

# Sabbatical Proposal for First Congregational Church (FCC), Chappaqua

## *Roots, Reflection and Renewal*

### Part A – Program Rationale and Design

#### **1. Begin with a summary statement describing the overall character and purpose of the renewal program you are proposing.**

Our plan is for parallel activities for our congregation and our minister. While Rev. Martha Jacobs works to reconnect and more fully integrate her Judaic heritage into her Christian ministry, we will examine the changes from the old Quaker town of Chappaqua to our current suburbia and examine what it means to be a UCC church in light of our diversity. We come from a variety of places and faith journeys. We welcome that diversity and want to reflect and share with each other who we are as we seek to open our fellowship to others and find common ground from which to continue to build our church community. Martha's reflection activities will involve travel, walking labyrinths, visiting family, and writing her faith story. Ideas for congregational renewal will spark from our reflections and the work we plan to do during this sabbatical time. This process will provide us all with new-found energies and refocus our efforts for continuing God's work in our community of faith. The Lilly Grant resources will support this growth process.

#### **2. Provide a clearly articulated rationale for engaging in the clergy renewal program. In doing so, please give careful thought to the connection between the purpose, the proposed activities and your rationale. Programs that are coherent, well-integrated and possess a degree of thematic unity often are the most compelling. Your responses to these first two questions should convey these characteristics. Also, include a discussion about why this is an appropriate time for the pastor and congregation to participate.**

We have been on an amazing journey of serving God and the community, but we all know there is much more to be done as we open ourselves up to what God has in store for us. The timing for this sabbatical is perfect for both Martha and our congregation as we are on the brink of a Spiritual renewal. You can feel the hope that is now surrounding our congregation. Since Martha was called to serve with us in 2014, she has brought us to a much stronger place, open to all the possibilities of love and growth that are available. Martha has infused new energy with her strong spiritual and healing presence. By melding her Christian identity and her Judaic heritage, Martha is more open to welcoming all and has brought not only us, but our wider community together in many new ways.

We rely heavily on Martha to bring us the energy we need to sustain this level of ministry and care for the wider community. Martha needs time to step back from her endless day-to-day church duties and reconnect with God in ways that will renew her and provide for spiritual nourishment, so that she can continue the work that God has called her to do. Martha's yearning to reconnect with her Judaic roots indicates to all of us that we too need to understand better who we are as a congregation as our community has changed significantly over the years. Our awareness of our diversity of culture and religious traditions is now compelling us to spend time intentionally getting to know each other better, by listening to each other's stories and journeying together on a path of spiritual growth individually and as a community of faith. As you will see

in A-3 and A-6, our plans for our time apart and the learnings gained will ultimately be integrated into refocusing the ministry and congregation.

Our journey to a more healthy, healing and open church has brought us to this point where we believe the renewal program will reinforce the actions we've taken over the past few years, while enabling us to enhance our journey into the future. This sabbatical, with the help from the Lilly Foundation, will allow us to embrace and feast on all that God wants to reveal to us, recharging our vision and hopes, while connecting us with the roots of our soul and God.

**3. In the body of your application, present a thorough narrative description of the pastor's activities and the timeline for the renewal program. Include a brief description and a rationale for each of these activities. This section is where you will give the fullest description of your plans and describe how the pieces fit together into a coherent whole.**

The proposed timeline for my sabbatical is from August 19, 2019 to November 30, 2019. My sabbatical would begin and end with walking labyrinths during silent retreats, one at Ghost Ranch and one at Holy Cross Monastery, working with spiritual directors who will help me be open to God's Spirit. Physically walking labyrinths provides me with the opportunity to more fully explore my inner spiritual journey. It enables me to be in touch with God in a way that no other discipline has done. Walking has become an important part of my journey in ministry, and at times of spiritual difficulties and challenges, I seek a place to walk where I can commune with God.

