High School Youth Interfaith Civil Rights Tour 2019!

The 2019 Interfaith high school Youth trip, ‘Our Faiths, Our History, Our Power to Create the Beloved Community,’ begins on Wednesday, March 27 and ends on Sunday, March 31. It is the culmination of four years of planning and hoping between Beth Emet Synagogue, Second Baptist Church, and Grace.

This 5-day experience will help participants understand the history of the city of Chicago through the lens of the racial and religious communities; it will help them to ignite the power of interfaith activism to create a more just and compassionate city. Teens from our three congregations will begin the trip by exploring our histories in Evanston and the Chicago suburbs by visiting historical sites and houses of worship; and hearing from prominent community members. We will then move to the south side of Chicago where we will be based for the rest of the trip. We will continue to analyze how our past informs us and empowers us to make change.

In addition to visiting sites of historical significance from the civil rights era and organizations that are engaged in justice work, we will also attend Muslim, Jewish, and Christian worship services. On the final day of the trip, we will return north to reflect on what we’ve learned and how we can take action to make the Beloved Community a reality here in the Chicago area.

We are thrilled to be staying at the Brother David Darst Center for this trip. The Brother David Darst Center is a social justice education center located on the south side of Chicago, in the Bridgeport neighborhood. Founded in 2002 as a ministry of the De La Salle Christian Brothers, the Darst Center is unique in providing opportunities for youth and young adults to see more clearly the faces pushed to the margins of our society.

In addition to gaining greater awareness of others, participating youth and young adults are challenged to respond to the many needs of our world as discovered and explored through Darst Center programs. It is our hope that, through participation in these programs, young people will feel inspired to respond to the many needs of the world around them.

If you would like to make a donation to help families cover the cost of the trip, please specify ‘2019 Civil Rights Trip’ on your check or in your note. We’ve already raised enough through fundraisers to cut the cost in half, but any extra donations on your part would be a great help! Please pray for our interfaith youth, adult chaperones, and the ministries of three fantastic faith communities who keep finding ways to do incredible things together!

Like, oh, I don’t know: GOING TO ISRAEL TOGETHER? Please speak to me if you’re interested! Beth Emet, Grace and Second Baptist are also going international for the sake of peace and justice!

The dates are October 24-November 3, 2019. For more info on that trip, please go to www.mejditours.com/open-tour/bethemet_secondbaptist/
Pastor Daniel
Worship Notes: Lent

The theme for Lent in 2019 is ‘The Witness of the Cross.’ We will focus on various expressions of struggle, pain, and injustice. Please speak to Pastor Daniel Ruen or Director of Music Mark Bowman if you would like to provide testimony of your faith journey through ‘cross’ times in your life.

We will host midweek services in the sanctuary at 7pm every Wednesday after Wonderful Wednesday dinners. Please join us!

Thank you!!!!

Thank you to those congregation members for their financial support/appetite for soup. The youth made soup, filled orders made by members of the congregation, and served congregation members and cleaned up after the Soup-er Bowl luncheon on February 3rd. They made $780, to be used partly in purchasing Sunday School supplies and partly towards the Civil Rights tour in Chicago. See the front page for Pastor Daniel’s description of the Civil Rights tour.

Jeanine Brownell

Prayer in a Time of Polarity

If you missed this year’s Prayer Retreat, not to worry – we’ll have another one in another year. The retreat, which took place Feb. 8-9 in Fellowship Hall, gathered more than 25 people who explored Prayer in a Time of Polarity, facilitated by Annie Rosenthal, a Better Angels trainer. Better Angels (better-angels.org) brings people of different political views together to try to find common ground. In addition to exercises led by Rosenthal, she offered handouts with instructions on how to navigate conversations and social media. We were also led by Mary Mrugalski, Grace member, Spiritual Director, and Ignatian Associate. She shared exercises in prayer practices inspired by the Ignatian tradition. Pastor Daniel provided the welcome and some facilitation.

Many people shared how the intentional silence and prayer practices were a welcome revelation; they are hungry for more. With that in mind, we plan to make this retreat an annual event each February at Grace.

Also, some participants expressed an interest in making the meditative prayer (Lectio Divina) a regular practice at Grace. Lectio Divina is Latin for ‘Sacred Reading.’ It was developed by early Christians and has been practiced by people of many Christian traditions ever since. It involves reading a few verses of Scripture aloud three or four times, then sitting quietly for a short time between each reading to deepen our relationship with God, to become more aware of how the Holy Spirit might be moving in our lives. If you are interested in joining a monthly Lectio Divina group or exploring the prayer practice, please see Mary Mrugalski after church or email Mary at mary@marym rugalski.com to communicate what times will work best for you.

