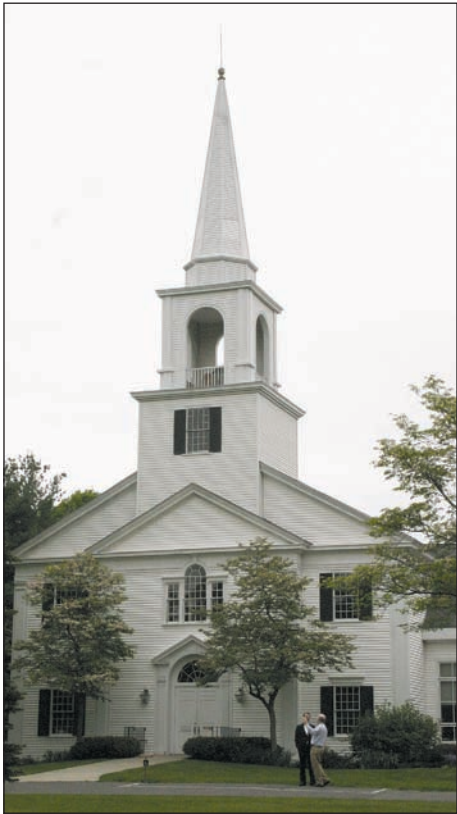


Always Room at the Table



By Mary Kantor

Pilgrim Congregational Church, set back from the street on eight wooded acres, is a traditional New England clapboard church. The grounds include the flowering shrubs, trees and benches of a Memorial Garden, a quiet spot for relaxation, meditation, and reflection. The peacefulness of the setting extends into the church. The sanctuary is described as “simple and restful with large, clear windows opening to the outdoors.” A long time member noted: “The simple beauty... An uncluttered sanctuary, a sterling pipe organ, and a tastefully beautiful chancel all create a mood of peaceful reverence.” While the church was designed in 1958, its architectural style is influenced by that of the Early American meeting house, an appropriate setting for the dramatic reading sponsored by the Lexington Historical Society on the weekend of Patriots’ Day. By lantern light the voices of the Battle of Lexington echoed forth from the first-person accounts of 1775. A befitting backdrop for the words of these historic figures, the traditional meeting house space could perhaps belie the present-day ministry and vibrant, living community that reside within its walls.

Pilgrim is a member of the United Church of Christ (UCC), a protestant denomination with nearly 5,600 congregations. The UCC was founded in 1957 from several different Christian traditions, and

according to UCC literature: “While preserving relevant portions of heritage and history dating back to the 16th century, the UCC and its forebears have proven themselves capable of moving forward, tying faith to social justice and shaping cutting edge theology and service in an ever-changing world.” The United Church of Christ considers itself a “church in process”, seeing God’s revelation as ongoing. Upholding this tradition, Pilgrim claims: “It is the responsibility of the church in each generation to make faith its own.” And this responsibility is taken seriously as seen in the church’s stated values: “to provide a welcome atmosphere to spiritual seekers,” “to create links with people of others faiths,” and to “find ways to integrate the spiritual with everyday life.” Ten years in the church – from Sunday School, through Confirmation classes, outreach programs, to playing piano for worship – Joey Costello, a high school senior, attests to ‘working to make faith his own’ and seeking ‘to integrate the spiritual into his life.’ Speaking of his experience at Pilgrim, he says: “We were given the opportunity to explore for ourselves, with Reverend Brain and other members of our religious community there giving us nudges in different directions or acquainting us with new ways of thinking.... The existence of religious dogmas does not mean that we have to forgo our abilities to think. Because of this method of examining our beliefs, I developed openness to new ideas.”

The openness of the ‘church in process’ is a quality that Dick Emiston, church member, as well as Assistant Moderator and chair of the Personnel Committee, values about Pilgrim: “[It] provides me an open, welcoming and affirming intellectually stimulating liberal protestant church where all are welcome regardless of color, nationality, religion or sexual preferences. I personally am drawn to the intellectually questioning rather than liturgically-centered services. But mainly I go because the members actually reflect all these qualities - particularly the welcoming, affirming and questioning aspects.” Regarding this welcoming, Reverend Judy Brain, completing her seventeenth year as pastor, states: “Pilgrim has a statement of welcome that is not just words but actions. In our physical accessibility, the rainbow stripe on our sign, our consciousness about the reality of racism, we try to live up to our pledge of diversity and to offer hospitality

to all people.”

Covenant of Welcome

We honor the Biblical call to love one another as God first loved us. We welcome into the full life and ministry of the church all people of any race,



Joey Costello

nationality, religious background, educational background, ethnicity, age, gender, sexual orientation, marital status, economic status, and physical, mental, and emotional abilities.