I am revisiting the need to more fully integrate my Judaic heritage into my Christian ministry. At the age of 17, I converted from Judaism to Christianity. Once I converted, I closed the door to my Judaic heritage for the next 22 years. At 39, when called to ministry, I realized how I had closed myself to my heritage. So, over the next two years, I worked in therapy, Clinical Pastoral Education and seminary, and came to a place where I could celebrate my Judaic heritage and integrate it into my growing Christian heritage/self, as I prepared to take on the mantle of ordained ministry. In February 2017, I was in Berlin, Germany, leading a UCC workshop to help congregants and clergy heal in the aftermath of human-caused trauma. I was stunned that it had not occurred to me that I might encounter someone affected by the Holocaust. I felt blindsided by my lack of ownership of my heritage. I want to understand better the joys and pains of my heritage, which I believe will bring me closer to God. I want to go back to Germany and to Poland, with the express purpose of spending time visiting some of the concentration camps and learning more about those who were affected by Hitler.

I am asking Rev. Dr. Beth Glover to join me on this trip. Beth has been a friend and colleague for more than 20 years. We spiritually challenge each other while also supporting each other's weaknesses and strengths. I want Beth to walk with me through what may be a difficult path as I delve into my Jewish heritage and to help me process what is happening on a deeper level.

I would then like to travel to France with my spouse, Pat, for 9 days, for her to take pastry classes and hone her skills as a trained pastry chef. Pat has supported me through seminary twice, through various upheavals in my life and has loved me unconditionally for 37 years. She has held me when I cried over losses at the hospital and church, and is an important part of FCC, joining when I did, of her own decision. It is important to our relationship that we spend quality time together and that I support her in her craft, as she has supported me.

Lastly, I love to write and have not had much time to do so. Upon hearing my faith story, many have suggested that I write about how God has been so present through the ups and downs

of my life. I will take a month to write and reflect. I will spend two weeks with my niece and her family in Virginia, writing and spending time with the family, with Pat joining us for a weekend. I will also spend two weeks with my brother in Maryland. He has a lung disease and his life-span may be shortened. I want to spend quality time with him, filling in gaps in my childhood memories, writing and having Pat joining us for a weekend. My final weeks would include a silent retreat at Holy Cross Monastery as I prepare to rejoin my congregation.

Re-entry to my congregation will occur over the course of a week. (see A-7) Following my sabbatical, I would like to work with a Spiritual Director to help me integrate my sabbatical experiences into my faith and practice, and a facilitator to help me discern the direction that God is moving FCC in our Renewal as we seek to serve the least of these in new and different ways.

**4. Provide a statement written by the pastor that describes the intended benefits, both for the pastor and for the congregation, of the program as planned.**

The energy that has driven me to work on this sabbatical grant with my congregation indicates the strong need of my spirit to take this sabbatical time and use it to rest but also to more fully integrate my Judaic heritage into my Christian ministry. As laid out above, this time will not only enrich and feed my soul and help it to sing even louder and with more energy, but will help me to step back, see where my energies should be focused and help my congregation to take on more of the work that I have been undertaking. When I arrived, this was a congregation in need of healing, love, acceptance and encouragement to step out into new territory. With God's help, this congregation is now stronger and more resilient; I need to be able to let go and let the congregation take on more. I believe that by their willingness to explore their own roots, reflect on their faith experiences and by working together to build a labyrinth, the congregation will be stronger spiritually, and will be empowered to join with me as we move forward to more fully serve God and those in need. We want to find a place to wander separately with God and then, together, bring back the learnings for all to benefit. We want to incorporate those learnings into our church and into my ministry. As when more than one person walks a labyrinth at the same time, I believe that we will be on the same journey towards the center – towards God – we will take different paths and will meet up at the center.

**5. Provide a similar statement written by a representative of the congregation that describes the intended benefits both for the congregation and the pastor.**

Through this experience, we hope to have a stronger minister and congregation. Discovering things along the way that we did not know about others in the congregation, will help us to identify some new leaders, who will make a difference in our congregation with the talents that God has given them. We hope to have a renewed sense of passion for our congregation, for God, and for the love of others in our community. As we intentionally take this journey together, we will bond in ways that have not been possible. We were a stagnant congregation when Martha first came to our church in 2014, and she has worked many long hours and sacrificed so much of herself to bring our congregation to a better place. We are much stronger now, strong enough to carry on without her for a few months, as she has a much needed and deserved time away from the congregation. Martha always talks about what makes her heart sing, and it would make all the members of our congregation's hearts sing if we can give her this amazing opportunity. We also look forward to the congregation having our own roots and reflection process, and to share with Martha all we have discovered upon her return.