Claudia Perry

Lots of prep work in making good soup!
**Soup Kitchen At St. Paul’s**

**Please mark on your calendars May 5, 2019, when the next Soup Kitchen at St. Paul’s will be hosted by Grace.**

The last one we did on February 3 was a wonderful event with a great group of volunteers prepping, serving and cleaning up. The generous stew cooks made more than enough; they even made a special vegetarian pot that was greatly appreciated! We served about 75 people and were able to provide some take home boxes.

I have been volunteering at Hilda’s Place this season and know how much our participants appreciate a hot, tasty meal served with kindness and acceptance.

Thank you,
Kathie Cunningham

**The Vision Keepers Dinner Was a Success**

We had a full house in spite of the snow, honoring thirty-four people from twenty-four Evanston faith communities for their commitment to service. A special thanks to the Vision Keeper Planning Committee for a job well done!

**Liberal Democrat Finds Wisdom in Words of Conservative Republican**

Just before the holidays in 2018, Ben Sasse, a conservative Republican Senator from Nebraska, released his book, *Them, Why We Hate Each Other - And How to Heal*. I saw his interview about the book with Judy Woodruff on the *Newshour* on PBS. I found myself taking notes. After the broadcast, I went to our computer to review the interview point by point on the station’s posting of the day’s program. All of this was fueled by my long-standing belief that “None of us is as smart as all of us.”

Last Fall, my husband, Bob, and I joined the “Listening and Speaking” sessions of the Skills Workshop presented at Grace by Better Angels. Better Angels’ purpose is bridging the chasm in our polarized nation and families. Members of Grace and many participants from surrounding communities packed the workshop.

Then weeks later, Senator Sasse’s topic, especially the “How to Heal” part, dovetailed right in. He offers reasons on how we got here and suggestions on the work ahead.

If you would like to learn more about the Senator’s ideas, I highly recommend the interview as an overview. PBS now only makes it available to members with Passport. Otherwise, one can choose an interview with Senator Sasse from another station on Youtube videos. Barnes and Noble has copies of the book.

Contributed by Gail Lamont
Family Promise Success, Despite the Polar Vortex!

Family Promise was warmly hosted by a collection of volunteers from across three churches and two synagogues. Tracy McKeithen, director of Family Promise (FP) North Shore and Clare (I) had wanted to look for a two-week window for hosting because we wanted to offer families a chance to relax on at least one Sunday (normally their pack-up and transition day). Barbara Mott from St Nick’s and Kathy Green from St James Armenian also agreed to the two-week chunk and as soon as the sign up was live, our wonderful volunteers rushed in to help. There was magic in this time because it was the first time that I announced a need for overnight hosts that we got not one, not two but THREE new overnight hosts! And all agreed it was at least doable a few times a year (if not a great night of sleep). Thank you Grace, thank you.

It was a fun fortnight, featuring, of course, the Polar Vortex! Families did say they were a little cold in spite of our overwhelming heat, because that strong west wind found all of the cracks in the molding around the windows. However, their discomfort was mild compared to the gratitude and comfort of being able to stay at Grace for all of the two days that schools were shut down. We had a series of folks from Grace come by to “staff” the building and play with the kids. A handful of Grace teens spent parts of their day off playing with kids and having a blast, it seemed. A highlight was that Taina Rodríguez Encarnación offered facials to the moms! Such pampering was very well received. Another highlight was that the families actually stayed for church, which is rare.

The earth is reacting to our overheating activities, the polar cap is literally losing its balance and dipping below. But thanks be to God, the compassion of people around this church community is ready to stabilize the list with a little extra...

Living Lutheran Article Link

Here is a link to an article from the online version of Living Lutheran, February 2019, as recommended reading from Raquel Rodriguez, entitled “Hope in the Courtroom.”
https://www.livinglutheran.org/2019/02/hope-in-the-courtroom/

From Pastor Daniel:

It was a great honor to preach at Gordon’s memorial service, working alongside other Grace leaders like Council President Taina R. Encarnación, Director of Music Mark Bowman, Pastor Erik Christensen, and musicians and helpers David Rodriguez-Nelson and Kristina Rodriguez-Jeluso. There were so many Grace members and Diakonia students who came in support, as well.

The service was an intercultural feast, one that will never be experienced again. I pray that Gordon’s memory was well served. I believe that all who attended felt the powerful spirit of The Rev. Dr. Gordon Straw’s life and ministry. Gordon always made it a point to tell me how relieved and happy he and Evelyn were to have found Grace as a home congregation. You all welcomed him and his family with such open arms. It would have made him immensely thankful to witness the way Grace church walked with Evelyn and Amanda through the end of his life, and the memorial service. (If you would like to see the full service on YouTube, please go to https://youtu.be/x_tvqMFJKQE)

As many of you who have lost loved ones know—a different and oftentimes more intense period of grief may hit harder in year two, or after that. Pastor Gordon would remind us that we all walk the long path of support and love together, so please help me to keep checking in with Evelyn and Amanda, and all those who have lost loved ones at Grace, after the memorial services are over, and time has passed.

