Session and the Trustees have both approved this relationship. The Trustees and the BID are currently reviewing the contract. We are awaiting National Capital Presbytery approval of the BID lease. BID is scheduled to begin leasing the space in early September, with renovations to start soon after. The center is to open November in time for the hypothermia season.

Anticipating this announcement and new relationship, we have been working toward the relocation of our children’s and youth Sunday School classes, which will no longer meet on the Park Level. On September 9, we began our Sunday School year in new classrooms with the classes on the 3rd and 5th floors sharing space with the McClendon Center program. The nursery will be on the 3rd floor with new lounge space in the church main office and balcony especially for parents with children in the nursery. The PreK room will be the classroom on the H Street Side on the 5th floor, the Lower Elementary room the classroom on the NYAve side on the 5th floor, and the Upper Elementary class will share with the Community Club library and the Young Adult Volunteer off of the kitchen in Peter Marshall Hall. The Middle School class will be in Alice’s office on the 2nd floor, and the High School class will be in Roger’s office also on the 2nd floor. Adult Education classes will take place in classrooms on the 1st floor and use Peter Marshall Hall for occasional larger classes. We celebrated this new arrangement with a ribbon cutting ceremony in Peter Marshall Hall on September 9.

This announcement and new relationship represent months and countless hours of creative and cooperative work, as well as openness to the leading of God’s Spirit and to new possibilities for participation in the work of God. We would like to highlight the creative initiative of Courtney Spearman, who had the vision to discern this opportunity when it was first proposed; of Rebecca Davis, President of the Board of Trustees, who has skillfully helped us think strategically and concretely about how to proceed; and of Trustee Ross Coe, who has spent countless hours writing both the contract and the Letter of Intent. We would like to thank all the members of the boards who have engaged in the process of collective discernment. We would like to thank everyone who has helped with the Sunday school move. Finally, we would like to express appreciation for the contribution of our dedicated church staff to our envisioning of this new ministry.

Now that the city has made its announcement, there will be more news to share with you all about the progress of this initiative. The Rev. Linda Kaufman, Executive Director of the Downtown Day Service Center, joined us in worship leadership on September 9. At the 10 am hour for Adult Sunday School, the Trustees hosted a meet and greet presentation to welcome representatives from BID and to answer questions you might have. We invite you to send any questions or comments you have about this new opportunity to asknyapc@nyapc.org. We look forward to this new venture in ministry in partnership with BID, as we

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live into new realities of the Spirit’s work in our midst.

In Christ,

Alice Tewell and Roger Gench

Links to stories about this grant:

https://mayor.dc.gov/release/mayor-bowser-announces-17-million-grant-downtown-day-services-center-support-individuals

https://www.downtowndc.org/news/district-announces-grant-for-downtown-day-services-center/

**Vision/Strategy Group Begins Work, Invites Participation**

In June, the congregation commissioned a taskforce to begin work on developing a Vision and Strategic Plan for our congregation.

The group will be developing a vision statement in early fall and then move into the strategic planning process. This is a job for the whole congregation! Watch for opportunities to participate in the process through Sunday School classes, the September 30 Congregational Sunday, the all-church retreat, and other gatherings.

Over the summer, Roger and Alice have led the group in studying some stories from scripture and discussing what they tell us about God and the church. For example, we’ve reflected on the cruciform graced history of NYAPC, using the story of Emmaus (Luke 24:13-27) and Ezekiel’s vision of dry bones (Ezekiel 37:1-3). Then we looked at the story of the Wedding at Cana (John 2:1-11) and discussed the church’s role in our experiences of scarcity and abundance. We also studied the stories of Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances to the disciples in John (John 20:19-29), asking what Jesus’ showing his wounds, and the wounds of our world today, means for the church.

Please contact any of us for questions or discussion. Reach out to any of the members of the taskforce directly, or email vision-strategy@nyapc.org.

Thank you!

The Vision and Strategic Planning Taskforce:
Miriam Dewhurst, Kathy Doan, Paul Dornan, Roger Gench, Hal Hiemstra, Meg Hanna House, Olivia Singelman, Jim Spearman, Sarah McGinnis, Edie Holmes Snyder, Alice Tewell, and Matthew Wieseler.

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**From Offering Plates to a Bench of Elders**

by Cathy Schultheis

While helping to clear out and clean up the Park Level and some upper floor rooms in preparation for the Downtown Day Services Center, I came across more than 20 heavy silver-plated offering plates that had been stored because we obtained lighter-weight ones that were easier to use during worship. Several were memorialized and names were inscribed. We went to the church history books to research the names, and Dan Stokes provided information from archival records. I was thrilled to discover one with my grandfather's name thereon—George E. Jacobs. He was a life elder at NYAPC, having first attended NYAPC's Bethany Chapel, where my grandmother was a soloist and where they were married in 1902.

While reading the book entitled *Our Hundredth Anniversary*, a collection of sermons and articles about New York Avenue's Centennial Celebration (1803-1903), I particularly enjoyed Dr. Wallace Radcliffe's *Centennial Sermon*. I learned that the Session of the Church used to have a "Bench of Elders" which presided over trials of church members who had not lived up to their vows. Disciplines, including suspensions and excommunications, were imposed for non-attendance at church, gossip, slander, intemperance, profane swearing, neglect of the ordinances and idleness. In 1826, at a Second Church Session meeting, a member was suspended for absenting himself from public worship for several months. Dr. Radcliffe suggested that the 1903 and more recent Sessions might be too busy for such activities. Can you imagine?

