

Union Church of Pocantico Hills – Mission Review Report June 2021

The **Mission of Union Church** is to provide a home **where all are welcome** to worship God, to learn and grow as Christians, and to share our love, friendship and support with all those lives we touch.

Summary

Union Church of Pocantico Hills is a 100-year-old, non-denominational community of faith, welcoming of all Christians. The church is on National Register of Historic Places and features stained-glass windows by Henri Matisse and Marc Chagall, making it an important tourist destination in the Hudson Valley. The church campus itself is among the properties owned and managed by Historic Hudson Valley, a not-for-profit educational and historic preservation organization headquartered in Pocantico Hills, NY.

Union Church is known for its rich worship services and music program. In recent years, though, the church's membership has decreased, and with an interim minister now in his second year at the church, a time of transition is at hand. The congregation seems interested in retaining much of the church's traditional worship while increasing membership and fostering greater community outreach.

Introduction

Upon the 2019 retirement of the Rev. Dr. F. Paul DeHoff, our pastor of 27 years, the congregation welcomed the Rev. Dr. Lindley DeGarmo as interim pastor. Subsequently, a mission review committee was created to provide a current assessment of Union Church: its strengths and weaknesses, the community it is serving, and its sense of call to ministry. The committee's task was to gather a holistic view of the church to guide a Pastoral Nominating Committee in a search for a new permanent minister.

The committee utilized a Congregational Assessment Tool (CAT) supplied by Holy Cow! Consulting. Michelle Snyder of Crows Feet Consulting helped the Committee analyze the results. Of 98 members and friends currently active in the life of the congregation, 81 responded to the survey, which people could complete

online or in mail. Although there were various opinions, a majority of the congregation agreed on three top priorities:

- Make changes to attract families with young children;
- Develop and implement a constructive outreach program to the local community and welcome new people to the church;
- Provide more opportunities for Christian education and spiritual formation at every age and at each stage of life.

Most churches taking the CAT also rank these three priorities highly. Union Church differed from most other churches, however, in also prioritizing relatively highly two other objectives:

- Expand outreach ministries that provide direct services to those living on the margins of society; and
- Work as for social and institutional change so that society might better reflect the values of the kingdom of God.

A Short History

Around 1880 a dedicated group of Christians living in Pocantico Hills recognized the need to have a meeting place where they could gather to worship, and so they organized a Christian Community Center which included a Sunday school. In 1900 the Pocantico Hills Society for Christian Work was established, which eventually resulted in the Union Church, thanks to support from the Rockefeller family and others. The cornerstone for the neo-Gothic church was laid in November 1921, and tower and chimes were donated later by John D. Rockefeller Jr. in memory of his late mother, Laura Spelman Rockefeller. The Parish House was added in 1931, complete with a stage and a well-equipped kitchen. A Children's Wing was added to the Parish House in 1957.

The church is famous for its stained-glass windows, all commissioned by members of the Rockefeller family. The Rose Window (1954) is the last work by Henri Matisse and dedicated to Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, who was a friend of the artist and one of the founders of the Museum of Modern Art. The remaining windows (installed 1964-66) are extraordinary examples of work done by Mark Chagall. The large stained-glass window at the end of the sanctuary was the first one commissioned by the Rockefeller brothers as a loving tribute to their father, John D. Rockefeller Jr., a Union Church stalwart. This window depicts the story of the

Good Samaritan, a fitting tribute to the philanthropic works of a dedicated founding member of the church. Eight additional windows with biblical themes flank the sides of the sanctuary, the only cycle of Chagall windows gracing a Christian church in America.

In 1981, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, which had been providing an annual grant to the church, encouraged the church to sell the church building and property to Sleepy Hollow Restorations (now known as Historic Hudson Valley) and lease them back for a term of ninety-nine years at one dollar per year. It was thought that such an arrangement would allow the Matisse and Chagall windows to be properly maintained and viewed by the public in perpetuity, while relieving the congregation of the substantial financial burden associated with maintenance of the building and grounds. After substantial negotiation, the congregation approved the new arrangement, and it was executed in April 1984.