I thank Evelyn and Amanda for their honest reception of our support, prayers, and love. They are teaching us how to move through pain, shock, and loss by leaning on their community, and by leaning on the Gospel. Please consider signing up for Gordon’s memorial blood drive at Grace.

Blood Drive in Memory of Rev. Gordon Straw

The family of Gordon Straw is happy to announce that Grace will be hosting a blood drive in memory of Gordon on March 23, from 10am-4pm in Fellowship Hall.

During Gordon’s chemotherapy treatments, he, Evelyn, and Amanda, were always grateful for the many units of blood and platelets which helped give him strength.

Evelyn and Amanda want to give back, and know that this blood drive will provide others hope in their medical struggle.

Call to sign up to donate: 877.258.4825 and tell them you want to sign up for March 23 at Grace Lutheran.

Or register online now at https://donateblood.lifesource.org/ Click on New Donor, then scroll down and search by date or code 940B.
**Update on the Capital Appeal to “Raise Up Grace”**

Last May, 2018 the congregation voted to embark on a multi-project plan to “Raise Up Grace” to make the building safe and welcoming to all who come through its doors. Before a concrete plan was even in place, over $120,000 was donated to get started on the more necessary projects. To wit:

1. The leaky roof over the sanctuary was replaced
2. Heat was restored to the education wing
3. Improved lighting was added to the chancel area of the sanctuary

Thank you to the early givers who saw a need and met it.

The best is yet to come. The Capital Appeal will officially gear up in May once specific costs for each of the projects are known and it will be presented to you by small teams of your fellow members. You will be asked to pledge participation in the capital appeal at some time during the summer months. Your pledge will extend over 3 years to make it a reasonable part of your family budget. We will celebrate the official kick-off of the appeal with a party in September.

However, there is one component of “Raise Up Grace” that cannot wait. We must replace our lift (elevator) NOW. This cannot wait because people’s safety is at stake. Pastor Daniel has already rescued one person by climbing over the top to get it running again (this is not in his job description :-) Please consider an early contribution to the appeal to replace this very necessary lift. Indicate APPEAL on your check or electronic contribution.

Additionally, if you make early contributions, we can get started on some of the other projects, such as making the chancel area accessible to all. This continues our “pay as you go” philosophy which enabled us to roof the sanctuary and heat the education wing.

Thank you,

Russ Kohnken and Ginny Ayers

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**Hi all Grace members!**

My name is Alice. In June of 2018, I went to Houston with other Grace youth for the youth conference that was held. I had an amazing time while I was there! This summer, I will be going to Ecuador with a non-profit, Global Glimpse.

While I am there, I will be using the same affirming, caring, and courageous values I put to use in Houston by teaching English and doing community service work. While in Houston, I was able to learn about many different perspectives from all around the US. In Ecuador, I hope to expand those perspectives to those from outside of the US. While there, I hope to make new friends from not only Chicago, maybe even from Ecuador! These bonds might help me learn not only how to communicate with others better, but how to take the lead in groups.

If you are interested in helping me get to Ecuador, please go to the website www.globalglimpse.org, click the blue donate button in the top right corner and use the student code 11620 to donate to me specifically.

I would like to thank everyone who donates to me and also to those who just took the time to read this.

Alice Wilson

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**Budget note for Harbinger, 2.12.2019**

Last Dec 9th, Grace unanimously voted for a budget of a little more than $341,000. That represents an increase of about 7% more than we spent in 2018, excluding spending towards the Capital Appeal, and means that Grace members need to increase our giving by 7% or more. It also represents spending of about $6,500 per week for 2019.

When we vote for a budget, we are looking at what Grace does and saying “yes, this is what we value. This is what we want to support”. To do a quick recap, we voted to spend at least $33,000 on benevolence, including to the Synod; $19,000 on our activities within Grace, including education, worship, and social ministry; $84,000 on operations including property, utilities, and the mortgage; and $204,000 on our staff: Pastor Daniel, music director Mark Bowman, office manager Marie O’Brien, education director Liz Laughlin, and sextons Jackson and Paola Lopez.

In January, we spent $32,700, about $4,000 more than budgeted. This was due to some extraordinary expenses, including a new computer for Pastor Daniel, and some semiannual payments for insurance and maintenance contracts. We received $23,800, about $4,600 less than budgeted. Obviously, this is unsustainable.

