

UCC Congregations: Voices from the Front Line

Reflections on Disaster from Barre Congregational Church

We feel grateful that our church building was not impacted by the flooding that has devastated so much of Barre and Montpelier. But we are deeply aware that catastrophic change has occurred in our community, to some of our members, to most of our businesses and to the very heart of the City.

We grieve with our neighbors at Bethany UCC, Montpelier, as we welcome them to worship with us this week. Some of members have been there and at First Presbyterian in Barre helping with physical cleanup of their flooded facilities.

Even before the floods, we were cooperating through Barre Interfaith Group with other churches and social change agencies. Those relationships have proven invaluable as we assess needs day by day. But this disaster is much bigger than Barre, or even central Vermont. Teams from all over the United States are here mucking out, delivering supplies and meeting immediate needs. They are essential, but they are temporary.

There is a group of people whose needs we cannot forget in the midst of this disaster; those who were poor and unhoused before the rain started. They still need food counseling, and housing. Once temporary housing and assistance leave town, we will still have people with no place to go, and even fewer options as the result of loss of housing stock.

Our business owners are making some very difficult decisions in these weeks. The face of Barre's downtown and older neighborhoods will be changed forever by this event, with some businesses closing permanently.

What do we need? Prayer and money. Short-term, donations can be made through the Conference fund. Gifts of clothes, perishable food and toys will only make more work for relief organizations, and aren't really helpful. Barre Congregational will be setting up a clinic to help people complete FEMA and other forms to receive relief, as we know that the application process can be overwhelming to those who are already stressed and tired.

Longer term, once the recovery phase is completed, there will still be people who will migrate from Barre/Montpelier to somewhere else in search of resources. Smaller communities will be confronted by people "not from here" who need housing, food and resources. They won't just go away. Churches will probably have to help their communities think through their response to these newly needy people and get creative about incorporating them into community life.

We are holding on to the promise of Scripture that someday everyone will "sit beneath their own vine and fig tree", and that out of the muck and disaster can come some "new things". But until then, we need your prayers for strength and patience.

Rev. Leigh McCaffrey

For the second time in my tenure at the **Waterbury Congregational Church** my friends and neighbors and parishioners have experienced the awful realities of the power of large quantities of flowing water. And for the second time the church opened its doors in the late evening hours to people seeking shelter. On Monday night, the first night of the flood, we housed 15 people and a dog. Three of the first to arrive were

already homeless before the flood and living near the river. All of their belongings except what they could carry were gone. They stayed for 5 days -- they have been on my mind more than anything else.

Despite being unable to shower, and arriving tired and dirty and hungry, they were cheerful and grateful. I worked for days trying to find them shelter. I called my State Representative, I called agencies and presidents of agencies -- all to no avail. Their past was too checkered. In the end, I found a new 6 person tent for them and took them back to the river. I've checked in daily. The river terrifies them. The daily global-warming deluges strike fear into their hearts and all of ours.

Indeed, as the recovery efforts in Waterbury roll on, and as these daily deluges persist, I am reminded again of the great lines by Chief Sealth (Seattle) that "whatever happens to the beasts, soon happens to all of us." Hearts hurt and tremble everywhere. We are all connected.

During my time in Waterbury, I have managed and been the point person for a little fund we call the Waterbury Good Neighbor Fund. And over those years, that fund has grown to be an important resource in town and recognized as such and supported to the tune of about \$15,000 a year. In the last week, we've had \$20,000 flow into those coffers and since closing the chapter on the shelter part of the flood, I've been occupied with meeting with families and homeowners who've asked for help in paying for everything from a new washer and drying, to a mortgage payment to an electrician. The disaster management team calls on us to find housing for those who cannot stay in their homes.

I am aware that there is a move to switch from using the term homeless to the term unhoused. But more than ever, this time, I've come to appreciate the power of home. I've always been fortunate to have a place to call home and not just to have a roof over my head. And like so many things which are part of our lives, I've also taken home a little for granted. I remarked to a few people in the years after TS Irene that if another Irene happened I would not be able to take it anymore. I was wrong. Hearts hurt everywhere and what better place to be than a place where hurting hearts are met with acknowledgement and not scorn? Where homelessness is treated as being without a home and not just without a shelter? What better place to meet hurting hearts than in a state where government takes seriously, even if it has often failed, our deepest societal problems? We help each other. And help is the greatest gift. For we are called to help our neighbor, no matter who they may be, no matter where they may call home, and no matter how much home looks unlike home to us.

Carry on helpers! Together we can make it home.
Rev. Peter Plagge

MORRISVILLE: I understand that over two month's worth of rain fell in about 2 days (Sun-Tues morning), of course devastating much of Vermont with catastrophic flooding. Our biggest concerns for long term restoration are our neighbors in Johnson, Cambridge, Hardwick, Montpelier, Barre and the Northeast Kingdom.

