

United Church of Strafford Profile 6-16

Our Unique History and our Future

Our church has for decades, even centuries, been a key element of our community. For many years, there were two “village churches,” the United Church of Christ in the upper village of Strafford, and the Community Baptist Church in the lower village of South Strafford. Nearly 50 years ago, these two churches merged to form the United Church of Strafford. The South Strafford church building was transformed into the local school’s gym, and the upper village church became the sanctuary of the United Church of Strafford. In the mid 1970’s, a parish hall was built onto the church. We remain affiliated with both the American Baptist Churches (ABC) and Vermont Conference UCC (VTCUCC).

So, who are we now as a church?

The United Church of Strafford is really the “village church.” It has for many decades taken its role in community service seriously, and still does. The Christmas pageant has always been open to children of all faiths and religious background (including *no* religious background). A couple of years ago, a Strafford family held a bat mitzvah in the sanctuary, which was widely attended (and appreciated!) by church members. Each summer, children of a variety of backgrounds attend Vacation Bible school (or Creation Camp, as it has more recently been called). Funerals are frequently held in the church, even for people who have no particular affiliation with it – and the church organizes and sets up a reception for the family. When Lords Acre time (the church’s major fundraiser) rolls around in the fall, dozens of different people in the community contribute food and time to make the dinner, the silent auction, and the community show successful. The annual rummage sale is a major town event, and gets contributions and help from the whole community (in 2015, about 45 people worked in some capacity, many for tens of hours). The congregation faithfully supports the Deacons Fund, and this money “stays local” to help people directly in the Strafford community in many ways, from fuel assistance to food to electric bills and more.

At the same time, it is true that with all this general good will and participation, the church has falling participation. This is particularly true of young families, and it is true of older people as well. Many of the people who have genuine regard for this church do not come to services, and do not financially support the church. We know we are not unique in this problem, and believe there are many reasons for this trend, but we regard this as a huge challenge. Without finding a way to attract a range of people, particularly young families, we worry for our church’s future.

We have all seen “little white churches” around Vermont that were clearly once vital centers of their communities, and who are now struggling along, or even closed. We do not want this to happen to our church. We want to find a way to keep what so many value, while

we re-imagine and re-frame what we can be, so that people can find a place for meaningful faith in their lives, in this church.

To respond directly to this (very big) challenge, in the spring of 2014, as we were nearing the end of a “transitional ministry”, we did an extensive survey of the community as a whole. Using the newsletter mailing list as a starting point, a small group of four interviewed over 100 people about their sense of the role of the church in the community in various ways. Most of the people we surveyed were at least nominally connected to the church, and some were active community members in other ways. The results showed clearly that people of all backgrounds, religious traditions, and professions valued the church, and would have a hard time imagining the church not being here in Strafford.

About a year later, during this past fall of 2015, we followed up on this survey with a series of meetings called “Imagine a Church.” We hoped that people would share what they valued in the church as it is, and begin to think about what a “re-imagined” church might look in terms of outreach, of community support, of learning, of faith, of tradition – and on.

These “Imagine a Church” meetings (to which about 25 people came, most from the church, some not) revealed a deep interest in a church which can reach out to and welcome the community - without exception. They revealed an interest in learning, and in music (both traditional and untraditional). They highlighted an interest in learning about traditional stories for scripture and faith, and also interest in seeking new ways of thinking: in a Christian framework, what might language we use to talk about faith and God and Jesus actually look like? How might our ideas grow and evolve? The responses showed that people deeply value helping other people, both in the world and in the community. They revealed a strong aversion to religious dogma, and a deep commitment to inclusion. They showed a clear recognition that without a mix of generations that includes young families, the church cannot thrive.

We would like to carry these hopes and dreams forward. We do not believe we, as individuals or as church, have all the answers, but we do believe that an inclusive, thoughtful, multi-generational church can be a vital part of life in this community going forward, and can serve people in ways that nothing else can.

Our challenge at this point is to figure out what that looks like, and we hope to find a pastor who understands this and can help us.

