

“Walking the Jesus Path Together”

A.K.A. “THE STEEPLE”

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This is an interesting article featuring a small church in New York. There are similarities with which we at First United Presbyterian Church can identify, especially this quote: “We share so much in common in our beliefs and our commitment to serve others as Christ would have us do. We may worship in a way that isn’t big and fancy, we may not have a coffee house or a Bible Study every other day, but we have the same commitment to the faith and to the community we are called to love and serve.” – Dalene (Article reprinted with permission from the Presbyterian Foundation)

Small Church Spotlight: First Presbyterian Church of Springfield, NY by Erin Dunigan



Founded in 1796, the First Presbyterian Church of Springfield has had a long history in the rolling hills of rural Upstate New York. However, like many churches in rural areas, the “glory days” of full pews and overflowing Sunday school seem to be in the rearview mirror.

Rather than simply hoping something new will unfold, the church leadership is seeking new ways of being a church in and for the community.

Session Moderator Debra Miller is not a native of upstate New York, nor is she a native in the PC(USA), having grown up United Church of Christ in New England. But being part of a rural community and a small church has shown her its challenges and benefits.

Common Challenge

Many of the challenges facing the Springfield congregation are common amongst congregations across the PC(USA). Denominational numbers have declined, and Sunday church now competes with sports and other activities. Aging membership and changing demographics of the community as a whole have also challenged the church.

As with many smaller churches, there are also challenges around pastoral leadership. “We have had visiting pastors for a long time,” Miller said. She herself is trained as a Licensed Clinical Social Worker but when the church had a hard time finding pastors willing to fill the pulpits on Sunday, she became an Authorized Lay Preacher to help with the preaching duties.

Not only is finding pulpit supply often a challenge for smaller rural churches, but it is also the consistency of that leadership — or lack thereof — that can be a challenge. “It can make it hard when you have people who come to visit the church and you don’t have a lot of consistency in preaching,” Miller said.

It is part of why the connection with the presbytery is essential. “It is so important that we have the support of the presbytery to have pulpit supply to ensure the consistency of the preaching that comes from the pulpit,” she said.

Embracing the beauty



But in spite of the challenges, the Presbyterian Church in Springfield is a small church with a welcoming spirit. “We had one person come to visit who had been raised Catholic,” continued Miller. “She told us that she had been checking out churches and that we were so welcoming.”

Another couple recently moved into the area from the larger city of Syracuse. “They came from a big church with a big choir and asked if it would be okay for them to engage more in the music of the congregation,” she said. The church’s current organist is 90 years old. She has been playing the organ for the church for 70 years with devotion, missing only one Sunday per year.

“This is the beauty and the challenge of smaller churches, Miller said. “We have a lot of history, but it can also be hard to make changes. Sometimes we try to introduce something new and it sort of just gets sucked back into the old way of doing things. It can be frustrating.”

Reaching out beyond the walls

The shifts that the pandemic brought about have also had some surprising benefits for smaller, more isolated congregations. At the onset of the pandemic the church installed internet, purchased a computer and set up zoom so that they could continue to have worship online.

“We have one woman from Florida whose mom was a member of the church but had started going to another church in town before the pandemic,” Miller said. When the shutdown happened both Mom and daughter began attending the church online via zoom.

“This is gives us a way to open up worship to those who weren’t coming before,” Miller said.

It is just one of the many ways that the church is looking for new angles to reach out rather than, as Miller puts it, “just waiting for something to happen that is better.”

Stewarding resources well

For Miller and the leadership of the church it comes down to an issue of stewardship — not just financial stewardship, but a wider view. “We are looking at a stewardship of our resources — how do we use our building, how do we use our lawn, how do we use our time?”

These questions led the church to carve out some of the space from their lawn for a vegetable garden. The produce from the garden is harvested by volunteers and given to three local food pantries.

In addition to providing fresh produce for the food pantries the church also runs various fundraising events to support one food pantry’s backpack program. The backpack program ensures that kids in food insecure situations have a backpack full of food to take home on the weekends.