Dr. Radcliffe was much impressed by our early pastor Dr. James Laurie because only once during his ministry did he bring a written sermon into the pulpit with him. Dr. William Bartlett, pastor from 1882-1894, reminisced about the church history, the church having been born in the year of the Louisiana Purchase, 1803. I couldn't help but think that a game of church history Trivia or Jeopardy may be in our future!

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**All-Church Retreat**

Getting excited for the start of the new year! It's Time to Register for the All-Church Retreat! Join us for the October 13-14 Retreat at Meadow Kirk in Loudoun County. We need your registration by September 23 so we can confirm numbers and assign rooms. Pick up a registration form here at church, or contact Karen Dunlap at shakescene@aol.com. Looking forward to seeing you there!
Seeking God’s Will: 
President Lincoln and Rev. Dr. Gurley
New Information about President Lincoln and the NYAPC’s Civil War Pastor
by John O’Brien
[This article was previously published in The Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association, Summer 2018 edition]

So you thought you knew Rev. Phineas Gurley? If you have been around NYAPC for more than a little while, or if you read the green church history book (Frank Edgington’s 1962 classic), then you know all the traditional stories of President Lincoln’s friendship with our Civil War pastor and his family. But there is a century of speculative literature about Lincoln’s faith — how was it formed and how did it influence his policies? Why isn’t Gurley a part of this bigger discussion? I believed that there just had to be more to the story of their relationship. I was right, and Gurley had a very powerful role in guiding the president to rely on faith, particularly through the difficult year of 1862, as he shaped his strategy toward making emancipation a Union war aim.

My research on Rev. Dr. Phineas Gurley and Abraham Lincoln was published last month by the national academic journal on all things Lincoln. I was able to find information on the depth and scope of their relationship that had not otherwise been known. Now this information has been assessed and shared with the academic community for criticism. I know a bit about Lincoln, and I believe that my findings are original and sound. There have been some very positive reactions so far, but I’m still holding my breath.

The only study of the Lincoln and Gurley relationship was published by this same Lincoln journal in 1948. David Barbee was a respected Lincoln scholar, and his conclusion was that the relationship was not substantive. That set the tone for the field and scared off other research efforts until now. It would take someone who felt a personal connection with our former pastor to want to tackle a subject that the field believed to be played out. I was able to discover significantly more information than could possibly have been available in 1948. The internet has made all forms of documents available from anywhere in the world. I was able to access newspapers, out-of-print books and journals, diaries, and correspondence that just hadn’t been accessible until recently. While there is no single repository of the “Phineas Gurley Papers” as there are for many other prominent 19th century personalities, I did find a small collection of anecdotes about Lincoln that Gurley had written. They were in the archives at the University of Indiana. There is a collection of sermons and photographs at the Presbyterian Historical Society in Philadelphia. A set of letters from Gurley to his Princeton mentor, written as he was taking over at the F Street Church, was found at the Seminary library. I had hoped to find our 20th century historian Frank Edgington’s papers, but alas could not. I was able to get enough material to put together a 100-page biographical timeline, and begin to examine the pattern of his life. I now feel that I know and understand this man.

Members of our church have become aware of the social relations that Lincoln and Gurley enjoyed. The Lincolns rented their pew and attended Sunday services often. There was the wedding of Gurley’s eldest daughter that the Lincolns attended. The president’s

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Lincoln had a great deal of difficulty, during the early months of the war, with the appointment of army chaplains. The laws governing the appointment and command of chaplains were such that all of the many headaches that resulted could only be resolved by the president of the United States. One of Lincoln’s secretaries quoted him as saying he believed chaplains were the worst people in the army. Enter the unsuspecting, well-meaning Gurley who had discovered that new hospitals were being built but that chaplains could not be assigned to them. I can see Lincoln smacking his own forehead in frustration. But Gurley rightfully reminded him that parents of that era would have been outraged if their wounded sons did not have access to spiritual comfort. Gurley asked that Lincoln trust him to recommend only the best chaplains. Men, who Gurley would assure him, had their “heart in the work.” Lincoln agreed. Gurley recommended five Protestant chaplains. One of these was Rev. Henry Hopkins, the character featured on the television series, “Mercy Street.”

In his first annual message to Congress in December 1861, Lincoln asked retroactive authorization for the appointments of Gurley’s five chaplains he had already made, with the request that Congress pass a law to relieve him of this responsibility going forward. When Congress took up the necessary Chaplain legislation in March 1862, Gurley was often mentioned in the record as Lincoln’s spokesperson on the matter. Our pastor was now considered as a high profile connection to the president. For the rest of the war, he would be sought after as someone with influence who could help with all manner of requests for presidential attention. I have been able to find 55 letters between Gurley and Lincoln, many of which involve recommendations for appointments or presidential intercession. This number probably represents less than half of the actual total. And nearly all of Gurley’s requests were granted.