The council and I met after worship on Sunday, Feb. 10, to discuss both what was happening, and what we should do. We came into that meeting with some trepidation, but also a confidence that Grace has always had a generous spirit, and has always risen to meet needs. Pastor Daniel often refers to our prior Capital Appeal (raising $350,000 in 3 years) and our Courage Fund (raising $75,000 in 5 years to give away) while in the midst of the “great recession” as evidence that Grace’s generosity and capability is both real and an amazing gift from God. What we may lack is recognition that following our generous spirit needs to be an everyday behavior, as opposed to primarily an acute response to needs and emergencies. We need to foster a culture of stewardship that grows from our generous spirit.

Towards this end, we are forming a Stewardship team to guide and nurture our growth in this spirit and culture. As you begin to see actions and hear from this team, look within to see your own spirit, and prayerfully seek to nurture its growth. While I don’t know how this will proceed, I consider it a blessing that we engage in this process.

Changing our culture is both good for us as a congregation and as individual members of the body of Christ, but we also need a short term fix for our budget deficit. The council voted to enable me to delay some larger bill payments, and some members have already stepped up directly. We received about $6,000 on the 10th in special giving to meet this current need, and another $5,000 was re-designated from the capital appeal to the general budget by another member. As I’ve alluded, Grace is amazing in our response to acute need!

As we go forward, please be prepared to share in our generous cultural and spiritual growth, and consider whether you also can contribute to lessening our acute, immediate need while meeting our ongoing needs.

Yours in Christ,

Russ Kohnken
A Celebration and Thanksgiving for the Life of Gordon Straw

The Rev. Gordon Jon Straw, loving husband to Evelyn and father to Amanda, died unexpectedly on January 5, 2019 at Lutheran General Hospital. He completed his journey in this world surrounded by a circle of love that included his wife Evelyn, daughter Amanda and family and friends gathered around his bedside. Gordon now rests in the arms of Jesus the Christ in his new heavenly home. He was diagnosed with an aggressive form of lymphoma in November 2018 and died unexpectedly of complications related to his treatment.

Gordon was born in Saint Paul, Minnesota on May 28, 1959 to Tom and Doris Straw. He has two brothers, Roger and Peter, and was an active member of the Brothertown Indian Nation.

When asked what the happiest moments in his life were, Gordon Straw would always respond with a smile, “My marriage to Evelyn Soto on August 1, 1992 and Amanda’s birth on March 6, 1995.” He rejoiced and was so proud of Evelyn and Amanda. He also leaves behind Huck Aegon Straw, the family rescue dog, whom he loved dearly.

Gordon was a man of many interests and passions. He loved to travel and explore new cultures and foods. Both cooking and eating were passions he enjoyed sharing with others; he was a self-proclaimed foodie and looked up to the likes of Anthony Bourdain. Some of his hobbies included: watching poker tournaments, cheering for the Chicago Blackhawks hockey team, cross-stitching, listening to/watching stand-up comedy and reading. Gordon even studied the art of whiskey, as many of his close friends and family would know well. He was a progressive (classic) rock enthusiast who enjoyed singing and playing guitar and whose favorite artists included Led Zeppelin, Queen and Johnny Cash. He passed on his musical knowledge and ability to his daughter, Amanda, who considers music her greatest passion in life and her father as her inspiration. Gordon had a wicked sense of humor, a brilliant mind, and always treated others with respect and kindness.

He was a proud member of the Brothertown Indian Nation and was a man deeply rooted in his faith in a loving and grace-filled God. His faith and strong sense of justice led to his commitment to human rights and justice for all people. As a Lutheran pastor with strong confessional roots, Gordon would often remind us of the importance of the ministry of all the Baptized. He was a teacher and a scholar and wrote and lectured on Native American Christian theology and related contemporary issues, and on topics in systematic theology and American Lutheran church history. Gordon worked with other Native American ELCA leaders to develop both the Native American Emphasis and the Vine Deloria Jr. Symposium at LSTC, at which he gave his inaugural lecture in November 2017.

When LSTC’s Board of Directors in April 2017 elected Straw to the position, Esther Menn, dean of academic affairs called him “the right person at the right time for LSTC.” Reflecting on his time at the seminary, Menn said, “Gordon made a great impact at LSTC, in the classroom and beyond. He was beloved for taking time for meaningful conversations and for enjoying communal lunch in the refectory. His kind and grounded presence inspired many of us to live into our best selves. We will miss him deeply, as we strive to carry on his legacy.”

Shortly after he joined the faculty, Straw recalled how his grandmother’s death when he was a seminary student steered him from his original “call” to teach toward ordination and parish ministry instead. He said his new seminary position and a return to that call to teach was “the fulfillment of a very long dream.”

He was especially passionate about helping prepare seminarians for public ministry in Christ’s church, saying, "I have been enriched by my own experiences as a student and teacher at LSTC and by the people of the LSTC community for more than 20 years.” He had taught at LSTC prior to joining the faculty, as well as at the Catholic Theological Union and in the Diakonia Program of the Metropolitan Chicago Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA).