A snapshot of our congregation

Our congregation at this time consists of 94 members, with 48 of those considered “active.” On any given Sunday, we typically have about 20-25 people in church. A “typical active participant” in our church is 50 or older, female, Caucasian, not a Strafford native but a longtime resident of several decades. This typical active participant is middle-class and college-educated. Of course there are plenty of exceptions to this!

Not many of our congregation are related to each other – perhaps 10%.

We do have some additional active people who attend our church in the summer and sometimes at holidays.

As a congregation, we have not participated much in conference wide activities. Last fall, our pastor told us about a “church in a secular age” conference that several of us attended with her; this most recent conference in April was attended by the pastor herself. Last month we did host a Guatemalan missionary, Gloria Vicente, from the conference, and we always participate in One Great Hour of Sharing.

A look at the community of Strafford

Strafford is a village of about 1,100, made up of two villages, the upper and lower villages (Strafford and South Strafford). It is located in east central Vermont, between Interstates 89 and 91, about a half hour drive from Hanover, New Hampshire and White River Junction, Vermont. There is a small regional airport in Lebanon, an Amtrak station in White River Junction, and the Dartmouth Coach bus service to New York City and Boston.

As part of the Upper Valley, Strafford can take advantage of rich cultural opportunities in the area (theater, music, art, museums). In addition, the Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center in nearby Lebanon New Hampshire provides both excellent medical care and employment to people in the area, including Strafford.

People work at various occupations. Many commute to the Hanover-Lebanon area, to work at Dartmouth College or Dartmouth-Hitchcock or in the various businesses that surround these. There are still a few farms left in Strafford, and there is a variety of small businesses that depend on good broadband internet access (which is supplied by ECFiber or Fairpoint).

Strafford has a K-8 elementary school of 117 students, which has long been recognized for its excellence. It makes a great effort to provide for all students’ individual needs. Because the school is small, and because of the values of the school and community, all students who want to are able to play sports, and all students participate in the school’s dramatic productions. The annual 8th graduation is significant community event, with each graduating 8th grader preparing and delivering a speech. The whole school participates in an annual Hike for Hunger, and the middle school runs an annual Operation Days Work, which has an international focus. The Creative Preschool, a private preschool, is in partnership with the school and is housed on the school property. Thetford Academy is the designated high school for Strafford, but students can choose another high school and can usually get a waiver to do so.

Strafford has no traffic light, and three stop signs (and no townwide cell phone reception!), but it is a busy place. The public buildings include Barrett Memorial Hall, where the Senior Citizens have a weekly lunch and many community events are held; the Justin Smith Morrill Homestead, a museum, gardens, and meeting room; the Harris and Morrill Library, which is open several days a week with an active children’s program and book study groups; and the Strafford Town House, an iconic white-steepled building on the Common (alleged to be the most photographed building in New England!).

Strafford's recreational facilities include town tennis courts, two ballfields, a picnic area at Old City Falls, a rope tow for downhill skiing run by volunteers in the winter, as well as a Nordic ski course, an outdoor skating rink, snowmobile trails, and a swimming pond where children's swimming lessons are held every summer. With the school, the gym, the swimming pond, the ballfields, and Coburns General Store all in easy walking and biking distance (and no cell phone service), Strafford kids are able to be an active lot.

People in Strafford dedicate a *huge* number of volunteer hours to a large number of community organizations. (In fact, this past year the church's annual Lord's Acre show was called "Strafford Works", written and performed to celebrate these volunteers!) These organizations include (but are not limited to) the local firefighters, who respond faithfully when needed and hold a Fourth of July chicken barbecue; the Lions Club, which runs the Recycling Center and more; the Historical Society, which publishes historical material and puts on exhibits; Neighbor Helping Neighbor, which arranges rides to doctor appointments and supplies other sorts of help. There is also an active PTA, which runs many events to help the school, and a Strafford Fast Squad, which can be counted on to come to aid folks in distress when needed. Strafford usually has a very high average voter turnout at elections.

Besides the United Church of Strafford, there are two other churches. One is Roman Catholic, the Our Lady of Light chapel. It has no local priest of its own, but does have regular Sunday services with clergy shared among several towns. The other is the Unitarian Universalist church, which holds services every two weeks and has a quarter time pastor.