My principal thesis draws the relationship between Gurley’s Old School Presbyterian theology and preaching to a key document that Lincoln had written about faith. This was “The Meditation on the Divine Will.” John Hay gave it this name when he discovered it in Lincoln’s papers after the assassination. It is a short but profound note Lincoln had written about his view of God’s presence in the war, and never shared with anyone. In my article, I describe the frequent counseling meetings that Lincoln had with his pastor after Willie’s death on February 20, 1862. These continued through the summer that year. I was able to identify themes and phrases from Gurley’s sermons that appear as near quotes or familiar ideas in Lincoln’s “Meditation” note. These concepts had never appeared in Lincoln’s writings before. They continued to influence his speeches and letters thereafter; and most strikingly in his second inaugural address. Gurley never said that Lincoln had accepted the Christian faith. Under the doctrinal standards of the era, he would have had to make a public profession of his faith, which he did not. Nor do I venture any assessment on the nature of Lincoln’s faith in Jesus Christ. What is apparent is that Lincoln had now become more adept at using the language of the Old School faith in his arguments for making emancipation a goal of the war effort and not just seek to make “the Union as it was,” with slavery still intact. These were concepts of faith that the Protestant majority in the country would understand and appreciate. That Lincoln could adopt this language and these concepts so effectively in an authentic and powerful voice does suggest a commitment to Christian values and a strong underlying belief in God.

There are other interesting aspects of the Gurley–Lincoln relationship that I discovered. And Gurley went on after the war to lead several of the significant changes in our city that took place after the war. When Gurley died in 1868, his congregation and the city honored him with one of the largest funerals in the capital to that time. We will honor him on this 150th anniversary of his death. I will be discussing these findings in the adult education class between services on September 23. I look forward to sharing them with you.
Massanetta Middle School Conference, July 5 – 8
by Sarah McGinnis

This summer Penny Wagner, Astrid Brigham, Jacob Gagosian, Helen Anthony, and Sarah McGinnis went to week 3 of the Massanetta Middle School Conference. The theme was “Y’all are mine” and we spent three days learning about Isaiah 43:1-7. The staff included small group leaders, a keynoter, workshop leaders, music leaders and directors. We were with other churches from North Carolina and Virginia. The first evening we learned a few energizers and met our small group. Each small group was formed so that no two people from the same church were in the same small group.

Each day started with energizers, music, and a message from our keynoter. Then we went to small groups and workshops. The workshops were focused on team building and allowed us to dig deeper into Isaiah 43:1-7. In the afternoon, we all participated in a rec event. The second day the rec event was a slip-n-slide. Massanetta is known for the slip-n-slide rec event and it didn’t disappoint. After the rec event, we had free time. Options included canoeing and swimming. The evenings started with more energizers and another message from our keynoter before going to small groups and workshops. After workshops, we participated in another activity as a large group. One night we packed food for Rise Against Hunger, which is an international hunger relief organization. There was an assembly line to pack and seal the food. At the end of the night, we packed 10,000 meals. It was fun to watch the energy rise in the room as we got closer and closer to packing 10,000 meals. Each evening ended with devotions and time to reflect on what we learned that day.

The last night we had a candlelight worship service outside. We formed a large circle, and the small group leaders came around and lit the candles. We listened to scripture and sang songs. It was an incredible moment where everyone could stop and be fully present. The last morning, we had our final worship service before heading out. It was a great way to end an amazing weekend. Middle school conference was an experience none of us will ever forget. We are looking forward to going back next year!

Meet Kasey Kelly, our new Young Adult Volunteer

I am from North Carolina, by way of China. My mother adopted me from China; however, I spent much time living in various parts of North Carolina. My mom is a pastor in the United Methodist Church, so I grew up within that denomination. I learned that I was deaf when I was one year old. Then, at age two, I received a cochlear implant (similar to a hearing aid). Recently, I moved to Waynesville, which is near Asheville, before I left for the YAV program. I graduated with a B.A. in Sociology from the University of North Carolina-Asheville. I am looking forward to working with and learning from the mission programs here at NYAPC.

Peace Candles Travel

During the Third Quarter, NYAPC Peace Candles for visitors have traveled near and far to Baghdad, Iraq; Chicago, Illinois; Havana, Cuba; Tucson, Arizona; and Washington, D.C. We hope our visitors will return again!

Gwendlyn C. Bell
St. Margaret’s Episcopal Church
Washington, DC

Carmina Blasco
First Presbyterian-Reformed Church of Havana
Havana, Cuba

Bill and Libby Dingeldein
St. Mark’s Presbyterian Church
Tucson, AZ

Rev. Farouk Hammo
National Evangelical (Presbyterian) Church in Baghdad
Baghdad, Iraq

Gretchen Wahl
Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago
Chicago, IL
Peacemaker Figure in the Lobby -- Meet the Artists
by Karen Dunlap

By now most of you have been greeted by the open-armed figure with doves that graces our lobby. We would like to introduce you to the artists and their particular connection with NYAPC.

While visiting a craft fair at Chautauqua Institute in New York in the summer of 2017, Tom and I were introduced to Cheryl and Don Olney of Louise’s Daughter, a talented couple who produce wood figures of dancers in all kinds of joyful steps and colors. Having left DC after a discussion about ways to make our church lobby more welcoming, we were drawn to one figure covered with doves in which we saw messages of peace and joy.