Our Buildings and Grounds

Church facilities, located on Bedford Road in the Town of Mount Pleasant hamlet of Pocantico Hills, are comprised of three attached buildings incorporating the Sanctuary, Parish Hall and Children's Wing. The Church parking lots can accommodate approximately 50 cars. The 4-bedroom Manse, which is owned by the church, is on a parcel adjacent to the church property.

Pocantico Hills is a small hamlet with a park-like character, less than two miles uphill from the Hudson River at Tarrytown, NY. It is home to Kykuit, the former hilltop estate of John D. Rockefeller Sr. and Laura Spelman Rockefeller, where four generations of Rockefellers have resided. Much of the surrounding property is now part of the Rockefeller State Park Preserve, which includes some 55 miles of carriage trails and constitutes a major local recreation asset. New York City is less than hour away by car or train.

Congregation

Union Church's membership, as reported at Annual Congregational Meeting in January 2020, listed over 90 active members, representing 54 households. Another 42 are counted as "friends" and an additional 26 as inactive members. The church is today primarily a "destination church," with the majority of members residing in Central and Northern Westchester County and representing 16 different towns.

The current membership reflects an aging demographic with an approximate average age of 63 with 64% over the age of 60, 28% between 30 and 59, and 8% younger than 29. Average length of church membership is approximately 20 years, with 13% more than 40 years and 30% less than 10 years.

Worship

Worship at Union Church is conducted in a traditional, Reformed style. In years past, there have been two in-person services, at 9 a.m. and 11 a.m. Communion has been celebrated once a month at the later service and weekly at the earlier service. Because of New York's Covid-19 pandemic regulations, Union Church moved to an online Sunday service at 9 a.m. in March 2020, with sermons, lessons and music pre-recorded in the Sanctuary followed by a live chat session on Zoom. In-person worship is expected to resume in September 2021 at a single, 10:00 a.m. service, with Communion celebrated monthly, and services live-streamed on Facebook and YouTube.

Music Program

The music program at Union Church is a major part of the worship service, with a music director who plays the organ and conducts a choir composed of both volunteer and paid singers. The church's memorial pipe organ was designed by Sebastian M. Glück and dedicated in 2006.

Membership in the choir is open to members of the congregation and the community, and inquiries about such membership are keenly welcomed by the current Organist and Music Director, Richard Coffey.

Prior to the pandemic Union Church also provided the community with a series of fine arts presentations that include distinguished lectures and high-level concerts of a wide variety, including chamber music, jazz, and, as might be expected, music for the organ.

Education

Historically, Union Church has offered Christian education classes on Sunday for children K – 8th Grade. For young children there has been a nursery and child care. The number of families with school-age children has decreased in recent years to

the extent that operating a Sunday school and child care is no longer necessary or viable. It is hoped that one day the church will be able to offer both again.

There is a virtual online office hour with the Pastor on Tuesdays at 8:30 a.m.

The Pastor conducts an online Bible study class on Wednesdays at 7 p.m., discussing the sermon texts for the upcoming Sunday.

Outreach and Service

The main outreach conducted by Union Church is the annual Harvest Fair held in October, which has become a three-day fall tradition in Pocantico Hills, attracting hundreds of people daily. It has been important means of fellowship-building among the members, as well as the church's chief fund-raising activity. The success of this event has led to a smaller version of the fair held in May.

Congregation members participate in several church-sponsored benevolences. In recent years, Heifer International, Feeding Westchester and Church World Services, a relief organization, have been beneficiaries. The congregation also participates in a Christmas gift drive benefitting local children.

Fellowship Hour

Following the traditional 11 a.m. service, there is a lively Fellowship Hour with refreshments served by a different group of volunteers each week (a scaled-back version follows the earlier service). Congregation members have expressed a sincere regret at not being able to engage in conversation with each other at the Fellowship Hour since the pandemic suspended such gatherings.

