

2023 Ministry Reports

Council Chair

Dear Beloved Siblings in Christ,

The year of 2023 was a busy year, seeing us do things we have not done before, and resuming ministries that have been held dear to us over the years.

We've been blessed to continue to meet in person most Sundays (except during the occasional snowstorm!) and are very blessed to have options to meet on Zoom as well. This allows us to continue to worship with those who cannot get out easily, or those who physically are far away from us. So many thanks go out to our Tech team who help to make this possible week after week!!

SOV has started its Bell Choir and has 9 enthusiastic ringers! The Bell Choir, under direction of Cathy Drescher, provided a musical offering at worship 4 times this year, and also visited Nashoba Park Assisted Living to entertain their residents at the Christmas season. Our Vocal Choir has continued to provide lovely music for worship, as well, and we thank Jeanne Iburg for her leadership!

Our building committee has continued to work hard to finish most of the urgent needs on their list. Thanks to their diligent efforts (including those of Mark Imbibo) the Building Committee was able to help reduce our budget deficit with a donation of \$3000 in 2023. Thank you! As Wayne and Cindy will share with you, now it is time to act upon our dreams and hopes! They will be sharing the major themes that arose from brainstorming during our June Congregational gathering when small groups walked through the building, sharing their ideas and dreams of 'what can be' at 21 Washington Street.

In 2023, SOV resumed its support of local area food ministries. We continue to collect food and other needed items for Stone Soup Kitchen, PACH Outreach, Townsend Ecumenical Outreach, and Loaves & Fishes. Collections are ongoing on a monthly rotation. Thank you to Sandra Tobies for spearheading this effort and delivering our donations to the food ministry locations. In addition to collecting donations, our crew taking care of the SOV Garden in the Ayer Community Garden provided 125 pounds of produce to Stone Soup Kitchen! Huge Thanks to Andy George, Bethany Carlson, and Ingrid Cruse.

Thank you to Angela George for again coordinating our participation in 'Gifts for Jesus'. This year we sponsored gifts for 22 children and youth - and I believe all had a wonderful time shopping for their person and helping to make sure they had a wonderful holiday.

Our youth members once again attended City Reach in Boston, this year with students and adults from the UCC Groton and St. Andrew's in Ayer. The kids and adults found this weekend

of service to be fulfilling and meaningful as they always do. Plans are in the works to attend again in 2024 on March 15 - 16, and winter clothing donations are already being brought in to each church.

This summer our 4 youth and 2 adults attended Group Mission Trip Workcamp June 17 - 24 in Imperial, PA. This year the students had a very meaningful week of service (Thank you to Vinod Kamalaraj for driving and leading our crew) and they look forward to attending Group Workcamp again this June in Dexter, Maine. We plan on attending with the youth groups of UCC Groton and St. Andrew's in Ayer.

This year, during January, July, August, and September, Pastor Gaeta took her sabbatical. This is the first time our congregation has had its Pastor take a sabbatical! This was a time of rest, renewal, and refreshment for Pastor, and for our congregation, as well. In addition to having guest clergy serve at Sunday worship, members of our congregation stepped forward to lead a service or offer a reflection. It was wonderful to see some new people taking on these roles, in addition to those who continue to serve. We also enjoyed worshiping with St. Andrew's Church in July. Special Thanks to Cindy Boanen for coordinating each week's worship and helping those who offered to lead the service or offer a reflection.

Upon Pastor's return, members of our congregation joined with other congregations in the NE Conference in a weekend retreat at Calumet Lutheran Ministries. This was an opportunity to spend time together and welcome Pastor Gaeta back from her sabbatical, and also meet and spend time with members of other congregations in our Conference.

SOV participated in the 'Independence in the Ayer' festival on June 24 and again took part in the Ayer Folk & Arts festival on October 8th, meeting members of the community. The next week we held an outdoor service for our Blessing of the Animals service, and said Hello again to several community members (and their pets!) that we met at the Folk & Arts Festival. At the end of October we joined in and hosted a walking tour of Ayer in our church neighborhood, led by Alan Manoian.

On Reformation Sunday our Congregation formally welcomed Pastor Gaeta back from sabbatical, and also celebrated her 20th Anniversary of Ordination. Of course, a fabulous potluck was enjoyed by everyone!