We shared with the artists that we were very interested in the piece for our church, but that it needed to be approved by a committee. They shared that they understood because for many years they lived next door to a Presbyterian minister in Rochester, NY. What a coincidence that that minister was Rosemary Mitchell, the NYAPC former Associate Pastor and the officiant for our wedding!

The piece was commissioned to fit in the lobby in February. In July we had a delightful visit with Cheryl and Don and a tour of their studio before we returned to NYAPC with the completed project and this picture (which we shared with Rose, who was delighted with our find). You can see more of their work at louisedaughter.com.

New Banners in the Sanctuary

Two new banners are displayed for Ordinary Time in the church calendar, practicing our ongoing awareness of the proper diversity of sacred imagery. The themes here celebrate the sacrament of baptism and the grace of openness to the Other. Baptism, in a painting named “Rebirth,” is depicted by Chicago artist Annie Lee (1935-2014), a prominent African-American artist who began painting in middle age. Painting primarily secular scenes, she is best known for portraying the emotions of women in their ordinary lives. The Ethiopian painting shows the scene of the woman at the well. Likely painted by an Orthodox monk (who create most of that country’s sacred art), with the script in Amharic naming this “Jesus and the Samaritan Woman,” it illustrates a key Bible story with universal worldwide resonance for reaching out beyond ethnic and class boundaries.
Special Gifts
by Cathy Schultheis

While visiting with good friends and fellow Presbyterians in North Carolina recently, I asked if John and I could help them prepare for her upcoming hip replacement surgery and recovery period. They said they had hoped to clean out their clothing closets, but her pain level was too high--so we volunteered to jump in and assist them. Before illness struck they had traveled throughout the United States and acquired interesting shirts in bright colors with historical data, natural wonders or witty phrases thereon. He had been a golfer and professional management analyst, and had shirts for those activities. We re-lived their journeys though stories told about the shirts (and other souvenirs). Our favorite shirt was a bright Carolina sky blue with fluffy clouds in which the following words were written: "If I had known I was going to live this long, I would have taken better care of myself." In second place was "At my age...I've seen it all, heard it all, DONE IT ALL! I just can't REMEMBER it all." Having been friends for nearly 40 years, we have told them a lot about life at NYAPC.

When we finished folding the clothes, we volunteered to prepare a list of the items (for tax purposes) and to deliver them to the charity they designated. Even though we have been friends for more than 40 years and have shared stories of life at NYAPC, we were most surprised and happy to be told that the recipients of the clothing (more than 40 men's shirts, plus women's outfits, warm sweatshirts, light-weight jackets, many scarves, several blouses and two winter coats) were to be the participants in the Radcliffe Room Ministry at NYAPC. This Special Gift to our church warmed our hearts. May we always remember to "tell the old old story of Jesus and His love" -- for there are many ears yet to hear it!

In October, we'll welcome Dr. Ellen Davis of Duke University Divinity School the weekend of October 20-21. Mark your calendars! The author of ten books and many articles, Dr. Davis' research interests focus on how biblical interpretation bears on the life of faith communities and their response to urgent public issues. Watch for more information coming later this year.

Theo Brown, Director
McClendon Scholar in Residence Program
The New York Avenue Presbyterian Church
240 393-7246 cell

Our Work as Stewards
by Cathy Schultheis, Director of Planned Giving/Special Gifts

We will be learning a lot about stewardship during the upcoming Stewardship Campaign that begins later this month.

It is my pleasure and blessing to have opportunities to learn from members how they view their work in the secular world and in the church. I have learned that most of us believe that God doesn't have different sets of rules for our various tasks, for everything we do is to be done as unto the Lord, whether on the job, in the home, at school, in church, or in the community. Our most active members believe that we are stewards of all that God has entrusted to us, that accomplishing the work God has planned for us requires discipline and that how we go about our work matters. Martin Luther said, "We should accustom ourselves to think of our position and work as sacred and well-pleasing to God, not on account of the position and work, but on account of the word and faith from which the obedience and work flow." In other words, God wants His children to have joyful, willing hearts as they carry out the tasks they're called to. One of those tasks is to discern who is determining what you do--you or God? How can you know if you are following the Lord's plan or your own agenda? What would change in your life if you considered yourself a steward of God's things rather than the master of your own life? Would you give more faithfully and generously?

I will be attending a Presbyterian-sponsored seminar later this month and hope to share more about faith-based giving with you upon my return. If you have any questions about our Planned Giving and Special Gifts programs at NYAPC, please contact me at 301-622-3149 or email ceks12601@yahoo.com.

Season of Peace

The 2018 Season of Peace is here! The PC(USA) 2018 Season of Peace started on Sunday, September 2 and runs through World Communion Sunday on October 7. During this time, we are invited to reflect on what we might do as peacemakers. This year’s theme, “Peace at All Times, in All Ways,” is from 2 Thessalonians 3:16. This along with “Let us Pray” will be found as bulletin inserts and encourages our participation and thoughtful giving to the PC(USA) 2018 Peace and Global Witness Offering. You will find envelopes in the pews, brochures in the racks by the entryway and Sanctuary doors, and an online payment method at the NYAPC website.

Pray for Peace. Work for Peace. Give for Peace.
TRANSITIONS

BIRTHS
Margaret Metcalf was born recently to Megan and Eric Metcalf.