We do have several challenges that face our community. One is a declining enrollment in our school. Next year's two classes of incoming children are small. Again, there are many reasons for this, at least some of which are economic - housing in Strafford is expensive. Having a smaller number of children in school reflects a smaller proportion of people their parents age - say, 30 - 50 - than we used to have. This challenge is directly related to the lack of young families in our church (though we believe that there are many reasons for this dearth in church, not all of them demographic).

Another challenge that we are always aware of is the need to keep folks of various socio-economic groups and interests well connected with each other. We are keenly aware how easy it is for any community to fragment, for people to (probably unintentionally) segregate themselves into little groups. The public school in Strafford has always seen itself as a "connector" in this way - and we see the church as another, very important, community connector. Reflecting on the role of "church" more broadly, at a time in people's public lives when activities can easily revert to only a private sphere (and perhaps sometimes one of loneliness), we see our church as, potentially, a force for life-giving connection to all kinds of people in our community where everyone is welcome.

All in all, Strafford is a community that has long valued the very notion of "community." We value the mix of people who live here in terms of income level, education level, age - and of

course, religious background. We also deeply recognize that “community” doesn’t just happen – it is fragile, and it needs to be nourished.

Three community members who could be phoned and asked about their perspective on our church and the community: Therese Linehan, Randy Coffin, and Peggy Thorp.

A look at worship and education in the United Church of Strafford

In 2013, during the time of transitional ministry, the church council decided that it would be helpful to write a church covenant – a sort of “mission statement” that would describe us and our core principles, both to ourselves and to others. Here it is.

We gather together with freedom of conscience in a community of love and inquiry. All are welcome, without exception. We practice Christianity with faith and compassion. We covenant with one another to embody the love of Christ, to nurture contemplation and action, and to offer our gifts, talents and energies as we are able.

In the spring of 2014, we conducted the survey of over 100 people in our community about how they saw the role of the United Church of Strafford in the community (described earlier). In the fall of 2015, we held the “Imagine a Church” meetings. 25 plus people responded, and gave lots of feedback responding to specific questions, including a detailed questionnaire about what qualities people were looking for in a minister. While we wouldn’t call this a scientific survey, we were pleased that so many people took it so seriously and took the time to be quite specific in what they thought was important. (Again, nearly all of these were people who were already quite active or at least interested in the health of the church.)

These responses, combined with what we had learned earlier from the extensive community survey done in the spring of 2014, yielded these interests, hopes, and values:

- *we want a minister who is comfortable in a “village chaplain” role, and genuinely likes all kinds of people.* People overwhelmingly want a minister who can make people feel valued and very, very welcome – certainly on Sunday mornings, but also in other areas of community life. A minister is the visible face of the congregation – he or she needs to be where people are, whether that be at Senior lunches, or soccer games, or the post office. As the only church in Strafford with a more than very part time pastor, our congregation takes seriously the commitment of its pastor to the rest of the community, even the “un-churched” part of the community. While we recognize that people have a variety of feelings about pastoral visits, we want our pastor to be willing and comfortable with visiting people, either because they are in distress of some sort or for some other reason. It is important that the pastor be available in times of family crisis.

- *we value sermons that are short, direct, well-crafted, thoughtful, and understandable.* People want to learn and be guided (though not scolded!). In general, people see the Bible as important but definitely not literal, and deeply value many other sorts of spiritual / religious inspiration and teaching as well.

- *we value a minister who is interested in reaching young families and others who are interested but not currently directly involved with the church.* As mentioned earlier, we are very concerned about the lack of younger families now, and believe that minister would need to consider this a priority. Making good connections with kids would be *very* helpful!

In addition to feedback about a minister and what we are hoping for from him / her, we have received thoughts and hopes about other aspects of our church's spiritual life going forward. These include:

- *music.* In both the 2014 and 2015 sessions, we heard a lot about music. Over the past decades, we have often been blessed with wonderful musical leadership. This has included good Sunday morning music with a choir (in the fairly recent past, much bigger than the 2-3 we have now), as well as special music on Christmas and Easter and often a summer "expanded choir" concert of music like *Schubert's Mass In G'*, *Vivaldi's Gloria*, and *Mozart's Requiem*.