Leadership

The pastor serves as the head of staff and ex-officio member of all boards and committees. The organist and music director leads Union Church's music program. A business administrator rounds out the staff. The spiritual officers of the church are the pastor and the Board of Deacons, comprised of nine members of the church, elected to staggered three-year terms. The temporal officers of the church are the Board of Trustees, also comprised of nine members of the church, consisting of three membership classes serving staggered three-year terms. The Clerk of the Congregation is a church member elected by the congregation to

oversee all official documents of the church, record the minutes, and receive from the Board of Deacons the membership roll of active and inactive members.

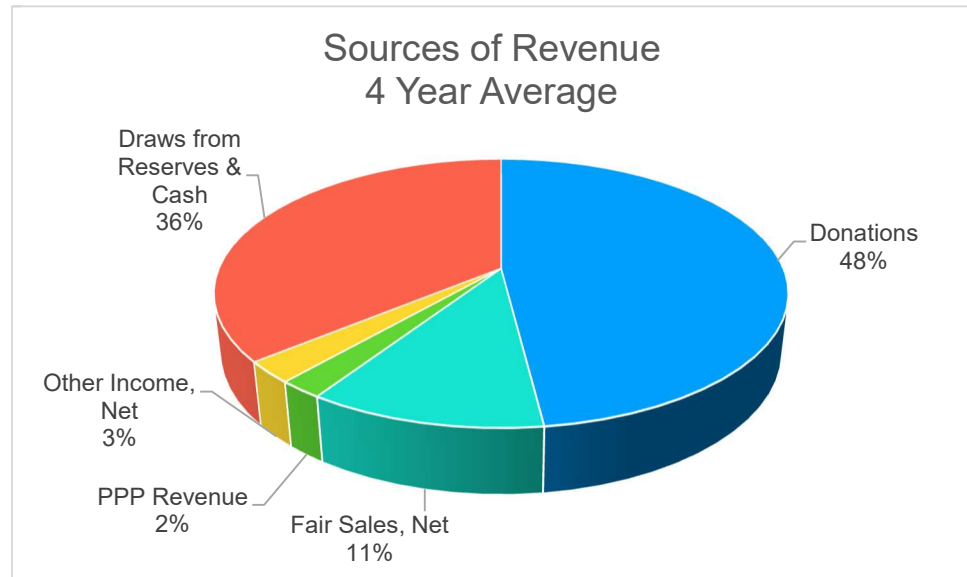
Interim Pastor: The Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo is an honorably retired minister of the Presbyterian Church (USA), who last served as pastor and head of staff of Towson Presbyterian Church, a 600-member congregation located in suburban Baltimore, Maryland. He was called to Towson from the First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York, where he served as Interim Associate Pastor. Dr. DeGarmo's call to ministry came after a long career in international business and finance. Dr. DeGarmo earned a Bachelor of Arts, magna cum laude, from Princeton University; a Master of Public Affairs from Princeton's School of Public and International Affairs; a Master of Divinity from Union Theological Seminary, New York City; and a Doctor of Ministry from Princeton Theological Seminary.

Organist and Music Director: Richard Coffey has been the Organist and Director of Music at Union Church since March 2019, appointed to that position after a forty-five-year tenure as Minister of Music and Organist for the South Church of New Britain, Connecticut. Since 2005 he has been the Music Director of The Hartford Chorale, one of southern New England's principal symphonic choruses, appearing frequently with the Hartford Symphony and other orchestras in the region, and touring throughout Europe and Asia. He holds degrees in music from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and the School of Sacred Music of New York's Union Theological Seminary.