Andrew Cody Lauer was born to Molly and Benno Lauer, September 6.

BAPTISMS
August Arthur Timmons, son of Margaret Bushko and Will Timmons, July 8
Matteo Victor Ajello-McGlothlin, son of Andrea Ajello and Cameron McGlothlin, September 16

DEATHS
Bill Matthews, a good friend of Olivia Singelmann, died June 4.

Kris Golden died on August 11, 2018, in Gainesville, Georgia after a short but valiant battle with cancer. She and her husband Wilson were very active members of NYAPC for many years.

Al, brother of Eric Slaughter and brother-in-law of Tamara Saltman, died very suddenly about August 24.

Leona Hiemstra TerLouw, aunt of Lenora Thierry, great-aunt of Joe Thierry, and great-great aunt of Julia and Joseph Thierry, died in Pella, Iowa on August 24.

Delight Dann, mother of Fred Dann, died on August 27.

Eddie Yoder, brother of Ron Yoder, brother-in-law of Shirley Yoder, and uncle of John Yoder, Susan Yoder Torres, Mary Anderson and Betsy Lee, died on September 12.

Ann Holland, older sister of Bill Long, September.

Bud Long, older brother of Bill Long, September.

Dismantling Racism One Conversation at a Time: Key Skills for Anti-Racism Allies
Tuesday, Sept. 25
Dinner at 6 pm, Workshop at 6:30 pm

Please register and plan to join us for what promises to be an informative - and fun! - hands-on program that will give us tools for working toward dismantling racism on our society - one conversation at a time.

There is no charge for this program; donations gratefully accepted.

Dr. David Campt, a nationally renowned facilitator and author of The White Ally Toolkit, will lead this highly interactive workshop to help us learn how to be more effective allies in our work against racism, providing practical tools and techniques - such as active listening, empathy and storytelling - to help increase understanding and change racial attitudes.

In this workshop, sponsored by the McClendon Scholar Program, we will acquire new ways to respond to skepticism, denial, unconscious bias, and even willful ignorance, all in a fun, practical, hands-on setting.


And if you have any questions, please contact Theo Brown at 240-393-7246 or go to www.whiteallytoolkit.com.

Witness in Washington Briefing Series
October 3rd from 10am - 12pm
Office of Public Witness, 100 Maryland Ave NE

At this month’s briefing, we will be discussing two urgent foreign policy issues:

US Involvement in the War in Yemen and Prospects for Peace with Kate Gould, Friends Committee on National Legislation

Click here to RSVP today!
This is an in-person briefing - it will be broadcast through Facebook live for those who cannot be present. Please RSVP if you are planning on attending in person.

For Facebook link click here.
Report of 2018 Njoro Mission Trip
August 2- August 15, 2018

"Ametenda maajabu na siwezi kuelezaa"
God has done so much for me that I cannot tell it all.

This was a Swahili chorus that we learned the last week that we were in Njoro. It summed up for me the realization that God’s grace had really been a part of this year’s mission venture - “And I cannot tell it all!” From the beginning of the year when all I had were four NYAPC persons who finally could commit to the trip (the fall midterm elections and family commitments were preventing others from making the commitment). I thought of canceling the trip. But knowing the Kenyan expectations were high, I decided to cast a wider net of invitation. The team that came together was a gift of God’s grace - a strong and very engaged group of nine! (See list of participants below.)

We had three planning meetings in which we did community building and discussed everything from Kenyan culture to “what to pack,” to how to do the on-line visa application. We also had a packing day in which we packed gift bags for students and OVC committee members as well as extra supplies requested: devotional materials, soccer balls, jump ropes, books, etc. Each bag we packed for the students had a t-shirt, 3 pairs of socks, two tubes of toothpaste, toothbrush, flip-flops, composition book, pencil case with four pencils, three pens, pencil sharpener and eraser, two bars of soap, and a bandana. The boys got a baseball cap, and the girls got costume jewelry.

Our first night’s stay was at the PCEA Guest House in Nairobi. Because four personal suitcases (Beth’s, John’s, Marsha’s and Sarah’s) did not arrive with us in Nairobi from Amsterdam, we did not leave the airport until almost midnight after filling out claim forms. Four members of the OVC committee were with us the whole time. The night’s sleep was short!

The nine of us with most of our luggage fitted into one van for the three and a half hour drive to Njoro through the Rift Valley. When we arrived in Njoro on Saturday, August 3, in the early afternoon, we were greeted by the students and staff. What fun to see familiar faces, particularly the four students who had been with us last fall at NYAPC. We feasted on a lunch together and had a big round of introductions before moving into our host homes for the night.

On Sunday we were split into three groups of three to worship and lead in the services at Njoro Church and the two satellite congregations – Bethlehem Church and Salem Church. I preached in the main church, and Sarah Black preached in the Bethlehem Church where Bob Braxton provided special music, and Kelvin Njoroge preached in the Salem Church (in Swahili!), where Ariana Colligan provided special music. With the exception of Salem Church, there were two worship services: an English service at 8:30 and a Swahili service at 10:30am.