Community involvement

One of the congregation’s biggest fundraising efforts is a July 4 event in Springfield that draws over 3,500 people with a parade and fireworks. In addition to the food concessions in which church members sell hamburgers, hot dogs and pies, everyone in the parade is given a ticket for a free soda that they pick up at the church. Between soliciting volunteers to help with the food stand and the

planning that goes into the event, there are lots of opportunities for church members to interact with the wider community.

“There is a large crossover between being involved in the volunteer fire department, part of the church, and part of the 4th of July committee so there is a lot of community involvement,” Miller said.

Shared Commitment

In spite of the challenges that face smaller churches, Miller hopes that the larger Church can also appreciate the beauty found within them.

“We share so much in common in our beliefs and our commitment to serve others as Christ would have us do,” Miller said. “We may worship in a way that isn’t big and fancy, we may not have a coffee house or a Bible Study every other day, but we have the same commitment to the faith and to the community we are called to love and serve.”

She does admit that being part of a smaller church can sometimes feel lonely and isolated.

That is why the connection to the larger church is so important for smaller churches. “The idea that you are more than just the people gathered in that building — that you are part of the Church — it helps us to feel less alone,” she said.

Erin Dunigan is an ordained evangelist and teaching elder in the PC(USA). She is a graduate of Princeton Theological Seminary. She serves as a photographer, writer and communications consultant and lives near the border in Baja California, Mexico.

You don't know her...but you prayed for her.

You have never seen her...but you know she is a child of God.

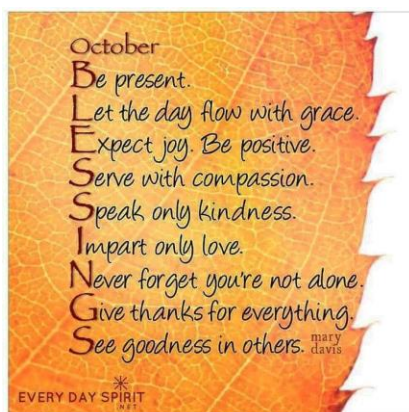
You have never talked to her...

but you know that words spoken to God are what matters most.

Thank you for embracing my daughter Carla through your thoughts and prayers.

She is recuperating slowly and is back to work part-time. The doctors have told her recovery from West Nile is very slow and will take time. We cherish the good days!

- Dalene



There will be a PW meeting following church on Sunday, October 8. All women of the church are encouraged to attend.




We pray for...
 Nolan Collins
 Carla Davies Terhune
 Mike Dickerson
 Pat Dickerson
 Hal Jackson
 Sally Leeper
 Tish McKee



"Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God." *Philippians 4:6*

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Stir Your Coffee
 At the Steeple
 Wednesdays
 at 10am

Join with the pastor every Wednesday morning for an informal time of fellowship and coffee. There is no agenda except to enjoy each other's company. Bring a snack to share if you like, but it is not required!

Pastor Dave would like to meet with you! There is a sign-up sheet on the bulletin board by Fellowship Hall or you can call the church office to make an appointment. Pick a Wednesday afternoon when you'd like to get together, either at your home or in my office. Let's get to know each other!



Join with Pastor Dave on Wednesday evenings at 5:30 pm in Fellowship Hall for a Bible study that looks at Christian Art History. This study will run through October 25 and will look at Art History from the Early Christian era through the Reformation. There will be lots of pictures, discussion and a fun time! Bring a sack dinner and enjoy this time of fellowship and learning!



MARK YOUR CALENDARS! Saturday, November 18, from 8:30 – 1:30 we will once again be having our annual Holiday Hop. Be thinking of what you can make to sell at the event. Baked goods, handmade items, and gently-used Christmas items will be available. Also needed is your help! Contact Rae De Regnier or Gaylene Blankers if you can help!

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Sunday, October 8 - Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost
 9:00 am - Adult Sunday School
 10:15 am - Worship, Paul Millhollin, worship leader
 11:15 am - PW Meeting following worship
 11:15 am - Fellowship

Wednesday, October 11 - 10:00 am Stir Your Coffee at the Steeple
 5:30 pm Christian Art History Bible Study

Saturday/Sunday October 14-15 - Covered Bridge Festival

Sunday, October 15 - Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost
 9:00 am - Adult Sunday School
 10:15 am - Worship, Donna Vaughan, worship leader
 11:15 am - Fellowship