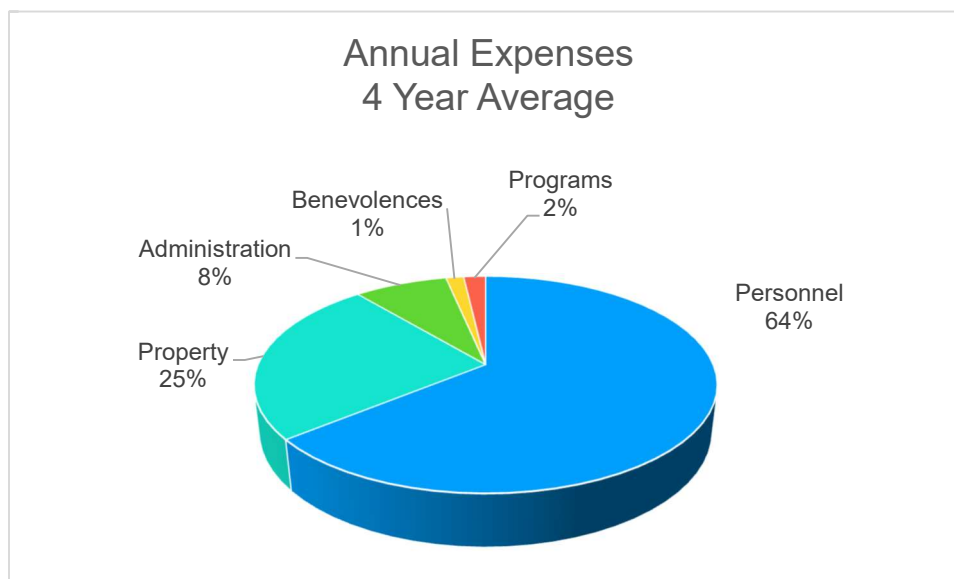
Business Administrator: Jennifer Gill is a long-time resident of the Pocantico district who has served at Union Church since February 2020. Having worked in compliance and operations with several Wall Street firms for over 20 years, Jennifer in 2013 decided to devote more time to her family and community. Since then, in addition to working part time for a local real estate attorney, Jen is a Lieutenant, Certified Firefighter with the Pocantico Hills Fire Department, a board member of the Westchester Youth Football League, and on weekends in season teaches skiing at Hunter Mountain.

Finances

Union Church has an annual operating budget slightly exceeding \$300,000. Our income is derived primarily from donations, income from our Harvest and Spring Fairs, and draws from our endowment and



operating reserves. Pledges and donations are the largest single component of income. Slightly less than half of our households make a formal pledge to the church. The average pledge has increased by almost 85 percent during the interim period, although overall donations have declined. Data from our recent congregational survey suggests that there is substantial capacity for improved stewardship among church members. In 2020 and 2021, the church received \$27,200 and \$40,250, respectively, from the Paycheck Protection Program to help cover personnel and other permitted operating expenses



The largest expense for the church is salaries and benefits, at approximately two-thirds of the annual operating budget. The cost of operating and maintaining our facilities accounts for about one-quarter,

significantly lower than it would be were it not for terms of our long-term lease arrangement with Historic Hudson Valley, whereby they are responsible for the bulk of the church property's maintenance. The cost of our ministry, in terms of education, outreach and discipleship, accounts for only 3% of our budget. We are hopeful of growing this area substantially in the years ahead.

Union Church's endowment approximated \$4.1 million at the end of 2020. The bulk of this amount, some \$3.8 million, was comprised of the board-designated Pastoral Endowment Fund, which is used to cover the expenses associated with the church's pastor. Three additional funds are dedicated to covering expenses associated with the music program, the fine arts program, and major maintenance of the manse, respectively. The church's policy is to draw 3.5% per annum of the rolling three-year average closing endowment balance to support operations. For 2021, we expect the endowment draw may significantly exceed 3.5% due to a projected operating deficit and the costs of the pastoral transition.

Ministry Area Profile

The congregation comes primarily from four Zip Codes in central Westchester County: 10510, 10562, 10570 and 10591. Population of this area is 78,964, up 4% since 2000 in 27,653 households. Racial/ethnic diversity is: Anglo / Caucasian 52%, Latinx 31.3%, African American 8.2%, Asian / Other 8.5%. Average household income: \$165,804.

Strengths and Weaknesses

At a brainstorming meeting held in February 2020, church leadership identified Strengths and Weaknesses of Union Church and pinpointed areas for development.

Strengths: Our pastor and preaching; ministry of music; church buildings and world-famous stained-glass windows; the manse; and ample parking. Endowment Funds totaling over \$4 million. A congregation whose members are well-educated and affluent—offering human resources that can be developed.