Monday through Friday we engaged in our planned Vacation Bible School program. Each day we started with worship in the sanctuary with lots of singing, a message on the chosen scripture led by an American or Kenyan. The scriptures included: Creation and the Adam and Eve story from Genesis 3, the story of Jonah in Jonah 1-4, the birth of Jesus in Luke 2, the parable of the sower in Matthew 13, and Jesus’ encounter with Nicodemus in John 3. You could say the theme was “Salvation History” with seeking understanding of the Bible as a library of different literature, full of powerful truth, not necessarily literally true (e.g., Adam and Eve and Jonah).

Following the worship, we divided into three age groups for discussion; these times were rich times of sharing and getting to know the students more closely. Ten am was tea time – hot tea with bread or arrow root or yams or cookies were provided to all. At 10:30 am we went into a rotation of three different activities. Every student had a time doing drama & music, arts & crafts and recreation & games. The day ended with a hearty lunch at 1:00 pm.

Two of the afternoons we visited in the homes of several students, meeting their parent or guardians. These were eye-opening experiences. The home of Matthew Mokua stands out for me in its hardship challenges. Matthew

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lives with his single mom and two brothers in a two-room rental; their rent is $5.00 a month. Matthew’s father died in 2015, and his mother does ‘casual labor’ (washing clothes or weeding gardens) when available, earning $2.50 a day. The mother said they often sleep without having taken any food. They have no electricity, and the one kerosene lamp they have has blackened all the walls with soot.

Matthew is one of the brightest students in OVC program; he is in class eight, which means in November he will take the national exam which will determine what high school he will be able to go to -- a boarding school or a local mediocre day school. We left money for a solar lamp for Matthew’s house, light to study by!

One afternoon we visited the Pokea Dairy Farm, where we met James Ndungu Karanja (80 years old), a world famous geneticist, who himself started life as a street boy, scrounging for food. He has quite a story and quite a farm! He had each of us plant a cedar tree, then his wife served us tea and he led us in singing a Christian chorus!

Wednesday is Market Day in Njoro; after lunch around 2:00 pm when the students head home for the day, we invited them to come with us to the town market. We bought each student a cabbage to take home (40 cents each) and an orange to eat. On Wednesday we also moved from our host homes to Egerton University, where we stayed in their conference hotel for the next four nights.

On Friday afternoon, after our last lunch together there was a special cake cutting to celebrate our time together. This is a BIG event for the Kenyan students, complete with a song while cutting the cake and Kenyan students feeding the Americans their first bite of cake with joyous laughter (resembling our American wedding cake cutting).

The second Sunday we worshiped again in the three churches, with three of us preaching and leading in some special music. Then after lunch with the OVC Committee and tearful good-byes, we traveled to Nairobi where we had two days of being tourists, visiting the Giraffe Centre, the Kazuri Bead Factory, and Bomas, a cultural event of Kenyan songs and dances.

This mission journey enabled us to engage with the new pastor, Rev. Tony Matiko (like American Methodists, the pastors in the Presbyterian Church of East Africa generally get moved every five years). Bob and I stayed in the pastor’s home and had some discussions long into the evenings. We also were introduced to the new Social Worker (Catherine Wambui resigned after getting married in April and moving away from Njoro), Susan Wanjiru Wambugu, her replacement, is very impressive. She relates well to the students, is computer literate, has a strong faith, and herself was an orphan child. We are looking forward to these new relationships.

Much gratitude goes to the NYAPC congregation for their generous support and to the Goshen International Church in Richmond (Kelvin’s church) and Orange United Methodist Church in Chapel Hill, NC (Sarah and Elizabeth’s church) for their contributions.

The Apostle Paul recalls the words of the Lord to him at a difficult time and I echo! “My grace is sufficient for you.” (2 Corinthians 12:9). Indeed God’s grace was sufficient and “I cannot tell it all!”

In Gratitude and grace, Rev. Beth Braxton

Participants:

Elizabeth BLACK, 9th-grader
Sarah BLACK, Director of non-profit center for the prevention of child abuse
Beth BRAXTON, Parish Associate NYAPC
Bob BRAXTON, Information technology, retired
John CLARK, Substance-abuse counselor
Ariana COLLIGAN, Occupational therapist
Will MacLEOD, Project Manager, Vector Security Company
Kelvin NJOROGE, Pharmacy technician and college student
Marsha RENWANZ, Anthropologist, retired
Breaking all the Ceilings
by Jerry Van Marter | Office of the General Assembly Communications - July 27, 2018

An interview with Liudmila Hernández, new (woman! young! single!) pastor of Havana’s First Presbyterian Church

HAVANA, Cuba

The Rev. Liudmila Hernández outlines the many different programs that are being developed at First Presbyterian Church, Havana. (Photo by Randy Hobson)

Despite the improbability of her call last winter as pastor of historic First Presbyterian Church here, the Rev. Liudmila Hernández is supremely confident about her ministry. “It is a challenge all the time, but I have no doubts,” she says. “I feel energy every day and ask God, ‘This is your church — help me.’”

Hernández, 29, is not only the first woman to pastor First Church — which was founded at the turn of the 20th century and was the first Protestant church in Havana — she is one of the congregation’s youngest pastors and is also single. You can call it the trifecta of unlikely calls.

“It’s a long history of all men, and I am also single,” Hernández says, “so there have been many questions about that and my youth. One church member responded to questions about my family by saying, ‘We are her family now.’”