Prior to joining LSTC, he served at the ELCA churchwide office beginning in 1989 as program director for American Indian and Alaska Native Ministries and later became the director for lay schools for ministry, and candidacy leadership manager for Region 8 of the ELCA.

Ordained July 13, 1986 and after serving his first call in Kansas City, Missouri, he discovered in himself a passion and preference for interim pastoral ministry. He held 11 half- and full-time interim ministry calls over 15 years in the Metropolitan Chicago Synod. He served in outdoor and campus ministry, and on several synodical and ecumenical committees and councils.

Gordon Straw earned the Master of Theology degree from LSTC in 1997 and had completed all coursework for a PhD in systematic theology. He earned his Master of Divinity degree from Luther (then Lutheran Northwestern) Seminary, St. Paul, Minn., and a bachelor’s degree in philosophy from the University of Minnesota-Morris.

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

(Romans 6:5)
On May 20, 2018, he received the honorary degree of Doctor of Divinity from Wartburg Theological Seminary, Dubuque, Iowa. He was praised for his advocacy for theological education among ethnic specific communities by Craig L. Nessan, academic dean at Wartburg. “[Gordon’s] support for lay schools for ministry and the education of the universal priesthood of all believers has been exemplary,” Nessan said.

Gordon truly loved people and often you heard him say to family, friends and students - “how we live our lives every day honors God and those around us, as well as ourselves.”

A service of celebration was held on Saturday, February 9th, at Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, 1100 E. 55th St., Chicago, Ill.

If you would like to see the full service on YouTube, please go to https://youtu.be/x_tvqMFJKQE

FAQS for the Interfaith Hospitality Center (IFHC)

From time to time people have questions about Grace’s involvement in the Interfaith Hospitality Center. Here is everything—well almost everything—you should know about Grace and the Hospitality Center.

What is the Hospitality Center and where is it located?
The Center is a project of the Interfaith Action Evanston organization. It serves individuals who are homeless in Evanston. It offers breakfast, employment training, computer services, and a warm place to spend from 7 A.M. to 11 A.M. Monday through Friday.

It is located at St. Mark’s Episcopal Church on Ridge in Evanston.

How many individuals are served in a year?
From July 2017 through July 2018, 8,397 guests were accommodated at the Center.

Besides a breakfast what else is offered?
423 guests were offered employment training and 794 guests used computer services.

How long has Grace been involved in helping the Center?
Grace people have been offering groceries to the Center for more than 20 years. Grace is one of the few Evanston churches that consistently provides a whole week’s worth of food to the Center.

Besides the groceries that are blessed on Sunday what else does Grace provide?
Generally, Grace provides four or five bags of groceries and cash to buy about a week’s worth of food. Fresh food such as milk, orange juice, yogurt, frozen waffles, and another three or four bags of dry groceries are purchased with the cash donated and Grace financial support. Groceries cost between $125.00 and $150.00 per delivery.

What can I do to support the Center?
Bring groceries on the third Sunday of the month. See the list on the Web page or check the metal cabinet in the West hall. Write a check or donate cash to support the effort. Volunteer to help shop and deliver groceries to the Center.

For more information, contact:
Nancy VanBrundt nmvb23@gmail.com or Connie Wood conniewood44@gmail.com

Thanks for Bandanas
Deep appreciation for donations of over 150 bandanas contributed by Grace congregants at Saturday’s memorial for Gordon.

See attached photos—of the ‘bandanas for Gordon’ flyer, and a photo of the collected bandanas below the urn, being blessed and prayed over at the memorial.
On January 16th, nearly 40 Houses of Worship were represented at Faith in Place’s “Solar for Congregations” event co-hosted by GoGreen Wilmette and Beth Hillel Bnai Emunah. Anne Laurence and Jill Graham attended for Grace Lutheran.

Faith in Place Executive Director, Rev. Brian Sauder highlighted several stages of a congregation’s journey toward responsible stewardship of energy resources. Step one is the formation of a Green Team to address climate change within the faith community. Faith in Place assigns a staff member to work with each congregation’s Green Team; Ramont Bell has been working with Grace’s Green Team for the past year.

Rev. Sauder emphasized that dealing with climate change occurs within a moral, environmental justice framework. Energy conservation offers a moral opportunity to do right by our neighbors both near and far. Since coal-fired and natural gas-burning power plants are the largest emitters of carbon dioxide (a greenhouse gas that causes climate change), they directly contribute to climate change’s negative impacts, like more extreme weather patterns, which are disproportionately felt by people and countries that did the least to cause the problem and can least afford to respond to the resulting natural and economic disasters.

Energy conservation, or reducing our demand for traditional energy sources, is the easiest and most effective way to promote environmental justice. Faith in Place offers an energy audit to houses of worship. Their consultants give data on the performance of the building and suggest retrofits tailored to the congregation’s specific needs. Many of those changes are as simple as changing incandescent or CFL lightbulbs to LED lightbulbs, adding pipe insulation to reduce heat loss, and installing programmable thermostats.

