

Report to Diocesan Convention 2019

The Rev. Meredyth Ward, Urban Missioner

First of all, I want to begin by thanking Bishop Fisher for the joy and privilege of serving as your Urban Missioner in Worcester. While it is the hardest work I have ever done, it is also the most engaging and fulfilling work I have ever done. I am honored to minister on the streets of Worcester on your behalf.

For almost five years now, I have been engaged in a ministry of presence, or, in a phrase the folks in my first parish might remember, the work of holy lurking. A ministry of presence is just what it sounds like—being present. That means listening more than speaking, showing up on a regular basis, and offering support and help when it is requested.

Walking Together, the storefront which is the home base for our ministry is at 799 Main Street in Worcester. The neighborhood is troubled, to say the least. Drug deals happen in plain sight on the street, many people are homeless or marginally housed (using shelters, a friend's couch, a tent or a car as home base), and addiction and mental illness plague many.

The storefront is open Monday through Friday from about 8:30 am to 1 pm. We serve coffee and snacks, and provide essentials such as hygiene items, condoms and dry socks. This summer we also provided countless cups of cold water. As more and more stores are selling bottled water, public drinking fountains in our city have become almost as scarce as pay phones.

We are blessed to partner with groups in the neighborhood who also help our folks. We now have 12 Step groups meeting five nights a week, and there are plans to offer a sixth meeting as well. AIDS Project Worcester offers Narcan training each month, and also keeps us well supplied with the life-saving medication. A small Evangelical church uses our space on Sunday afternoons and offers a meal each week.

Through the generosity of some parishioners at St. Luke's in Worcester, we offer a wonderful lunch on many Thursdays. They bring sandwiches, hard boiled eggs, fruit, cookies and chips—a real feast. During the winter our staff and volunteers filled in on the alternate weeks with soup or stew or chili. Neighborhood friends come in with food to share as well. We've received shepherd's pie and American Chop Suey as well as baked goods. Sometimes people living on the street get foods from the food bank that require refrigeration, like yogurt or milk, and they bring it to us to share.

We are blessed to have a number of devoted volunteers. Some come to us from local parishes, others from the neighborhood or various programs. They help make coffee, sweep the floor, talk with our neighbors and provide comic relief! More than once we've had donations come in which require a fashion show. Other times someone will burst into song. There's never a dull moment.

Laundry Love continues to be a regular part of our ministry. In September we served 65 households in four hours. The laundromat staff seamlessly coordinates with our volunteers. We sign people in, offer them detergent, pay for their laundry, and serve a simple supper. Thanks to another group of volunteers, the kids are entertained with Legos, play dough, and coloring pages. The wonderful people at the Worcester Parent coalition bring children's books each month, and the faithful people of ACTS International come regularly with donations of clothing for children and adults.

Last October we were able to be part of the Diocesan Revival. The morning of the revival a group of volunteers met at Fuller Park in Worcester and cleaned the area of needles, trash and other debris. We then prayed for those who use the park and for the people who gather there. In the afternoon we offered crafts for the community, hot pizza courtesy of Simple Church Worcester, and danced to the music of the DJ who comes to Laundry Love most months. When the time came to go to the Hanover theater we processed down Main Street! It was a fun afternoon, despite the cold.

For several months this past year, I was blessed to serve with the Rev. Deacon Julie Butcher. Deacon Julie was a delight to work with—encouraging, inventive and always up for a challenge. She and her husband have moved to Florida, and she is sorely missed. We wish her well in her new diocese and her new adventures in ministry.

Over the past year we have received support from several different parishes and organizations in our community.

All Saints, Worcester
St. Matthew's, Worcester
Immanuel Lutheran, Holden
First Congregational, Auburn
Christ Church, Rochdale
Trinity, Ware
Trinity, Southbridge
Good Shepherd, Clinton
St. Michael's on the Heights, Worcester
St. Stephen's, Westboro
St. Francis, Holden
Holy Spirit, Sutton
Bethel Lutheran Church, Auburn
First Congregational, Worcester
Keeping Worcester Warm
Suds Up Laundromat
Southbridge Savings Bank
Dismas House, Worcester
Holy Cross College, Worcester
PEO, Charlton
and the many individual donors whose generosity makes our work possible

I am also very grateful for the work of our board:

Ms Elizabeth Harding
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Mr Philip Magnusson
The Rev, José Reyes