First Presbyterian’s history is storied. Its sanctuary, erected in 1906, is now a designated National Historical Site in Cuba. When Pope John Paul II became the first Catholic pontiff to visit Cuba in January 1998, he conducted a mass in Havana’s Plaza of the Revolution using the pulpit from First Presbyterian Church, which was transported to the site for the occasion. During the Cuban revolution in the late 1950s, the bell tower of the church was used to broadcast Radio Rebelde, which informed Cubans of the progress of Fidel Castro’s guerrilla forces. Many civic and religious gatherings continue to be held at the church.

A 2014 graduate of the Evangelical Theological Seminary (SET) in Matanzas, Hernández’s first call was to the Presbyterian church in Sanctu Spiritus in central Cuba. “It was a good experience for me … a good place to start ministry,” she says. “El Centro Presbytery (the Presbyterian Reformed Church in Cuba, or IPRC, consists of three presbyteries) is a good place to learn, because there are not enough pastors, so I served two smaller congregations in addition to Sanctu Spiritus.”

Hernández was visiting partner churches in the U.S. when she was first contacted by the pastor nominating committee at Havana First. “It was a very difficult decision, because I had many feelings about the Sanctu Spiritus congregation and El Centro Presbytery,” she says. “I asked God what his plans were for me. I wasn’t thinking about being the first female, or being young and single,” Hernández continues, “but God was talking to me and the members convinced me I was their leader.” She succeeds the Rev. Hector Mendez, who recently retired after 26 years as pastor of First Presbyterian Church.

Like Presbyterian churches everywhere, First Havana is experiencing many demographic and social changes as its densely-populated neighborhood on the edge of Old Havana changes. “About 80 percent of our congregation are older adults,” Hernández explains. “Many of our members have strong Presbyterian tradition and strong traditions as part of the IPRC, but there are also many seekers and neighborhood people with very little church background. It is a challenge to minister with those different folk.”

First Church also supports a group of African medical students. “They come from many traditions,” Hernández says. “They worship in a different way with choirs and dance — they have changed our worship completely. Our members lament when [the Africans] worship elsewhere.”

And a class for previously unaffiliated people has also changed the congregation’s approach to worship. “We have shed so many assumptions about worship,” Hernández says, noting that services now include more

(continued on p. 20)
understandable language and educational notes. “First Church has become such a mix!”

Left: Banners of partner churches in the United States hang along the rear balcony of the sanctuary. (Photo by Fred Tangeman) | Right: This urban church serves the local community in a myriad of ways including a weekly yoga session. (Photo by Randy Hobson)

After her first six months as First Presbyterian’s pastor, Hernández has identified several goals for her ministry. “I would like to work more with children and youth,” she says, noting that the church’s library is being remodeled to make it more welcoming for young people. The church is adding computers, internet access, a research center and multi-media equipment and resources to cater to the younger crowd. “We have to be a place for them after school,” Hernández adds. “We are very serious about having young people in the building during the week.”

She also praises the psychological counseling program at the church, which serves families, couples and older adults. “We have many situations and lifestyles that we have to be open to — our ministry is to give everyone hope and meaning.”

Meet the Rev. Liudmila Hernández from Office of the General Assembly on Vimeo.

First Havana Invites NYAPC for Easter

Rev. Liudmila Hernández has invited the next NYAPC delegation to visit the First Presbyterian-Reformed Church of Havana for Easter in 2019. We have accepted! The next trip will be Monday, April 15-22, 2019. This will be the first time that we will celebrate Easter with First Havana. If you wish to join the delegation, contact Marilyn Seiber, mjs1wan2@gmail.com. Total cost will be approximately $1,500 for airfare, lodging, food, transportation, visas. The sign-up deadline will be the first week of January.

CUBA NEWS

Greetings and News from Rev. Héctor Méndez

July 18, 2018

I had the opportunity to preach two Sundays in the Presbyterian Church of the Lamb and it was of great blessings. Next Sunday I have to preach at the Principe de Paz Lutheran Church.

Last Sunday we greeted Sandrita, who was Music Director and pianist at First Havana for many years. She was blessed to be able to come with her husband Oscar and their two children. We pray to God that First Havana can get a good director of Music.

We are fine and waiting for the Green Card. In these days many people from the Church in Cuba have passed by here, so we have news from there.

We would like to hear from you. GOD BLESS YOU, Oneida y Hector Méndez

July 25, 2018

Last Sunday I had the privilege of preaching at the Príncipe de Paz Lutheran Church, one of the largest Hispanic churches in Miami.

After the service, we went to have lunch with the whole family, as my daughters, Oneidita and Suecia, decided to ADVANCE the celebration of my birthday (July 24) since on Sunday we could all be there.

Everything was great at lunch, with cake and candles, but . . . then came the SURPRISE: A musical group of Mexican Mariachis who performed many well-known songs. It was a great surprise that filled us with joy and that we share with you who are also part of our family.

Praise be to JESUS CHRIST!