A Faith in Place energy audit team met with Grace’s Green Team on February 7th and conducted a detailed inspection of our building, top to bottom. We are awaiting the detailed written report, which we understand will include both cost estimates for the suggested retrofits, and information on potential sources of subsidies to pay for them.

Beyond making energy efficiency improvements, converting to renewable sources of energy can serve as a visible sign to the wider community that a congregation is living up its values and is committed to reducing its carbon footprint and caring for the earth. Solar panels on the roof, though costly to install, can cut future electricity bills by half (or more in the summer months), and the initial cost can be subsidized by various incentive programs.

Some congregations pay for their solar panels through what is known as a “Power Purchase Agreement.” In this arrangement, houses of worship partner with a solar installation company – a for-profit, private firm that actually owns the panels and can take advantage of federal tax incentives that are available to individuals and businesses, but not non-profit faith communities.

Under this model, the house of worship leases the panels from the installation company and purchases electricity from them. The installation company benefits from the federal tax incentives and also from selling State of Illinois Solar Renewable Energy Credits (SRECs) to the local utility. The faith community benefits from a more affordable way to purchase solar panels; after 6 to 7 years, the house of worship can buy out the panels from the company for a smaller payment and then own them outright.

An alternative method for “going solar” is for the congregation to finance the initial installation itself, so that it can own the panels outright from the start. In that way, the faith community benefits from selling State of Illinois Solar Renewable Energy Credits (SRECs) to the local utility, which reimburse qualified nonprofit organizations between 70-90% of the initial capital cost over a five-year period. (Illinois SRECs are more generous for nonprofits than for profit-making firms because the latter but not the former also qualify for federal tax credits.)

Whether a house of worship undertakes energy efficiency upgrades, installs solar on-site, or joins a community solar project, another component of ensuring justice emphasized by Faith in Place is ensuring that jobs in the green energy economy be accessible to communities most harmed by environmental injustice. Within those communities, returning citizens (people with criminal records) and alumni of the foster care system are at elevated risk for incarceration due to a lack of economic opportunity.

Faith in Place thus encourages congregations to select energy efficiency and solar contractors that have a policy of hiring graduates from training programs designed for persons who can most benefit from the good-paying jobs in these growing sectors.

Jill Graham
**New Members of Grace**

**Nura Aly**

Thank you for your welcoming presence to my mom and me. My name is Nura Aly. You may recognize me as the violinist who uses a wheelchair. I grew up as a member of St. Nicholas Church and still consider myself Catholic in many ways. I have been familiar with Grace from previous interfaith interactions and meeting Pastor Dan at the St. Nicholas Easter Vigils.

A few months ago we began visiting Grace as a result of our discontent with the Catholic Church handling of priest sexual abuse of children. It has been a confusing journey for me. I still love my St. Nicholas family. And, after officially joining Grace, I feel at home with you as well. So I consider myself a “dual citizen” of St. Nicholas and Grace.

I have always had a very strong faith and have always relied on God. My mom and I have functioned as a team, muddling through life together. My faith journey has been anything but regular. My dad comes from Egypt and is Muslim and my mom grew up Catholic. They had agreed to teach me both faiths, but at a young age things changed. My dad told us we were not allowed to attend St. Nick's anymore. That was traumatic for me.

I needed the calm, safety, and joy that Sunday Mass provided. I needed my extended family of faith. My mom felt the same way, so we continued to attend Mass without my dad’s permission. Because I wasn’t really allowed to practice my faith, I never took it for granted.

My St. Nicholas family kept me afloat through good and bad times. It was there that I first started playing liturgical music. That’s how I pray and serve. It was St. Nick’s members who held me as I grieved the death of my boyfriend six years ago. It was St. Nick’s who helped me heal and recover my sense of joy. I feared I could never find another community as nurturing as St. Nick’s. My fear was unfounded. You have embraced me and welcomed me into your faith family. My mom felt the same way, so we continued.

My St. Nicholas family kept me afloat through good and bad times. It was there that I first started playing liturgical music. That’s how I pray and serve. It was St. Nick’s members who held me as I grieved the death of my boyfriend six years ago. It was St. Nick’s who helped me heal and recover my sense of joy. I feared I could never find another community as nurturing as St. Nick’s. My fear was unfounded.

You have embraced me and welcomed me into your faith family. Mark invited me to play my violin with the choir. Pastor Dan bought a ramp to help me get up to the altar space. Peg, Nell, Dan, and Clare all showed up at my performances with my band outside the church. And you welcomed me with open arms at services, coffee hours, and during the retreat.