And finally our work toward becoming a fully inclusive and welcoming congregation is ready to bear fruit. During this year, the Core Team (Valerie Wilkins, Celia Wilkins, Karen Sheldon, Kim Duhamel, and Pastor Gaeta) met monthly to learn more about the process set out by Reconciling Works. The team provided several educational opportunities including discussions led by Pastor Gaeta and a talk given by Dr. McMahan from Kennedy Community Health Center. Today at the Congregational meeting we wish to affirm the Welcoming Statement seen below under the RIC Core Team report, and officially become an RIC (Reconciling in Christ) Congregation.

I am so grateful to be able to help lead this wonderful congregation. I give thanks for the Executive Team, Congregation Council, and all the members of SOV for remaining active and loving members of this Congregation.

Respectfully submitted,
Karen Sheldon, Council Chair

Pastor's Report

To God's Beloved, who gather as Shepherd of the Valley Lutheran Church –

2023 was full of new experiences for SOV and it seems as though that is how we thrive! Many of these events and activities are discussed in other reports: Reconciling in Christ process, collaborative youth ministry, handbell choir and **sabbatical**, to name a few. I am so appreciative of the latter, especially. I was able to spend the months of January, July, August and September away from the daily responsibilities of SOV. This afforded me the time to be in a different kind of space - physically, mentally and spiritually! I spent time in New York City, the mid-Atlantic states and South Korea. These months allowed me to listen more deeply to the Spirit, trusting that your leadership and involvement in the life of SOV was also being guided by God.

Over the course of 2023 I wrote letters of transfer to other congregations for three households:

- Denise Opperman to Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in Pelion, SC
- Lynne Clifford to Holy Cross Episcopal Church in Simpsonville, SC
- Val and Jim Slusser to Bethany Covenant Church in Bedford, NH

There were no baptisms or funerals of members of the congregation. I performed one wedding for Marisa Rivera and Austin Mackey, occasional visitors and active community members.

We welcomed two households into official membership:

- Val and Celia Wilkins
- Ingrid Cruse and Karl Helmer

All have found places to offer their gifts and connect with others here at SOV.

This year we also began some important conversation related to living into this new location. June's congregational gathering was delightful as people explored the hidden nooks and crannies in the building and imagined some **possibilities** for reconfiguring space. SOV is gradually becoming a known entity here in Ayer - and when our updated sign outside is installed, it will be even easier to tell people about us! Wayne's introduction to us of different ways to think about funding the ministry has opened up some new tools we can use for **stewarding** both our building/property and money that has been entrusted to us.

As I am slowly having individual/family visits with each of you, it's been a joy to hear how being part of SOV makes a difference in your lives. I invite you to reach out if you haven't yet heard from me. These conversations are the highlight of my experience being a pastor. I love to hear your thoughts and ideas, consider with you God's presence in our lives and challenge you to fully live into God's call for you as beloved: taken, blessed, broken and given to the world.

I have been so blessed to be your pastor for these 7+ years. Thank you for your patience with me and sharing yourselves with one another. I am certainly looking forward to what God will do with us next!

Peace in Christ,



Stewardship

For 2024 ...

- 14 pledge-units increased their pledges
 - 1 new pledge-unit
 - 3 pledge-units kept the same pledge
 - 1 pledge-unit decreased their pledge
 - 1 pledge-unit stop pledging but will still give
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- Final pledge amount for 2024 is \$97,480 which is a \$2,630 (2.8%) increase over 2023 pledges. The number of giving units remains the same at 19. No pledge units left SOV nor new pledge units added; instead, their statuses changed between pledge and other identified.

Val Wilkins volunteered to be the 2025 Stewardship Chair.

Blessings,
Wayne Twombly
Stewardship Chair 2024

Youth

This year we have combined with the UCC Groton and St. Andrew's Church in Ayer for service opportunities and also some social opportunities for our youth. The youth once again attended City Reach in Boston in March, bringing many donations of food and warm winter clothing and spending time with unhoused members of the Boston community. They are excited to attend again in 2024, on March 15 & 16 and collections for donations continue.

Our two high school age youth and 2 friends attended a Group Mission Trip Workcamp in Imperial, PA June 17 - 24. Each youth member had the opportunity to serve with a different group and rejoined our group each evening with many wonderful stories to share. Vinod and Karen got to co-lead a team with some amazing youth from all over the country.

