

## Henrietta United Church of Christ

Rev. David Inglis, Elizabeth Pixley, Moderator, & Rev. Martha Koenig Stone  
Annual Meeting Sunday - January 22, 2017

### “A New Thing”

**Scripture:** Isaiah 43:19-21

See, I am doing a new thing!  
Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?  
I am making a way in the wilderness  
and streams in the wasteland.  
20 The wild animals honor me,  
the jackals and the owls,  
because I provide water in the wilderness  
and streams in the wasteland,  
to give drink to my people, my chosen,  
21 the people I formed for myself  
that they may proclaim my praise.

**Pastor Dave:**

“See, I am doing a new thing!” New things can be exciting—like a new computer, a new job, a new baby. But new things can also be challenging—learning how to *use* that new computer, learning how to do a new job, and a new baby demands a heck of a lot more changes than just diapers.

In today’s scripture reading, Isaiah is speaking God’s words of hope and promise to his people, who had been defeated by Babylon and force-marched 600 miles across the wilderness into exile in Babylon some 50 years before. God was promising that he was going to bring them back home from exile and into a new life.

This was wonderful news—sort of. Those who could remember their life back home had grown old in Babylon. How would they make it back? They had found ways to make the best of the situation, had raised families there, and made a new life for themselves. And most of the Israelites who were there had been born there. They knew no other home but Babylon.

New things disrupt the old and familiar things. They demand something new of us, such as a journey through the unfamiliar wilderness until we find ourselves at home again in the new.

So God promised not only to do a new thing, but also to provide what they needed to help them *get* there. God tells them, “I am making a way in the wilderness”—a path you can follow that will get you there. “I am creating streams in the wasteland...to give drink to my people, my chosen.” God will make a way even when there seems to be no way.

I am sure the people thought of these words many times as they prepared to pull up stakes and make their long journey across the wilderness to a home that most of them didn't even remember.

On this Annual Meeting Sunday, HUCC is starting to look at the journey through the unfamiliar territory that lies ahead after my retirement April 30. So today, Liz Pixley, Pastor Martha and I are going to help you prepare for this new thing so you will feel more ready for it. And I'm going to start by reminding you of how strong you are and how fit you are for this journey.

Carolyn and I will never forget the warm welcome we and our kids received 25 years ago, even before I was voted in as your pastor. There was a warmth, genuineness, and openness here that made us feel so much at home. And this spirit has grown through the years. Most of you are here today because you have experienced this spirit too. It's the spirit that accepts people as they are, whoever they are, makes room for them, and welcomes them into the life of the church.

It's the spirit that has allowed and encouraged me to spread my wings—to do drama sermons and PowerPoint sermons, to present different ways of looking at the scriptures, to look at our faith through the lens of modern science and modern science through the lens of faith, and to relate our faith to contemporary issues that can challenge and stretch us--such as sexual orientation, racial justice and global climate change.

It's the spirit that has supported other people in the church to spread their wings and try new things—preaching, creating new groups, putting on musicals, starting a Kids' Camp, Children's Chapel, and a Children's Chimes Choir. And look at all the student pastors HUCC has helped prepare for ministry—16 of them during my time here—all of them still so appreciative of the encouragement, support and guidance they received here. And it did a new thing and hired Rob Gilmore as a youth pastor. And then it hired Pastor Martha to be our Associate Pastor. It was a stretch, but we did it! And aren't we glad we did?!

And this church knows how to step up and tackle challenging things. We decided to make our church as environmentally responsible as possible and made a lot of changes to the way we did things. We undertook a year-long study of sexual minorities and became an Open and Affirming church. We took a deep breath and undertook major expansion and renovation project that grew into a million-dollar project. The church kept stepping up its support, and undertook the jobs of moving and painting and landscaping so we could swing it. And because of this church's generosity, we landed on our feet financially. This is amazing!

I could go on and on. The spirit of HUCC is 200 years strong, and in 2017 it is as strong as ever. You are ready for this journey! Now Liz is going to share what the path for this journey looks like.

### **Eizabeth Pixley:**

We have an interesting year ahead of us at Henrietta UCC, with Pastor Dave retiring this spring after 25 years of dedicated and devoted service to this congregation. We wish Dave and Carolyn all the best as they decide how they wish to invest their energies in the future. In the meantime, we will need to move forward with new leadership.

One of the good things, in my view, about the United Church of Christ as a denomination, is that our support to OCWM (Our Church's Wider Mission) comes back to us in the form of staff support and guidance during pastoral transitions. In our case, our NY Conference Minister, Rev. David Gaewski, will be guiding HUCC through this process. Because Pastor Dave has been a long-term pastor at HUCC, we will also follow the advice from the NY Conference that we first select an interim pastor before embarking on a search for our permanent pastor.