At Grace, I have felt a sense of freedom and relief that I didn’t realize I needed. My hope is that I can continue to nurture the relationships I have with people at St. Nicks while continuing to deepen my faith at Grace. I feel a strong call to stay at Grace and give of myself while never forgetting where I came from. Thank you for your support and love through my faith journey. I am grateful to have so many wonderfully faithful filled people in my life.

**Mary Mrugalski**

I too am grateful to have landed at Grace. As I, Nura’s mother, write this thank you note, I can hear us singing the hymn, “Take oh take me as I am, summon up what I shall be. Set your seal upon my heart and live in me.”

I feel grateful that you and Pastor Daniel have taken me as I am. Like Nura, I also feel a sense of spiritual freedom at Grace. You opened your hearts to one of my favorite meditative ways of praying during our prayer retreat. You invited me to wash out the baptismal font and set up the altar with the experts who’ve been doing it for a very long time. You welcomed me to the women’s breakfast, no questions asked. You accepted me, just as I am, broken and healing, full of joy and desire to serve, just like you.

I consider myself a kind of Catholic “conscientious objector,” a “refugee,” and now a “dual citizen” of Grace and St. Nick’s. I too can’t give up on my friends at St. Nick’s just because I’m mad at the larger church. And I’m grateful to be connected to you as well.

Now that you have opened your hearts to me, I open mine to you with a short spiritual autobiography. I’m a mother of two grown children (Nura and Ian) and I’m a retired news reporter. I’ve always been on a search for God, not realizing that God has been with me all along. I’ve survived abuse as a child and then domestic abuse and I know that God has always been with me because no matter what’s been going on, God has graced me with a sense of joy, hope and optimism.

I’ve been receiving Spiritual Direction for fifteen years and praying daily in a contemplative way, learning to listen to God. I also started going on eight day silent directed retreats every year about nine years ago. That process refreshes and renews me.

About ten years ago I went through the two year formation program to become a Spiritual Director, which means I companion individuals on their spiritual journey, helping them to discern where God is in their lives. I also felt that I needed to be grounded in God’s word and felt the best way to do that was to take a four year Scripture Study Program. We went through every book of the Bible and learned how God communicates with humans through the Holy Spirit, inspiring people to write about man (and woman)’s search for God and God’s revealing God’s self throughout the ages.

I’m also an Ignatian Associate, a member of an intentional Ecumenical Christian community of lay people who have promised to live simply, be available to serve God, and be faithful to the Gospel and one another. We don’t live together, but we meet frequently to support each other. We consider ourselves contemplatives in action, setting aside time daily for Contemplative Prayer so that we can then be effective in our social justice action.

I admire the many ways you at Grace focus on social justice, and I want to jump into everything, but I know that would only lead to compassion fatigue and I’d be no good for anyone. So I trust that God works through you in more ways than I can imagine. I see God in your eyes when you shake my hand or hug me during the sign of peace; I hear God in your words as you open yourself to me with the stories of your lives; I taste God’s goodness in our sharing of communion; and I hear God’s voice in your voices in the choir, in Mark’s piano playing and in the generous, joyful sharing of all the instrumentalists.

**Women’s Breakfast**

Oh, I almost forgot, while Peg is on vacation I will be hosting the women’s breakfast at 9:30, every other Thursday morning. My condo is a bit smaller and I’m not sure I can fill her big beautiful generous shoes, but I’ll do my best. Thank goodness Peg will be back in April or early May. Next breakfast will be March 14 at my place. Please email me so I know how much coffee to make. I’ll send you my address: mary@maryMrugalski.com
On Sunday, February 24, the Cuban population went to the polls to approve a new constitution, drafted by the National Assembly (the legislative house of representatives, called diputados and elected by the provinces).

I have participated the last two years, within the context of the Cuban Council of Churches, the Evangelical Theological Seminary and local congregations, in an intense discussion on the implications of this new Constitution for the churches, stressing the importance and relevancy of a more inclusive society.

For the last few months this constitutional document has been discussed all over Cuba, including the different Protestant denominations, the Catholic Church and other religious movements like Santería, a religious syncretism of Yoruba religion, Roman Catholicism and Spiritualism, brought by the slaves from western Africa.

The attempt is not only updating a document that already had many revisions, but more importantly to provide a space for an open discussion on issues like human sexuality, religious freedom and the challenges of economic development in a more globalized world.

And now that the process of trying to normalize United States and Cuban diplomatic, political and economic relationships is under way, it is appropriate to reflect on some of the issues that lie ahead, examining the deep spirituality so pervasive in Cuban culture and life. Touching the Cuban life necessitates traveling deep into the spiritual relationship of Cuban faith and culture and the ongoing struggle to define spiritual and cultural identity. This was within a twofold mixture of Spanish/indigenous cultures (mestizaje) and the creole/African cultures (mulatizaje). Out of this mixture came a blend of humanity we call “Cuban”.