In 2024 we look forward to partnering with the youth groups from UCC Groton and St. Andrew's in Ayer to attend Group Workcamp in Dexter, Maine during the last week of June.

Respectfully submitted by Karen Sheldon

Prayer Shawl

Members: Linda Prince, Val Wilkins, Celia Wilkins, Karen Sheldon, Cathy Drescher, Ellen Baxendale, Pastor Gaeta, Cindy Boanen, and Margaret Doyle.

In the past year the Prayer Shawl Ministry group met in person either at the church or CareOne in Concord hosted by Ellen Baxendale. We donated excess yarn to Ukraine (a local resident collected clothes, toys and yarn for Ukrainian residents). We filled "Bags of Love" for Stone Soup Kitchen. The bags contained hats, mittens and scarves. In addition, we sent hats, mittens, and scarves to City Reach.

We sent out 1 shawl for a new baby, presented 5 shawls to high school graduates and 5 care packages for high school graduates to support their post-high school paths. There will be 5 shawls and 1 quilt presented to past council members for their service in 2024.

Respectfully submitted,
Linda Prince
Prayer Shawl Ministry Leader

Building Committee

In 2023, the Building Ministry Team continued to manage the upkeep of the church building by ensuring that any repair work was tracked and completed on a timely basis and all building related vendors and contracts in support of the building maintenance/upkeep were properly managed. Our part time Building Manager, Mark Imbimbo, completed many of the building repairs himself helping us to more effectively manage our costs.

The Building Ministry Team generally meets monthly and has the following members:

- Christine Andersen
- Cliff Bailey
- Tom Bielicki
- Denise Boyd
- Andy George
- Kathy Johnson
- John Hansen
- Wayne Twombly

· Garrik Wilkins

Some of the major accomplishments in 2023 were

- Spring and fall cleanup days, including the purchase and spreading of mulch around the property
- Continued to work issues with the heating system, this included replacing the Circulator pump for the zone in the Sanctuary
- Continued to work to clean up and remediate the leaks in the basement caused by heavy rain
- Cleaned out and moved the children's play area into the parlor to make room for the bell ringers to practice
- Removed some pews from the sanctuary
- Repairs to the dishwasher were completed
- New cabinets were installed over the sink outside of the sanctuary
- Toilet leak fixed in Fellowship Hall
- Locks installed on both doors in the upstairs bell room
- Lock box replaced outside of the main purple doors
- Had carpet installed over the tile in the Bell Ringer's room and in the hall
- Plexiglass replaced in the sign out front
- Managed the fire alarm inspection and the fire extinguisher maintenance and inspection
- Managed rentals and building usage
- Regular building cleaning as well as periodic upkeep, inside and out
- Started the process to get the lift re-inspected

Total spent on repairs and inspections in 2023 was \$ 7,590.

We would like to thank all those in the congregation for their continued support of this important Ministry. It takes many hands and an array of talented and dedicated individuals to manage a building of this size! We appreciate all the help the congregation has provided in making this Ministry successful!

Respectfully submitted,
Kathy Johnson
Chair of the Building Ministry Team

Reconciling in Christ

During this year, the RIC Core Team (Valerie Wilkins, Celia Wilkins, Karen Sheldon, Kim Duhamel, and Pastor Gaeta) met monthly to learn more about the process set out by Reconciling Works. The team provided several educational opportunities for congregation members including discussions led by Pastor Gaeta and a talk given by Dr. McMahan from Kennedy Community Health Center. Today at the Congregational Meeting we wish to affirm the Welcoming Statement below, and officially become an RIC Congregation. Thank you to Cathy Drescher and Cindy Boen for your help with preparing the bulletin board in the downstairs hallway.

We at Shepherd of the Valley Lutheran Church joyfully invite and welcome YOU! As siblings in Christ, we seek to be an inclusive and affirming faith community, (sharing) a variety of experiences and identities. We celebrate all people, recognizing our diversity of sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions, mental, physical and emotional abilities, racial identities, economic statuses, opinions on social issues and all the other ways our dominant culture labels and ranks people. We commit ourselves to working for racial equity and justice as we grow into our antiracist identity.

Wherever you are in your journey of life and faith, you are loved, invited, and welcomed to our part of God's family. You are precious and beloved in God's sight and OURS!