**6. Describe the congregation's plans for covering the necessary pastoral functions during the pastor's absence, for celebration of the pastor's leave-taking and return, and/or for programs or activities that will serve to renew the congregation as a whole.**

Martha's final Sunday with the congregation will include a laying on of hands as a way of signifying our mutual intentions and support for this journey. A final meal together will follow to bid farewell to Martha and Pat.

Our reflection and renewal time will intentionally work on our *Roots, Reflection and Renewal* theme, based on the ideas that have been generated by the congregation. We will listen to each other's stories, support and care for each other and continue to do good for others. Several members of our congregation have agreed to lead us in this process.

In Martha's absence, we plan to cover our Sunday service in the following ways:

- Guest Pastors (including four members of our own congregation who are ordained)
- Special Music programs led by our Minister of Music
- Roots/Reflection Sundays - time to reflect on our stories and our journey together (led by a guest facilitator)

We will create a directory to record our individual faith journeys as a way of getting to know each other better, and have the opportunity to reflect on our roots, draw closer to each other and remember who we are and who we are becoming.

Our youth will be video interviewing our members who we will ask to share their stories during some of our worship services. This electronic directory will be a "living" document that could be expanded in the future as new members become part of our faith community.

We will also memorialize our over 100 year history with a display that we interweave with our stories, since several of our members have been at FCC for more than 50 years.

"Dinners with a Cause" will be held monthly to benefit outside organizations that FCC has supported and/or those with whom we want to make new connections, based on our congregation's input. We will also host a dinner for those who rent/use our space: the Boy Scouts, AA, and the Upper Westchester Muslim Society, in order to learn about their mission in our community.

Our most ambitious project will be the building of a permanent labyrinth that will be open to the community. In addition to Martha, several members participated in a labyrinth experience at FCC, and found it very helpful in their faith journey. It is a part of our Roots that connects to our present since we know that Martha walks labyrinths. This connection has made many of us aware of the positive aspects of labyrinth walking. We know that it can be a lasting part of our sabbatical work, helping us once Martha returns, to discern where God is moving us as a congregation in the Renewal part of this grant proposal.

**7. Tell how the pastor and the congregation will communicate and share insights from the renewal program with one another at the conclusion of the renewal program.**

Prior to Martha's return to our pulpit, we would have small house gatherings at various members' homes to share what has been happening with the congregation in Martha's absence, and she will talk about her own journey. On Martha's first Sunday, we will have a homecoming celebration, worship service and lunch, followed by walking our new labyrinth together. We will present our new directory as well as a DVD of our journey and recorded reflections to share with Martha as we begin the next phase of our journey together. Subsequently with the help of a trained facilitator, who will be working with Martha independently, we will envision how to join

our experiences, how we can enrich our congregation and wider community because of how the Spirit has moved us during this time. Through this process, we will uncover the Renewal part of where God is moving us.

**8. Give a description of the process by which the congregation determined whether to submit a proposal. Favorable consideration will be given only to proposals that provide evidence of broad congregational support for the program.**

In the fall of 2017, Martha reached out to several congregation members to discern whether FCC would be interested in the Lilly Clergy Renewal Program. The members were excited about it and encouraged Martha to form a planning committee to further consider applying for the grant. Six members volunteered and started work with Martha, eager to engage the entire congregation in dialogue. Three open sessions were held with the congregation, along with discussions during various leadership meetings. Ideas were generated for how we might use this time for reflection and renewal. We also used our two main publications, *Thursday's Word*, and *The Carillon*, a new page on our website, as well as several of Martha's sermons, to invite congregants to share their ideas about ways our church might benefit from this opportunity. The enthusiasm was electric, and people shared ideas and hopes for personal and collective spiritual growth for our church. The ideas that were generated were shaped into a cohesive plan for a church-wide time to uncover our roots and reflect on them while Martha is away. At our Annual Meeting in January 2018, the congregation voted unanimously to apply for this grant, and to work together on our *Roots, Reflection and Renewal*.