Some of you have questioned the need for an interim pastor – why can't we just move on with the search for a permanent pastor now? I would ask you to put yourselves in the shoes of a new pastor coming in to this church. We have established traditions and are used to a way of doing things that someone new might not be comfortable with – and he or she might have ideas of their own! Plus we will be missing Pastor Dave and might want to have things "Just the way they have always been!" This is not a good formula for success for a new pastor. Therefore, working with an interim pastor is strongly recommended.

An interim pastor fills several important roles in the life of the church during this time, in addition to preaching and performing the usual pastoral job functions. He or she can first help us to grieve the loss of a long-time pastor. It will be important to reconnect to the United Church of Christ as a denomination during this time of transition and the interim pastor can help us do that. An interim pastor can also help us look at our congregation's history, our successes and our struggles - then assist us with visioning for the future. A period of one to two years is typical for the interim pastor to serve a congregation.

So where is HUCC in the search process for an interim pastor? Our Church Council has selected four people to serve on the Interim Search Committee: myself, Joe Green, Adrian Matlack and Terry VanOstrand. We will work under the guidance of Rev. David Gaewski, our NY Conference Minister. The interim search process is much shorter and less involved than the search for a permanent pastor. Several profiles of possible interim pastors will be provided to us. The Church Council will approve the candidate selected by the interim search committee. Want to know more about the process? This coming Wednesday, January 25 at 7 pm, in the Music Room, Rev. Gaewski will be here to discuss the search process with the interim search committee members, the church council and anyone else who wishes to attend.

We will travel down this road together with God's guidance.

### **Pastor Martha:**

Well! That's a lot to think about, as we imagine the transition to new leadership at HUCC. My lip gets a bit trembly when I think about saying goodbye to Dave & Carolyn, and my heart flutters a bit when I try to imagine where we're headed. But there are lots of things that reassure me as we approach the days and months to come.

First of all, I have great confidence in our Conference Minister and the search process we will follow. I know we will enjoy working with Rev. Gaewski, with whom I have worked closely on numerous projects. And I have confidence that we'll learn a lot from an interim minister who brings different ways of doing things and new ideas for ministry. Lots of folks have asked me if I would want to "step up" and take on the position of Senior Pastor, but I believe it will be much better for the church for us to do a really careful job of visioning for the

future and then calling a person from beyond the congregation to help us move into that future. Besides, you already have me, and, being much younger than Dave, I'm not leaving any time soon! 😊

Which brings me to the second reassuring thing: Dave & Carolyn are leaving, but most of the church folks aren't going anywhere! You'll be here, and I'll be here, and together we'll still be HUCC, worshiping and praying and making music and offering hospitality and reaching out to all sorts of individuals and groups. We're pretty good at being the church! We're pretty good at keeping our hearts open to new things and looking for new ways to serve and have fun together. And we're good at working with others in the community, as we build bonds of compassion that reach around the globe. We have so many talented and dedicated leaders here, who share their diverse gifts and interests. It makes for a really interesting bunch of people, all stretching toward God and reaching out to each other in their own ways. Now, it's true that sometimes congregations shrink a bit in the midst of big changes –we experienced that when we renovated the building, and that's certainly a possibility in the coming year. But we've been through it before, and we know how to bend with the winds of change, as people come and go. It's part of being the living and breathing Body of Christ. So I am confident that we are up to this newest challenge.

A third thing about HUCC that I think is a real strength is our support for kids and youth. This is a place where young people can thrive! HUCC loves children and delights in watching them grow. We see God's spirit at work in their wiggles and their questions, their emotions and their deep thoughts, their creativity and their faith. Adults pay attention to children here, and children know they are safe and loved and valued in this place. Our children develop friendships, not only with each other, but also with many adults in the congregation who are willing to share their time and faith and wisdom. And they learn about service to the wider world as well: 17 of our youth served lunch at the Salem Nutrition Center last week for Martin Luther King Day. What a tremendous resource this church is, as our young people prepare to make their way in the world! And what a tremendous resource the children are to the church! In a way, we can already catch a glimpse of the future before us, as we interact with our young people and imagine what lies ahead. Part of our work in the next few years will be to look for ways that we can invite others to join us in bringing their children and in becoming a community that values young people just as much as adults. And I believe that will be joyous and fruitful work.

Of course, our greatest asset and my greatest comfort as we face the days to come is the tremendous love of God, which brought us into being as a church and has remained with us every step of the way and will never leave us. If we drink deeply of that love, if we immerse ourselves in that ever-flowing stream, and let God carry us along, surely we will reach the new horizon of blessing that is yet to come. As I think about what lies ahead for Henrietta United Church of Christ, I am reminded of the old gospel song:

Walk together children, don't you get weary,  
Walk together children, don't you get weary,  
Walk together children, don't you get weary,  
There's a great camp meetin' in the promised land!

Amen.