Morrisville was largely spared in terms of damage to buildings. However, public areas were hit hard including the town's park and community garden, some roadways, and the municipal water system.

Tuesday evening (July 11), Morrisville Water and Light Department was told by the State to issue a do not drink order for all residents on their system. Do not drink is a more severe order than a boil notice; it means the water is unsafe for consumption and food preparation (including washing vegetables or dishes) even if it has been boiled.

The water looked and smelled fine, making the situation more dangerous, as people who did not hear of the do not drink order didn't know the water should not be used.

The **United Community Church of Morrisville** holds a free week-day breakfast, with many guests who are unsheltered or living near the poverty line.

Unsure how long it would be until disaster relief provided drinking water, and concerned for our Breakfast on Us guests (many of whom do not have vehicles or extra cash to buy bottled water), early Wednesday morning, I asked interfaith partners and human service organizations to mobilize. We asked folks from neighboring communities to bring water from clean wells or purchased from stores. Soon, people showed up, dropping off what they could while others took what they needed. Some donations were jugs or flats of commercial water, but others were donations from people's homes, brought in any containers they could find.

The impetus came from concern for our most vulnerable folks—the breakfast guests who either didn't know about the do not drink order or didn't have means to get bottled water.

We called it a library because people brought what they could and took what they needed for free, like the little free libraries.

The interfaith community, human services organizations, local businesses, and neighbors just being good Vermonters saw the community of Morrisville through until outside help arrived. Water and Light received a tanker with water that was available a little out of town sometime on Thursday (7/13), over a day and a half after the do not drink order was put in place. The National Guard arrived with more water Friday morning. For more than 36 hours, Morrisville relied on the water library.

The Greater Stowe Interfaith Coalition worked to secure water donations from local businesses, The Alchemist Brewery and Cold Hollow Cider Mill in conjunction with Stowe Cider. These businesses donated water late Wednesday and on Thursday, respectively. Volunteers from our congregation, Stowe Community Church, Jewish Community of Greater Stowe, and the surrounding towns provided logistical support and organizing, and unloaded the water.

We used social media and word of mouth to let people know the water was available. United Way called media outlets and both Channel 5 and Channel 3 news, as well as the Boston Globe came to report on Wednesday evening.

Thursday and Friday and throughout the weekend water donations poured in from area churches including Charlotte Congregational Church, Waterville Community Church, Waterbury Center United Methodist Church, and the UMC Mission hub at Hedding United Methodist Church in Barre. We also received water from the National Guard via Morrisville Water and Light.

From Wednesday morning to Monday evening, UCCM received and gave back out over 2,000 gallons of bottled water.

We never limited people in the amount of water; in fact, it was hard to convince people to take enough water for their household (including pets!)—a minimum of a gallon per person per day. I encountered a several people who didn't know about the do not drink order and a couple of people who had intentionally refrained from drinking water, despite medical advice and need, because they weren't sure they had safe drinking water. All of these people were relieved to have water, and their relief was palpable.

We ran out a few times—for four hours on Thursday, and from Friday evening until Saturday at 1 pm (because we had a memorial service from 11-1 and focused on that first, then got more water). But more water always came and keeps coming.

The do not drink order was downgraded to a boil notice on Saturday. But not all people have access to boiling, or ability to do it in 85+ degree heat, and the distrust with the constantly changing information and updates also means people are very cautious.

This, we believe, is what church is and should be: serving those in greatest need and not counting the cost. It is also an example of faith in God and in one another. We gave out water until we ran out, trusting that more would come in, as God often works through people to provide. We asked for help, and were answered with the love, support, and power of community.

Rev. Dr. Becca Girrell

VERMONT FLOODING UPDATE from the Vermont Conference UCC

The Vermont Conference of the United Church of Christ - VTCUCC - is actively involved with flood relief work. Use this [LINK](#) to learn of ways to give time and resources in support of this work - including specific volunteer initiatives in Morrisville, Montpelier and Barre.

The Vermont Conference UCC has organized an offering to support folks in need in Vermont churches and communities impacted by the flooding.

- You can make a donation using the information below &/or plan to make a donation to the VTCUCC's Vermont Flood Relief Fund at - and participate in - the Saturday August 12 "Parking Lot Dance Party with the Green Mountain Swing Band and VT Swings (dancers)!" We are co-sponsoring the event and are hoping for a great turn out!

The Vermont Conference invites your donations for Vermont Flood Relief online by [CLICKING HERE](#) (include note VT Flood Relief with online donations) - OR by sending a check to the VTCUCC - with the memo: Vermont Flood Relief to:



Vermont Conference UCC/Flood Relief
36 North Main Street - Randolph, VT 05060

Learn more about the VTCUCC response to the flooding [on their website](#) - including avenues for volunteering- using this [LINK](#) - also "like" and follow the [VTCUCC Facebook page](#)