Respectfully submitted by Karen Sheldon

Community Garden

SOV's gardeners include:

Bethany Carlson

Ingrid Cruse

Andy George

During the 2023 growing season, SOV gardeners donated approximately 125 lbs. of vegetables to Stone Soup Kitchen. The fresh produce delivered to SSK was distributed to the community.

The vegetables consisted of cherry tomatoes, beefsteak tomatoes, green beans, cucumbers, eggplant, peppers, radishes, carrots, swiss chard and lettuce.

All starter plants were donated by the gardeners or grown in the garden beds from seed.

This was a very productive garden this year. We had little to no issues with bugs or fungus. These gardeners were vigilant with watering and fertilization. We did a lot of late season pruning of the tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers and eggplants in order to allow the existing fruit to ripen.

The committee looks forward to a bountiful 2024 growing season.

Submitted by,
Andy George

Worship

Many thanks to all who have made worshiping at Shepherd of the Valley such a prayerful and meaningful time.

The steadfastness of Jeanne Iburg in providing us with musical accompaniment is especially appreciated. And it's been nice to see Linda Prince and Ingrid Cruse and Karl Helmer filling in when Jeanne isn't available.

In June, a team installed cabinets in the sacristy, providing adequate room to store and prepare the communion elements. Thanks to Jeanne Iburg for setting up communion each Sunday.

Pastor Gaeta led us in worship according to her schedule and with the exception of her Sabbatical time. During the Sabbatical and her other Sundays away, we were led in worship by a mix of supply pastors (Pastors David Rinas, Mark Peterson, Cassandra Chavez, and Andrew Heisen) and lay leaders (Karen Sheldon, Janet Vesper, Wayne Twombly, Cliff Bailey, Stefanie Heiter, Valerie Wilkins, Andy George, and myself.) We also attended worship at St. Andrew's one Sunday.

On the evening of Maundy (Holy) Thursday, we followed the rite as outlined in the ELCA Worship book. On Good Friday, some participated in the Stations of the Cross around downtown Ayer and in the evening we followed the rite as outlined in the ELCA Worship book. We had a good turnout for the Easter Vigil that included Rosi's baptism. Thank you to Britta Roper for the adornment of the altar for our Easter celebrations. At our celebratory service on Easter Sunday, we welcomed back some folks whom the congregation watched grow up and some parents of our members, as well as most of our members.

We had three Zoom-only worship services in 2023: The holiday weekends in July and September and a snowy day in December.

On October 15 we held a St. Francis of Assisi service with Blessing of the Animals **outside** in the Memorial Garden, on a beautiful morning.

On October 29 we celebrated Reformation Sunday, including a prayer for Pastor's 20th anniversary of ordination.

Christmas Eve fell on a Sunday this year. We held only the Christmas Eve service, forgoing the Fourth Sunday of Advent service. At the evening service (4:00) we again welcomed back children and parents of our members. And thank you to Angela George for adorning the altar with poinsettias.

The Wednesday evening prayer group came to a quiet close during the year, but before then we used a regular order of service, examined the Scriptures with regard to issues of sexuality, and shared Lenten services with other members of the Northeast Conference.

Respectfully submitted,
Cindy Boalen
Worship Ministry Leader

Handbell Choir

I am blessed to be able to share my passion for handbell ringing and to see that excitement spread. At the beginning of this year, all but one person was brand new to ringing. Now we have rung four times during Sunday worship and played a Christmas concert for the residents at Nashoba Park Assisted Living Center. They enjoyed it so much that we did the entire program again as an encore.

Our plans for 2024 include a special worship offering during Lent and Advent and at other times throughout the church year. We also hope to play again at Nashoba Park next Christmas. Most of our members will be attending a Handbell Retreat at Camp Calumet in January. Additionally, three high-level ringers/directors have offered to lead workshops here at Shepherd of the Valley.

It has been a joy to hear these handbells brought back to life and rung to praise the Lord.