Over the past two years we have been operating with no music director, and instead have relied on Sunday-to-Sunday music leaders, some paid and some volunteer. This has worked remarkably well in many ways, and we are *very* grateful for all of them!

However, we recognize the importance that many have mentioned of vibrant music in this church (both traditional, congregational, choral, and diverse). Some people mentioned that "music is a big reason I come to church"). We have been using the United Methodist Hymnal, which has a combination of traditional hymns and some newer ones, for the past fifteen years or so. People have a range of opinions about hymns that they most like to sing.

Beginning this coming July, we are very pleased that we will again have a music director. Special funds were raised to pay for a music director who will start a children's choir to perform several times a year. She will also help re-energize a regular Sunday adult choir, as well as "expanded choirs" for Christmas, Easter, and a summer concert as described above. It will be *very* important to us that a new pastor and our music director can work well together!

- *Sunday worship services.* We have some traditional services that are important to our community, particularly Christmas and Easter, including the Christmas pageant. (This past year, the Christmas Eve service was completely full). People value the ecumenical Thanksgiving service that we share with the Catholic church and the UU church (although not many attend), and appreciate the inclusive form of communion that we practice monthly.

Our members like to sing together! At the same time, some folks are interested in new and different aspects to worship as well. We have often held a "blessing of the animals" at an

outdoor service which people have liked, and there is some interest in other forms of worship occasionally, like contemplative prayer and / or Quaker meeting.

- *Religious education for kids.* For the past two years, we have not had a real Sunday school program. This is certainly both a cause and an effect of so few young people in our church. There are some young parents in Strafford now who hope for and would value a consistent program for their children (with a good teacher), teaching them basics of faith (including stories, music, psalms).

In the past, Sunday school was largely organized by several of these young parents; at least at this point, we have been unable to find a group of parents to do that, but we are hopeful that this will change. Finding a way to reach young families was one of the driving forces behind creating the new music director position, and having the active support of at least a few parents will be important for this program to succeed.

- *Religious education for adults.* In the past, we have had adult education study programs, both Bible study (like the Kerygma program) and thematic studies (such as a Lenten study on forgiveness). Some people would very much like these to happen again.

Who we are, how we work

Open and affirming. Our church has never taken a formal vote on whether or not to declare ourselves “open and affirming.” We think it is safe to say, informally, that our church is open and affirming to anyone who would like to participate for any reason – sexual orientation, race, age, or based on any other identification. We have made our inclusiveness part of our covenant.

Decision making in our congregation. We have always had an active church council, and it has become more active and thorough in the past two years. Decisions on the council are made by majority vote. Once a year, we hold an annual meeting when the congregation gets reports from the committees and votes on the budget (and any other matter that may have been brought by the council or a church member). The offices / committees include: moderator, clerk, head of trustees, head of deacons, treasurer, and heads of standing committees: stewardship, missions, religious education, pastoral relations, hospitality, and endowment. The pastor is a non-voting member of the committees and church council.

Handicapped access. We have long had a ramp access to the sanctuary itself, which is scheduled for some repair this summer. This past year, we added handrails for the few steps that lead from the sanctuary to the parish hall. We also added handrails outside to the steps that lead to the church from the street. One of our bathrooms is handicapped accessible and one has a changing station.

Resolving conflict. Over the past several years we have faced some challenges as a congregation. In addition to the “demographic challenges” we’ve mentioned earlier, we had a difficult experience with a couple of pastors. We had two “transitional” ministers (the first for less than two years, the second for nearly four), both of whose expectations for their role here turned out to be different than we had initially expected and/or understood. This period was difficult for us on several levels, with hurt feelings on several sides. The second of these transitional pastors left in the early fall of 2014, and we *intentionally* spent the next year as a “lay led” church. The members of the church council arranged for lay-led services (with many members of the congregation offering to help, even writing sermons!), as well as finding fill-in pastors on several occasions. The deacons took turn leading the music and finding local musicians to help. To try to help with reconciliation, the council sponsored several open meetings facilitated by professional counselors, so that people could, if they chose, try talking through some of the hurt feelings that had arisen.

While this whole period was a tough experience to go through, we gained something from each of our transitional pastors. The first helped us establish a more effective governance system. The second brought some diverse worship experiences, including a Hindu dancer and a Buddhist nun. As a congregation, we valued both of these.