**B. Congregational Information**

**1. Provide the date of founding and number of years at your present location. Describe any especially illuminating or distinctive historical events in the life of this church.**

FCC was founded in 1912 by 37 people who worshipped on the second floor of an auditorium. They purchased a small plot of land and built the "stone" church. A six acre lot was purchased in 1948 and over the next seven years the church and ancillary spaces were built. During this time, FCC became the social and spiritual hub of the Protestant community. Membership declined in the 70's and 80's as the demographics of the community changed; FCC began to focus more on opportunities for Christian mission. This included opening our doors to AA and the Boy Scouts, two missions we still support. In 1994, a Columbarium was established on the property next to the sanctuary. The congregation hired an assistant minister who was openly gay and approved becoming an Open and Affirming church in January 2013, and in 2014, called an openly gay pastor. Since the arrival of Rev. Jacobs, FCC has enjoyed the unique opportunity of renting space to a Lutheran Church for its worship, to a Synagogue for celebration of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur each year, and most recently to a Muslim Society to use as their place of worship while they build their own mosque. Throughout our history, the congregation has changed buildings and transformed itself time and again. But through all the years and changes, this congregation has stood as witness to one loving constant – the presence of God. Those 37 stalwart souls who made the decision in 1912 to build our church are still with us in spirit today. These are the foundation stones upon which we build our future, seeking to continue our mission: "With open hands and open hearts, we care for each other and the wider world through prayer, connections and compassion. We are compelled by our faith to follow in the path of Jesus Christ, by both listening to and spreading God's love to all people."

**2:** Current membership is 238 and average worship attendance is 75.

**3:** Our last four senior ministers: Martha Jacobs, 2014 – present; Tom Lenhart, 2006 – 2013; Timothy Ives, 1988 – 2004; and Richard Ryder, 1977 – 1988.

**4:** Internal ministries include: Annual Barn/Tag Sale (provides an opportunity for persons of limited means to obtain quality merchandise for little or no cost); Play Care (offers both nursery and pre-school programs that encourage academic learning and socialization in a nurturing environment); Luke’s Pantry (collects and delivers food for the Community Center of Northern Westchester throughout the year); Emergency Shelter Partnership (opens the doors of our church for two weeks each winter to give the homeless meals, a place to sleep and warm clothing); and the annual Youth Mission trip (this year a recovery effort to assist in rebuilding after Hurricane Irma). External ministries include: Neighbors Link (provides services, education and workforce development for new immigrants); UCC Coalition for LGBT (supports individuals and churches as they explore the Open and Affirming process); New Castle United for Youth (takes action to prevent and reduce youth substance abuse in the community, through youth engagement, parent education and collaboration among community organizations working with youth); Coalition for Youth and its Subcommittee for Community Healing (helped the town deal with sexual abuse issues at the High School); A-Home (provides affordable housing for low income people in the community), and a Youth Volunteer Fair (in conjunction with the school district and local organizations, provides an opportunity for youth to find volunteer opportunities).

## **Part C – Pastoral Information**

**C-1** Martha received her BFA from US International University in 1974. She attended New York Theological Seminary, graduating in 1996 with her Masters in Divinity and in 2006 with her Doctorate.

**C-2** Martha was ordained by the United Church of Christ, New York Metro Association on April 20, 1997. She worked for NY Presbyterian Hospital for three years as a chaplain (2011-13) and worked for The HealthCare Chaplaincy from 1997-2010, as Director of Pastoral Care at United Hospital in Port Chester, NY, and Managing Editor of *PlainViews*, an e-newsletter for professional chaplains. She has served FCC since April of 2014.

### **C. Provide any other information about the pastor and his or her ministry, career and community involvements that may be helpful for the review committee to know.**

Martha reached out to the greater Chappaqua community to help us heal following sexual abuse by a beloved high school teacher. She has organized many community vigils following tragic events in our country and has championed our church’s involvement in the wider community, including opening our doors to three different religious traditions that needed places to worship. As a chaplain for 25 years, Martha was not eligible for a sabbatical. She worked at Ground Zero after 9/11 for several months, and has tried to do self-care through occasional silent retreats. Having spent the past almost five years with us, and helping us grow both spiritually and in membership, we believe that Martha deserves an opportunity for respite and renewal that goes beyond the “normal” sabbatical. The Lilly Grant for Clergy Renewal is the right fit for her and for our congregation.