Rev. Hector Méndez

First Havana’s Music Director Moves to Indiana

First Havana’s Music Director, Sandra Santos, and her husband Oscar and two sons David and Lucas, moved to Indiana in July 2018. Oscar began a Master’s degree in Early Music at the Jacobs School of Music, Indiana University in Bloomington. The program began on August 20. Felicidad to Oscar and best wishes to the whole family!
Following his participation at the General Assembly in St. Louis, June 16-23, 2018, Rev. Farouk Hammo of the National Evangelical (Presbyterian) Church in Baghdad visited several churches and concluded his visits in Washington, D.C. with The New York Avenue Presbyterian Church prior to returning to Baghdad. During his stay, June 29-July 2, Rev. Hammo met with National Capital Presbytery’s Global Mission Network, where he gave a presentation.

On Sunday, July 1, Rev. Hammo participated in NYAPC’s worship service, speaking with the children during “Time with Children,” helping to serve communion, and giving greetings to the congregation during Moment for Mission. Following the worship service, the Peace & Justice Committee hosted a lunch reception that allowed the congregation to meet Rev. Hammo, who also gave brief remarks and answered questions. He spoke about the status of Christians – 85% of the 2.5 million who have fled Iraq—and the role of the three Presbyterian churches in Iraq in caring for displaced refugees. The Baghdad Church has an active women’s program and Sunday School, though the number of children has decreased. He explained that the churches are not allowed to preach outside the fence of the church, so people come to the churches through programs and services provided inside the churches, although the Kirkuk Presbyterian Church has a prison ministry outside the church.

Some of the projects that Rev. Hammo mentioned are:

- Counseling for some patients at the mental hospital next to the church.
- Opening six years ago a pre-K Good Shepherd School for 115 children, of whom 110 are Muslim. (NYAPC’s Alternative Christmas program has supported this school.)
- Bringing children onto the church grounds for sports.
- Providing food baskets for displaced families from west and north Iraq.
- Rev. Hammo was invited to be a Moderator between Sunni and Shia groups to seek reconciliation.

Future projects include:

- A primary school opening in September for children through fourth grade. (Peace & Justice has recently made a donation for funding a school bus.)
- An autism center for families of children with autism for rest and training for care. The Baghdad Church has a building for this project.
- A job-training center to teach displaced refugees new trades such as hairdressing, mechanics, etc. This would be housed in the same building as the autism center.

Rev. Hammo said that U.S. churches could help in the following ways:

- Foremost, they need our prayers, constant prayers for the churches and their work.
- They need visitors from churches in the U.S. so Iraqis feel they have extended families here.
- They need our churches to stand with their projects, to encourage and provide financial assistance.
Letters from Rev. Hammo to NYAPC upon his return home

July 8, 2018 Re: Good Shepherd Primary School

Greetings. Thank you very much for the excellent time that I spent with you, your elders and leaders as well as the congregation during my recent visit. I was so blessed and uplifted, thank you.

Upon arrival home, the Almighty blessed us with receiving the license for operating the school for this academic year 2018/2019 which we are rushing to meet all the needs concerning what is left of furniture to be purchased and bits and pieces here and there. However, we are in desperate need for a mini bus (16 seats) to serve for kids as well as for church transporting to and from church, as well as a Generator to meet the needs of the school. Both items will cost around $50,000-55,000.

I wonder how you may bless us with any portion of this need and help us to purchase them before the commencing of this academic year. On the other hand, our congregation is eager to see any of your team ministry over here as I shared with them about your team of ministry and the congregation. Thank you, keep well and be blessed.

August 28, 2018 upon receiving news of a NYAPC Peace & Justice Committee donation

Greetings and thanks for your contribution, that's much needed in this particular time.

1) School staff is building up after long process of interviewing many applicants.

2) Kids' applications are still undergoing as this academic year will be commenced end of September. It's rather slow as there was a long break for festival rituals.

3) Preschool are closing their summer school this week to commence their year by September.

4) Much prayers are needed for the cabinet formation which is still under long discussion and negotiations.

May the everlasting Lord and Saviour bless you and keep well always.

Sincerely Yours,

Rev. Farouk Hammo
Senior Minister, Baghdad, Iraq

Rev. Rami al-Maqdasi Sends Greetings to NYAPC from New York

by Marilyn Seiber

Rev. Rami al-Maqasi sends greetings to his friends at NYAPC from his family and church in Dunkirk, NY. Rev. Al Maqasdi was a PC(USA) International Peacemaker hosted by NYAPC in September-October 2016 when he participated in worship on World Communion Sunday. Since then, Rev. al-Maqdasi was called to serve the First United Presbyterian Church in Dunkirk, N.Y., where everything is going well. He writes:

“We are a small congregation. We have two services on Sunday, one at 11:00 a.m. and one at 6:30 p.m. The evening service is informal and we have Hispanic people and we share Spanish gospel reading and two Spanish songs.

After I came to the church I started to do every Tuesday morning Meditation/ Bible study. One Tuesday meditation we share some videos of Christian history, testimonies, prayer time, and we share our life experiences plus the readings from the Bible and we sing songs. Sometimes we do the meditation in the church backyard where we meditate out of the beautiful nature. The other Tuesday is the Bible study. The church has a mission among the community through the women’s guild and support the rural ministry as well in Dunkirk. Actually our church founded the rural ministry many years ago!

Pray for us that we might be able to reach out to people and bring them to church.”

Rami also writes that his wife Raya is looking for work, his oldest daughter Marilyn is in school, and the youngest daughter Lisa will begin a pre-K program in September.

We pray for Rami and his family and his church. We are family in Christ!