In addition, we learned *a lot* as a congregation from these difficult times. We learned the huge value of using a church governance system diligently and thoughtfully to address issues and problems. We re-learned the importance of going through the channels we had ourselves established. We learned the necessity of frequent, *timely* communication within the council, and between the council and the congregation. We learned that we had some holes in our by-laws that had made it hard to address problems carefully, and as a congregation we fixed those.

Our year without a pastor was a strong, reflective, and caring year, and we emerged from it ready to find an interim pastor who would reflect the values and “seekings” of our congregation, and help us to regain some footing and grow as a church. We are very grateful to and for our interim pastor for helping us with all of this!

Three significant things that can be said about who we are as a congregation.

- 1) We come from a variety of religious beliefs and backgrounds, and value this. We see ourselves as Christian in a broad sense, as our covenant makes clear. Dogma is much less important to us than thoughtful and inclusive exploration.
- 2) We have a strong sense of music as a part of worship, and as a connecting force among diverse people,
- 3) We see ourselves as on a faith journey, in a world that we all recognize as changing. Cutting across and through many of the responses that folks gave in our surveys and meetings was a recognition that we live in changing times, and that our church needs to

find a way to thrive within those changes. In the surveys, questionnaires, and meetings people noted such interests as:

- We want a church that will make central the question of what the realities of our world are, and what Christ's example asks us to do in response – in many ways
- We want to try different forms of worship – Taize, Quaker meeting, lay-led services, talk-back, etc
- We want to find ways to explore what “relevant to the world” looks like (and relevance matters)
- We would like Bible study to help people (including young people) realize there is a “truth” in stories even when they are not literally “true”
- We value “spiritual health”
- We value new ways of thinking
- We recognize the validity of doubt

How we serve others

For many years we are proud to have had an active Mission Committee. Its “mission statement” is below.

Mission Statement of the United Church of Strafford Mission Committee

The mission committee exists to distribute church-designated funds to groups and organizations that directly provide relief and support to people in distress. We research candidate organizations and groups to determine if a majority of the funding goes to directly impact the lives of the people they serve.

In addition, the mission committee strives to engage the congregation in local mission projects to aid the people in our community.

The committee works at the local, regional, national and global levels in selecting recipient organizations and groups.

Our values are found in Matthew 25: 31-46 summarized: “Lord, when was it we saw you hungry or thirsty, or a stranger and we helped you?..... The king answered, Truly I tell you, just as you did it to the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

Our most exciting recent mission project has been a Heifer project fund raiser of coins (a “noisy collection”!) that got us well over \$200 in a short period. We have also just begun a sustained yearly donation to the Newton School Health Hub, our local K-8 school-based health clinic.

For many years we have supported the Sharon Food Shelf, The Veteran's Place in Northfield, VT, The Haven (an area food shelf and shelter), and Cover (an area organization that helps weatherize homes for low-income people). We also help support Neighbor Helping

Neighbor (a local community organization which provides varied help to individuals – rides to appointments, reading sessions, etc).

Our other local, national, and global mission efforts that we have supported are Helping Hands, flood relief, a leper colony in the Philippines, and our local senior lunch program. Every year, we help to support One Great Hour of Sharing. In addition, we provide some support to local residents who embark on mission efforts in the Far East and in the Americas. For decades, we were part of the Oxfam work, though it has been several years since we participated in this.

Sometimes, we have been involved in social justice advocacy, as a congregation, in the following organizations: Have Justice, will Travel, and Safeline. When we conducted our survey in 2014 and the “Imagine a Church” meetings in 2015, thoughts about the “church in the world” (or “social action”) varied. While many people felt that our church needs to respond to the needs of the world as it exists, it seems clear that being directly “political” *as a church* is something many in our church would find divisive. This may be an area where finding useful language to articulate what we care about is particularly important!

In addition to the Mission Committee, our church has long had a Deacons Fund. This gives financial assistance to people in the community in a variety of ways, on a case-by-case basis (and is completely confidential).

Supporting our ministry

Here is a brief summary of our current annual church budget.