Weaknesses: Declining membership and few families with children and youth; no Sunday School program and few Adult Education programs; weak connections to local communities and few outreach missions; declining financial support from congregation; poor communication from leadership to the congregation.

Areas to develop: Sunday School/Christian Education program; connections to local community; pastoral care; mission review; more diverse fine arts programming. More stewardship participation within the congregation.

Responses and Reflections on the Survey

It is not explicitly stated anywhere in the results or analysis of the recently completed church-wide congregational assessment, but the obvious should be acknowledged: Union Church is primarily a white, affluent, mainline Protestant church, of older adult members, the majority of whom are women. We are theologically progressive but with a high degree of theological diversity: a broad range of perspectives are represented in the congregation and the progressive moniker, while representative of the majority, is not representative of the whole.

The search for a new pastor comes at a crucial time in the history of Union Church, as we have experienced a significant decline in membership and attendance at Sunday service while experiencing a number of recent annual budget deficits. Our primary strength is our worship and music, which is satisfying to most of the congregation, and which is helping to determine overall satisfaction levels. Ensuring that our next pastor can at least maintain the level of worship satisfaction, if not improve it, will be distinctly important.

The Holy Cow! CAT and Crows Feet Consulting have been helpful with our self-evaluation and posed provocative questions as we look to the future. To repeat, the Holy Cow! CAT data showed our stated top priorities to be attracting families with children and youth, developing a comprehensive strategy to reach new people and providing opportunities for Christian service, education and spiritual formation at every age and stage of life. These priorities focus on eliminating our weaknesses, not amplifying our strengths.

Such priorities are laudable and familiar in churches everywhere. What church would not aspire to young families in the pews each week, and a thriving education and spiritual formation at every age? At the same time our consultant pointed out the difficulty of achieving those objectives as we are presently constituted. Young families are attracted by Sunday School programs and other young families in the congregation. It will take energy and expenditures of time and money to achieve a turnabout.

The consultant cautioned us not to downplay the “dynamics of the congregation’s culture” or set expectations a new pastor may not be able to meet. This reality will require a thoughtful, honest and realistic discussion of our current situation, what needs to be done to keep Union Church viable and what we want to be in the years ahead.

The Mission Review Committee recognizes and applauds that “revitalization” is our overriding theme. But we need to shine light on the fact that members also state that they like “familiar ways of doing things and stick with them.” It will take planning, cooperation and increased congregational giving to make the changes we desire—to reach / serve new people and attract young families.

According to our consultant UCPH is in a climate of Recovery/Reinvention where “members of the church can imagine a church more vital than they are currently experiencing.” That does seem to be the current feeling at Union Church, where our members appreciate the intimacy and sense of community, quality of the liturgical services and traditional church music, but also strongly desire more opportunities for ministry and service and greater educational programming. The survey indicates that outreach and advocacy are important to the congregation, yet in recent years the congregation’s community engagement and benevolences have been sparse. The congregation would benefit from a new pastor with a heart for mission, who can challenge the congregation to develop new outlets for its Christian witness.

Key Indicators from the Survey

Overall Satisfaction: On the whole, I am satisfied with how things are in our church.

Clearly agree: 51%
 On the fence: 41%
 Clearly disagree: 8%

Overall Energy: Going through the motions / not much excitement about it among attendees.

Clearly agree: 21%
 On the fence: 43%
 Clearly disagree: 37%

Attendance Trend : Compared with 3 years ago, I attend worship...

Less: 32%

Same: 54%

More: 14%

Value of Activity Beyond Worship: Participation in church activities is very meaningful to me.

Clearly agree: 55%

On the fence: 41%

Clearly disagree: .5%

Rating of church energy level: Low

Respectfully Submitted,

MISSION REVIEW TEAM

Gary Sledge, Chair

Tom Staudter, Co-Chair

David Bartholomew

Joe Imperato

Catherine Pollack

Bob Sweeney

Pam Wittemore

Lindley DeGarmo, *ex officio*

June 21, 2021