Within this process of formation of what some anthropologists like Fernando Ortiz called ‘cubania’, cubanness, lies an experience that looks to meet God in daily realities and searches for meaning in the creation of society and culture. Then, in spite of the people’s different political ideologies and faith comprehensions (or lack thereof), what helped maintain a unique communion and an open communication within this communion was Cuba, the motherland.

Cuban nationality and culture were forged out of the deep roots of the indigenous, the African, and the Spanish traditions. Santería (as religion and culture) is the premiere example of this, offering dances, music, and rhythm with drums to provide an occasion for religious freedom and resistance in the midst of oppression and suffering. This heritage contributes to contemporary Cuban painting, poetry and music. Hundreds of priests and thousands of believers have inherited this mixture of faith and beliefs: natural medicines, intercession to African deities (disguised in Catholic images and names), mixed African and Spanish identities, and ancestral language and customs. The African spiritual inheritance is strong and rich.

Faith is often overpowering by ideological systems in orienting values and principles. In other words, the secular world often overwhelms the sacred world. It’s a human condition. We tend to confuse gospel and culture. True, ideology is needed in any society. However, elements of faith discernment and spiritual vision can help avoid many painfully misleading conceptions and behaviors, moving societies toward equity and unity.

Many religious leaders saw an incompatibility between faith and the Communist Party, though many other believers took a more positive attitude. Cuban churches did not know how to respond and were unprepared for the ideological confrontation happening. Catholics were negative toward the Revolution because of the atheistic stance it took and the fact that the Communist Party usurped much of the Catholic influence. Protestants were caught up in the “American way of life” and a “competition” with the Catholic Church for souls. There were misconceptions about what the Revolution was doing with the youth, indoctrinating them and invading the family or not? Churches were weighted under the burden of discerning the truths within all of this, and perhaps even with the self-preservation, an oxymoron in itself? We all too easily, and readily, forget under whose protection the Church rests! The churches did respond eventually, both directly and indirectly.

Religious diversity is a fundamental aspect of Cuban life and culture, meaning a visible and genuine syncretism. There is a spirituality of resistance, based on a sense of hope for the future. Popular religion is the people’s answer to this daily experience of the divine in their midst. Cuba is grass-roots ecumenism. The religious complexities of Cuban society puzzle many people, for the country’s reality escapes a clear-cut theoretical explanation and may be quite confusing. But the topic of the religious experience and spirituality of the Cuban people surface frequently. In the Cuban reality, the faithful of different religious traditions tend to believe that society is a place in which their faith should be public and visible. Today, more than two-thirds of the Cuban population embraces some kind of religious syncretism. Forms of spiritualism are found blended with Catholicism and Santería. And forms of charismatic and Pentecostal experiences are found in the majority of Protestant churches.

What are some of the crucial issues and challenges facing Cuba?

- Strengthening a civil society, allowing more participation of organized private sectors, including social movements
- The economy continues to be a priority, in a socialist country challenged by a global capitalist economy
- The dialogue between the Revolution and religious groups is an ongoing, pressing issue
- Interreligious dialogue and syncretism continues to be an ecumenical challenge
- Mission of the churches in a socialist country continues to be a priority, under new circumstances

Cuba is no longer an isolated country in the Caribbean; it is well integrated both at the regional and the international levels. Despite a continuing confrontation with the U.S. government, Cuba maintains diplomatic relationships with 190 countries in the world today.

Let’s hope that the U.S. government will open an intentional and serious dialogue to restore diplomatic and normal trading exchanges with Cuba, in a globalized world. And that this new Constitution provides a space for a more participatory process in a civil and civilized society. The churches should be a spiritual and moral force in Cuban society, more than ever!

Carmelo Álvarez – Chicago, IL February 20, 2019
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Rev. Dr. Gordon J. Straw Memorial Blood Drive and Marrow Registry

SATURDAY, MARCH 23
10 A.M. – 4 P.M.
GRACE LUTHERAN CHURCH
1430 SOUTH BLVD., Evanston

Gordon Jon Straw, age 59, passed away on January 5, 2019 due to complications from his battle with cancer. He was diagnosed in early November with a very aggressive form of Triple-Hi’s Diffuse Large B-Cell Lymphoma. During his chemotherapy treatments, he received many units of blood and platelets. We were always grateful and lifted up these unknown persons in prayer for their gifts which helped give Gordon strength to endure his chemotherapy treatments. We want to give back and we know that this blood drive will also provide others hope in their medical struggle. Maybe we’ll even save a life or two!

Gordon was a seminary professor, Lutheran pastor, husband, father, son, brother, uncle, friend, mentor and so much more. We honor his memory and beautiful life through the many others who will be receiving these gifts of life.

For more information or to schedule a donation, call 877.258.4825 or visit vitalant.org.
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