Our budget for the 2015-2016 fiscal year (August 1 – July 31) calls for Income and Expenses of roughly \$64,000 (\$63,928). As of May 2016, we are on budget.

Our budgeted income (major sources only):

- Fundraising - \$2500
- Gifts - \$3000
- Plate Offering - \$2800
- Pledges - \$40,000
- Special Offerings - \$ 900
- Rental of apartment in parsonage - \$10,000
- Rummage Sale - \$1200

Our budgeted expenses (again, major sources only):

- Administration - \$1050
- General Buildings and Grounds - \$3950
- Church Buildings and Grounds - \$8255
- Parsonage Building and Grounds - \$11,273

Conference Expenses (UCC and ABC) - \$1000
Reimbursements (Mileage, Continuing Ed) - \$1750
Retirement Contribution - \$4271
½ time Salary - \$18,500
Social Security - \$2333
Missions - \$1250
Music - \$5776
Search Expenses - \$1000
Worship (Altar supplies, child care, pulpit supply) - \$2770

Our church assets are:

Church building, built in 1820 and Parish Hall added in 1972 in Strafford
Parsonage in South Strafford (about 2.5 miles from Church in Strafford)

Endowment – As of 12/31/15, the United Church of Strafford’s Endowment was \$276,120, comprised of \$256,511 in cash, fixed income, and equity positions and a Cumulative Endowment Income Fund of \$19,609 reserved for capital improvements and a yearly contribution of \$2000 to the Mission Committee for the school-based Health Hub. This fund is increased each year on August 1 by 3% of the last 3 year’s July 31st average endowment value. The Cumulative Endowment Income Fund money is not figured into our annual budget. Should the Trustees want to spend more in a given year than is in the Cumulative Endowment Income Fund, it requires a vote of the entire congregation.

Here is a description of our church building.

The Church itself is slightly over 1800 sq ft with an attached Parish Hall/Kitchen/Pastor’s Office of roughly 1500 sq ft. The Parsonage has two bedrooms, two baths, a living room, large kitchen, parlor and office space. There is a rental apartment on the second floor of the Parsonage at the back of the building.

The Church/Parish Hall and the Parsonage are cumulatively insured for \$1,143,055 for building value and \$56,032 for contents.

We use largely renewable electrical power, due to actions we have taken to function as sustainably as possible.

Our last capital campaign was in 2008, raised \$15,000 for painting the church and \$30,000 for repairs to the Parsonage (total of \$45,000 raised)

The salary and benefits we offer are described in the attached covenant. See attached and note that the interim pastor had her own health and dental insurance so these were not included in Employee Benefits under the Terms of Call.

Pastor job description

At this point in our church's life the council is clear that we cannot afford more than a half-time pastor. (We hope that finances would make it possible to raise this to $\frac{3}{4}$ time soon, but that depends on funds.)

We of course recognize that a half time position is just that – a half time position. We would hope that within these parameters, our pastor would focus on helping us breathe new life into our church. Certainly this would include planning and running Sunday services, and working collaboratively with our new music director. In addition, and importantly, we hope our pastor would recognize the importance of connecting with church/community – meeting with seniors, visiting sick people, etc. In fact, given our congregation's need to revitalize our church, we hope our pastor would devote the greater share of that time to “community connecting”, not having too much of it bound up in planning Sunday services. We are open to different ways of doing this - perhaps one way would be to have a lay-led service one Sunday per month.

How this would actually break down in units of time would need to be discussed. At this point, we hope that the emphasis we are looking for is clear!

Compensation

1) within UCC / ABC guidelines, depending on experience. Compensation will be negotiated based upon experience and needs of the chosen pastor and the needs and resources of the Church

2) housing. The church has a parsonage centrally located in the lower village of South Strafford. The building has been well-maintained and currently has a rental apartment separate from the main parsonage. Living in the parsonage would be part of the compensation package as a housing allowance.

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The most important attributes of a pastor would be friendliness to all kinds of people, comfort with many kinds of people, and being well-organized. Being friendly to all kinds and ages of people was overwhelmingly identified as the single most important characteristic in an interim minister, and we continue to hear this from people. We are looking for a pastor who is willing to minister to the wider community, not just church members – what some have called a “village chaplain” role.

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