The community reflects this diversity; Dick Emiston describing: “It is an amazing group of individuals ranging from MIT, Harvard, Boston Latin and other faculty to a judge and a college president, to



The Pilgrim Church Council. From left to right: Marjory German, Steve Van Evera, Rev. Judith Brain, Ed Bond, Rev. Merrie Allen, Bob Beckwith, Duncan Todd, Gregory North, Christine Emery, Mary Mackie and Susan Carabbo.

university and medical school students, to retired persons, stay at home parents, military personnel and shop keepers, and including a large, active and growing group of children. White, black, Hispanic and Asian, young and old, are all a part of us. What a place!” Carol Chytil, with her husband and three children, travels forty-

five miles from Clinton every Sunday for worship: “My husband grew up with no knowledge of religion. I grew up with church being an integral part of family life. Pilgrim is the perfect place where we are both welcome and embraced.... Pilgrim allows us to be true to ourselves, our family values and to worship and grow at our own pace.” According to church data, members of the congregation represent a variety of religious backgrounds as well as the agnostic and the seeker. “When I visited Pilgrim, I felt I was part of a family. I found the congregation open, accepting and non-judgmental. I felt I belonged. This is the place to nurture my spiritual growth,” says member Sou Chu. Rev. Brain affirms this commitment to providing a place to belong: “We also try to bring people together in a comfortable and supportive social network where interests can be shared. Families need company in raising children to be kind and ethical. Elders need support for the many transitions they face. People need friends in a crisis. We want to be like the idealized neighborhood where everybody knows your name and looks out for you and where you’re not afraid to ask someone for help.”

The supportive network of Pilgrim extends well beyond its own community. “We are mission oriented... We provide families with an opportunity to serve others together.... I do think that in hard times, it is instructive to be conscious of how 95% of the rest of the world lives. One of the advantages of being part of a faith community with a strong mission emphasis is that you come face

to face with what real poverty means. You might go on a mission trip to Honduras... You might go with a youth group to the “Outdoor Church” in Cambridge and worship with people who are living on the streets in the middle of winter.... It puts things in perspective and also gives

you purpose. If you are feeling bad about something in your own life, reaching out to help someone else can be healing," says Rev. Brain. Pilgrim is also home to Room at the Table, a multi-faith, multi-cultural community whose mission is:

- increasing awareness in our communities about people in need locally, nationally, and globally
- mobilizing people of all ages to reach out a helping hand
- raising money through serving simple meals

In 2007, Room at the Table was selected as one of the town of Lexington's "Ten Unsung Heroes" for "its efforts at addressing the needs of the world and providing opportunities for people to make a difference." Pilgrim Council member, Steve Van Evera, notes: "The Pilgrim community emphasizes the doing of deeds of service and compassion for others. I'm especially proud of the service that my fellow-Pilgrim members give to the Boston area community and the wider world."

Rev. Brain describes Pilgrim Church as "a community of kind and caring people who are spiritually inquisitive and intellectually open. It's also a congregation that loves to laugh." As this community prepares to say good-bye to their well-loved and respected pastor, and looks toward new leadership, they continue to move forward as a 'church in process', as a mission and service oriented community, and as a home for spiritual seekers.



Reverend Judy Brain to retire after 17 years at Pilgrim Church in Lexington

were challenged by the way these folks responded to their loss. Their faith sustained them; they did not give in to despair but showed us what it means to be positive in the face of adversity. They, in turn, have been reaching out to help others. It's remarkable.

What do religious leaders see as the biggest spiritual struggles that people are having these days?

Undoubtedly the economic crisis and the world situation create anxiety. People come to church or synagogue dealing with issues of significant magnitude. Will I have a job next week? Can I maintain hope when I've been unemployed for five months? Will my son return safely from Iraq? What kind of world will my children inherit?

This combined with the everyday struggles that people encounter all the time. Concerns about health and family, personal relationships, temptation, and the desire to live a good life.

How does Pilgrim Church serve the individual, groups, different ages...?

I talk a lot about service and community involvement but we are primarily a *community of faith* and our primary purpose is to help people develop a relationship with God—to experience forgiveness, to be able to pray, to study scripture and learn from its precepts, to sing and listen to music that lifts the spirit, to act in ways we think would be pleasing to God—and to discern together what those ways might be.

"We want to be like the idealized neighborhood where everybody knows your name and looks out for you and where you're not afraid to ask someone for help." – Rev. Judy Brain

Coffee Hour

After Sunday services families and friends catch up as kids browse for books and play.

"We want to be like the idealized neighborhood where everybody knows your name and looks out for you and where you're not afraid to ask someone for help."

– Rev. Judy Brain



Reverend Judy Brain, pastor of Pilgrim Church, will be retiring after seventeen years of ministry. On June 14, Pilgrim hosts a presentation and luncheon celebration of her years of ministry. She shares some thoughts on her role as a spiritual leader.

What are some of the bright spots or struggles as a spiritual leader currently?

I love being a pastor. It's a wonderful profession/calling. We're the last of the generalists. You get to do everything—public speaking, teaching, small groups, counseling, studying, social activism, advocacy, spiritual direction, prayer, sacraments. You accompany people at their major life passages. We clergy joke that we're there to hatch, match, and dispatch. But it is really is a privilege to be with people at their most joyful or their most vulnerable.

Religion can be divisive, I'll admit. But when we are truly being the organization that God calls us to be, we can only add value to a culture. I'm proud to be part of the institutional church. Lexington is fortunate to have so many religious communities that care about and contribute to our quality of life. We are concerned about our kids' safety and health, about civil rights, and peaceful co-existence; and we work with schools, police, and social services to support those efforts.

What helps spiritual communities thrive today?

I can speak for my own community of Pilgrim Church. One of the things that keeps us going is seeing faith and compassion at work. A family in our church lost everything in a fire. The congregation gathered around them literally each Sunday as they came to worship. And they gathered around with help and support as well—clothing, money, household goods. In turn, we

