Report to Diocesan Convention
2021-2022
The Rev. Meredyth Ward
Urban Missioner

As always, I would like to begin by thanking our Bishop for the support that he and others in the Diocese have offered to me and to the urban mission in Worcester over the past several years. It has been an honor and joy to serve this community.

This report to Diocesan Convention is bittersweet for me. I retired as Urban Missioner as of June 30th of 2022, and Walking Together, our mission space in the Main South neighborhood of Worcester, closed at the same time.

There were many reasons for this decision. COVID forced changes in the model of our ministry, and, in many ways, we would have been starting from the beginning again. The population we served is transient by nature, with people moving or overdosing or being incarcerated or, best yet, getting sober and moving on. After two plus years of COVID, there were very few people left who knew the culture we had worked so hard to create at the storefront.

There is always a tension between works of charity and works of justice. Charity gives people stuff—very necessary stuff, from food and clothing to toiletries and first aid supplies. Justice helps people move to a new place—mentally, emotionally and spiritually as well as physically. Both are important, and finding a balance between them is part of any missional work.

During Covid, we were firmly on the side of charity. We worked hard to get food parcels and warm clothes to our folks. Sometimes, when numbers were high, we were handing things out the door of the storefront, sometimes we are able to invite people in for a few minutes, and sometimes we were driving around Worcester, looking for people and handing things out our car windows. This last method we jokingly referred to as the "ice cream truck" ministry.

The problem was that when we were able to reopen, people were used to just coming in to pick something up and leaving, rather than staying to talk, to build community and to explore their lives. It became clear, too, that over the two plus years of Covid, changes in the city had caused many of our folks to relocate to other neighborhoods. If we were starting from scratch, we were no longer in the perfect place. If we were to do the work of justice, we would need to move and begin again. We were too exhausted to contemplate a completely new start.

Now, long before I was a priest, I studied biology. I learned that trees which have been under great stress from drought or fire or insect infestation often put their energy into making seeds rather than leaves in the following year. Extra acorns or maple keys will help insure the survival of the DNA of the tree, even if the tree itself dies.

This past year has been a time to create seeds and to notice where seeds are already sprouting from this ministry. The 12 Step groups we began and nurtured have found other places to meet. Folks who found their way to sobriety are now sponsoring others. Some of our ESL students have taken the citizenship test or have found new jobs as their language skills increased. Some

folks have found housing out of the Main South Neighborhood. The neighborhood fridges now number four in Worcester with two more in nearby towns. Laundry Love continues to serve our neighbors, and some of our Walking Together Alumni have taken it upon themselves to pass out some of the same resources of food and warm socks and toiletries this winter, through a group they formed called "Keeping Worcester Warm."

Walking Together has closed, but ministry continues in the neighborhood. The seeds we sowed have begun to sprout, and will continue to do so over the years to come. St. Mark's Church is creating a new Episcopal presence in Main South—very different in scope and direction from Walking Together, but attesting to the love of God as expressed in our tradition.

I have been blessed to be part of the Episcopal branch of the Jesus Movement in Main South. May we all nurture seeds of hope, strength and justice in our own cities and towns.

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