Respectfully submitted
Cathy Drescher - director

Ringers - Linda Prince, Karen Sheldon, Suzanne Wilson, Valerie Wilkins, Andy Vesper, Janet Vesper, Cliff Bailey, Pastor Gaeta and Scott Wilson

And a special thank you to Celia Wilkins for helping out in directing

Community Connections

As part of Community Connections, in May, 2023 SOV resumed regular collection of non-perishable food, paper goods, personal care products and cleaning supplies for delivery to four of the area food pantries on a rotating monthly schedule: Stone Soup Kitchen (Ayer), PACH (Pepperell), Townsend Ecumenical Outreach (Serving Townsend and Ashby) and Loaves and Fishes (Serving Ayer, Shirley, Devens, Groton, Littleton, Harvard and Dunstable). Thanks to the generosity of our congregation, every month we have been able to support the efforts of these organizations with donations of items such as boxed mac n cheese, canned and boxed pastas, soups, paper towels, toilet paper, canned meats and fish, snacks etc.

In addition, the congregation provided juice boxes and healthy snacks during a special drive at Loaves and Fishes in March 2023 to support the Emergency Intake Center at Devens.

We also sent school supplies in August to Page Hilltop Elementary School and joined UCC in their annual backpack drive, an effort that UCC took over from Loaves and Fishes in 2018 so they could focus on providing nutritious food and which we have a long history of supporting.

The food pantries are always very grateful for all donations as they work to provide assistance to an increasing number of clients. Thank you to everyone for helping to share our resources!

Respectfully submitted by Sandra Tobies

Memorial Garden

The Memorial Garden flourished during 2023's growing season thanks to an abundance of rainfall and moderate temperatures. A new layer of fresh mulch was laid in coordination with the spring cleanup. There were a few plant materials that needed replacing as well as some perennials that did not come back due to the extreme drought that first year (summer of 2022). Approximately 6-10 new perennials were planted during the season, in addition to spring bulbs that were donated at Easter.

The biggest additions to the garden are the two curved granite benches. Bronze memorial plaques were also custom made to adorn the top of the benches, and will be installed this spring when temperatures are warm enough to ensure a strong bond with the epoxy.

Looking ahead for 2024, it is hopeful we can add more perennials and groundcover to the shaded hill area (closest to the ACS fence). A bronze entrance plaque would be at the top of the wishlist if more donations come in for the garden.

Respectfully submitted,
Suzanne Wilson

Treasurer's Report

Commentary for Full Year 2023 financials:

Operating Budget

1. Giving/income full year (2023) was \$88,242 vs. a budget of \$99,200. This represents a deficit of \$10,957. Pledges are down from the budget by \$13,870. There was an accounting discrepancy between budgeted pledges and actual stewardship pledges resulting in a \$3,100 shortfall. Most of the remaining shortfall was from an annual gift that did not happen as planned in 2023. Free will and other identified income are up \$1,779 of which \$1,700 was from an unexpected gift. The remaining \$3,300 of the unexpected gift will come in 2024.
2. Debt reduction campaign was \$1,100.

3. Outlays for the full year (2023) were \$118,582 vs. a budgeted amount of \$120,559. This represents an underspend of \$1,976.

Building Budget

1. Building income for the full year (2023) was \$42,492 vs. a budget of \$41,864. This represents a surplus of \$628.
2. Building expenses for the full year (2023) was \$34,548 vs. a budget of \$40,180. This represents an underspend of \$5,631.
3. Building Income less expenses leaves a surplus of \$7,943 in the building budget. The building committee recommends using \$3,000 to reduce the operating deficit and \$4,943 to add to the building reverses.

Notes

1. Unrestricted reserves are \$42,168. Annual Operating deficit is \$21,359. In 2 years, the reserves will be depleted.
2. Building Fund has \$182,442 and an annual contribution rate of \$4,101. At an estimated capital spend rate of \$16,000 per year, the Building Fund will be depleted in 15 years.
3. Unexpended Carry Over Funds are \$11,927.

Audit Committee

Kim Duhamel will join the audit committee. Sandra Tobies will continue on the audit committee. Wayne Twombly will not be an auditor since he is the treasurer. Thank you Kim and Sandra.

Investment Committee

Andy George, Dane Kranpitz and Wayne Twombly will join the investment committee. The purpose of the committee is to review and recommend ...

- 1) How much money should be in prudent reverses?
- 2) How much money should be invested in CDs? Mission Investment Fund? Other investments?
- 3) How should investment income be reported to the Council?
- 4) How should investment income be spent? Re-invested?

Thank you Andy and Dane for joining me in this important new committee.

Blessings,

Wayne Twombly
Treasurer