

## REPORT OF THE PASTOR

As our grace at a recent dinner with friends, each of us shared something we are grateful for and something for which we hope. “I am grateful,” I began, “that almost every day I get to do something that makes a difference. I hope that somehow all our individual efforts can come together to make a bigger difference.”

It was the first thought that came to mind. In the days that followed, I realized how much my gratitude and hope emerge from being part of Edwards Church. Through our church, I get to do things that make the world a better place—in small ways and large. Through our church, I find hope that all our individual efforts really can come together to transform and heal our world.

From the time I started as pastor here, almost 22 years ago, I have known that what we do as a church matters deeply—to the individuals who are part of the church, to the wider community, and to our world. This past year, it has felt especially true. We need Edwards Church. The city of Framingham needs Edwards Church. The world needs Edwards Church. In this troubled and divided world, Edwards Church offers sanctuary, healing and comfort, opportunities to live out our passion and compassion, and new models for being church.

**Sanctuary:** In a social and political climate that is divisive and seems to empower hatred, Edwards Church seeks to be a sanctuary. Every Sunday morning—and now on alternate Sunday evenings—we gather to worship, to open ourselves to the presence of God who created each of us and loves us for who we are. We begin our services with a welcome: “No matter who you are or where you are on your life’s journey, you are welcome here.”

All week, we try to live out that welcome. We extend a special invitation to individuals and communities who have been excluded in the past. We try to learn about the barriers—intentional and unintentional—that keep us apart. This year our White Privilege Study group looked deep inside ourselves as we examined the entrenched societal assumptions and structures that keep racism alive. We hosted a Transgender Remembrance Day service, remembering lives lost to despair and discrimination and celebrating hope and courage. Our Board of Christian Education, along with our new Associate Pastor Shane Montoya, explored ways to help families with young children feel more comfortable in worship. We hosted a multi-cultural Palm Sunday parade and co-hosted a multi-cultural Interfaith Thanksgiving service. Together with friends at Open Spirit, we made our campus a place of warmth, welcome and beauty for many groups.

Being sanctuary means more than inviting people to come and join us in our space. It means going out, seeking to create spaces of safety and home in a sometimes hostile world. Our confirmands attended the Martin Luther King, Jr. Youth Conference hosted by Greater Framingham Community Church this year. Our Board of Wider Mission supported efforts to create Metrowest Immigrant Solidarity Network, accompanying local immigrants who are at risk due to changing immigration policies. We co-hosted our Third Annual Veterans Appreciation Dinner.

**Comfort and Healing:** Almost every time we have a memorial service, a non-churchgoer stops me to say what an amazing gift we have here at Edwards Church. They marvel at the power of a community of people who show up for each other, who gather to honor life and grieve loss, who care for a beautiful sanctuary and campus so we can offer a warm, safe place when it is needed.

In a society that values individualism and independence, where fewer people belong to faith communities or even join clubs, what we have here is precious and rare. We offer one another comfort—through the powerful message, the inspiring music and the reassuring rituals of our faith, and through our cards and calls and rides and prayers and other expressions of caring. We don’t always know exactly what each other needs; still we try. The message of our shared faith and our acts of caring is profound: You are not alone.

Our commitment to healing extends beyond our church community, and is lived out in our support for the multi-faith center we founded—Open Spirit: A Place of Hope, Health & Harmony. Every week, people from many faiths and backgrounds come here to experience healing of body, mind and spirit—through yoga, Qi Gong, meditation, support groups, gardening, multi-faith conversation, and so much more.

**Opportunity:** The problems we face as a nation and world feel more overwhelming than ever. We worry about global climate change. We worry that our immigrant neighbors' families are being torn apart. We worry at the persistence and corrosiveness of racism, at the pervasiveness of sexual harassment at so many levels of our society, at the growing economic divide, at the threat of nuclear war.

With so much to worry about, it is easy to become paralyzed. One of the most important things we do as a church is to help each one of us claim our capacity to make a difference, and to work together so the small things we can do are multiplied. We do this as an expression of our faith that God is at work and calls us to help. We do this because we care about our planet and about our neighbors near and far.

The opportunities we offer take many forms—crocheting prayer shawls, standing on street corners with signs of welcome, serving meals at Pearl Street Cafe, singing, baking, sending cards, accompanying immigrants to court, teaching Sunday School, washing mugs, bringing food for A Place to Turn, managing budgets, serving on boards and committees and teams, welcoming visitors, writing Congress...The list goes on. No one of us can do it all; each of us can do something that matters. Together we can bring hope, healing and justice to our divided world.

**New Ways of Being Church:** All over our nation, religious institutions are struggling to deal with new societal realities. An increasing number of people identify themselves as “nones”—without any religious identity. Many churches have moved into survival mode, drawing inward in an attempt to pay the bills. Others have closed. It is clear that, in order to continue to be vital organizations, faith communities need to do things in a new way.

We are doing new things. We have just completed a full year since our merger, which brought two communities with resources and passion together, multiplying our capacity for faithful action many times over. We are partnering with other churches in new ways: shared confirmation and mission trips with Plymouth Church, collaborations with our sister churches on campus and around Framingham. We are exploring ways to offer an evening service, to reach out to people who are seeking a different experience of worship. We are hosting and supporting Open Spirit, a new kind of outreach, offering spiritual nourishment to the wider community while providing opportunities to build community that celebrates our differences.

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There are so many reasons to be grateful and hopeful. I am grateful for the sanctuary we offer, and hopeful for the ways we will continue to widen the circle. I am grateful for all the ways we offer comfort and healing, and hopeful that God's healing spirit works through and beyond us. I am grateful for the opportunities we have to make a difference, and hopeful that we can find new ways to work together with other communities. I am grateful for our openness to new ways, and hopeful that we can be a model to inspire others.

I am grateful for each person in our congregation: for our gifted and dedicated staff, for our officers and board and committee and team members, for people who usher and greet and welcome and bake, for people who crochet and drive and pray and sing. I am hopeful that in the coming year we will deepen our faithfulness, our caring for one another, and our compassion and passion for justice.

Peace,  
Rev. Dr. Deborah L. Clark