

New Things Happening in the New Hampshire Conference

A series sponsored by A New Thing Task Force sharing great things happening in the Conference

The purpose of this series is to share possibilities and also contacts, as a resource, if you would like to use these ideas in your own particular way.

(First Congregational Church, Concord, NH)

Church, and how ministry is done, is changing. While that feels particularly true in the time we find ourselves, the fact is that church and ministry has been changing ever since Christ died, was buried, and then rose on the third day. Only 235 years ago, did the “Sunday school” movement begin in Gloucester, Great Britain by Robert Raikes and it is important to realize that Sunday schools were originally literary schools: they were places where impoverished children could learn to read. While religious education was always a core component, the original purpose was a ministry of literacy. Fast forward to 2017 when many churches are struggling to figure out why families with children are no longer attending church, let alone Sunday school programs.

In 2015, the leadership of Christian Education at First Church of Concord realized that in addition to only having a small handful of children in the congregation, that there was no longer energy from the congregation to assist with the Sunday school program. Through a series of conversations and life events, First Church and its Pastor, Rev. Emilia Halstead, realized that it was time to let go of the Sunday school ministry of the church in order to make space for what new life and ministry God would bring into the congregation. Rev. Halstead felt that it was vital to have a ritual to celebrate and to mourn the death of such a long standing ministry of the church. Therefore on June 5th 2016 the service of worship was a Memorial and Celebration of Life for the Sunday school program, complete with a time for “Words of Remembrance” where members of the congregation were invited to share their memories and their grief about this great change in the history of their church.

Following the Memorial service, even through their grief, there was a lightness that followed. The congregation found space to give the shame and the guilt they had been feeling about the depleted Sunday school over to God. In the place of shame and guilt came hope and a passion for what God will do next in their midst. First Congregational Church is now an Empty-Nester church and like all parents who work through the difficult process of finding their new purpose after children leave the “nest” the congregation is seeking to discover their new purpose as an “elder-rich congregation of empty nesters.”