

Report to Diocesan Convention 2020

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.

This has been a challenging year for Walking Together, and for all of us. The pandemic has exposed the holes in our safety net, and revealed systemic injustices. The people we serve are often essential workers, have health issues which put them at high risk for the virus, live in crowded conditions, and have little access to banking, technology and internet.

During 2020 we have been reinventing ourselves regularly. The first part of the year was as normal as an improvisational ministry can be. We fed people, listened to them, helped with basic needs like laundry and hygiene, and offered a safe space to come in out of cold and wet winter days. We distributed hats and gloves and warm, dry socks, and made soup and chili and occasionally roasted a turkey. We offered Narcan training and hosted 12 step meetings five nights a week. We accompanied people to court and to detox. We played chess and laughed at funny stories. We created community together.

When the pandemic shut down began, we, like so many others, assumed we would be open again in a couple of weeks. We helped organize 12 step meetings on Zoom, and gathered the contact information of those who came to our last in-person laundry love. We didn't bother to clean out the refrigerator before we left—we'd be back before long. We turned off the lights, lowered the gate and put up a sign saying "see you soon."

In early April it became clear that we were not going to see each other soon—at least not at the storefront. We began driving around Worcester, looking for our friends. The shelters had been dispersed across the city in an attempt to help people maintain social distance. As we slowly reconnected, we began to bring some of the resources from the storefront with us. We put together bags of healthy snacks to offer to people. We distributed masks. We gave out hygiene supplies. And, with the help of St. Francis Church in Holden, we gave out dozens of bottles of water. As many of you will remember, water fountains are as scarce as pay phones, and folks were in desperate need during the heat waves this summer.

Laundry Love is now happening as a month long event. Rather than gathering a couple of hundred people at the laundromat for pizza, kid activities, music, laundry and prayer, we now provide gift cards to the laundry. A small number of people can come in each day to do their laundry. We can't gather as a community. People can't even

fold their clothes at the laundromat, per CDC guidelines. We miss prayer and playing with babies, but at least folks have some clean clothes.

We have opened the storefront on a very limited basis. People can come to us a couple of mornings each week to get snacks and hygiene items. We hope that by the time cold weather sets in, we will be able to welcome people inside, for conversation and a warming station, rather than just picking up needed supplies.

The 12 step groups have started up again, with social distancing and masks. Since many of our folks are on the other side of the digital divide, on-line meetings were not an option for everyone.

This year I have been blessed to work with the Rev. Deacon Dianne Wilson. She has been part of our ministry from the beginning, and her heart and commitment enrich us all.

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

AIDS Project Worcester

Immanuel Lutheran, Holden

Trinity, Southbridge

Good Shepherd, Clinton

St. Stephen's, Westboro

St. Francis, Holden

Holy Spirit, Sutton

First Congregational, Worcester

Keeping Worcester Warm

Suds Up Laundromat

Southbridge Savings Bank

Episcopal City Mission

Thrivent Action Teams

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

Ms Brenda Jenkins

Ms Karen King

Dr. Holly Dolan

Mr. Steve Abdow

Mr Stephen Hill

Mr Philip Magnusson

The Rev. José Reyes