

A: FRONT

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Mutual aid network

St. Paul's UCC congregation creates Birdsboro Shares to bring people together

Translate



Stuart Wells and Pastor Deb Parker-Hill of St. Paul's United Church of Christ in Birdsboro are leading Birdsboro Shares, a mutual aid network. BILL UHRICH/READING EAGLE

By Bill Uhrich
buhrich@readingeagle.com

St. Paul's United Church of Christ is the little church that could.

The small Birdsboro congregation has made commitments to improve the lives of residents in the borough and the surrounding areas.

With a weekly attendance of around 25, the congregation has focused on mission work within the community, beginning in 2014 when it spearheaded the Mission Trip Birdsboro and Beyond program, which has grown into its own entity that this year assembled 142 volunteers at 63 sites in southern Berks to help with home repairs and landscaping.

The congregation isn't content with birthing that success and has started a new local mission program: Birdsboro Shares.

Stuart Wells, who has been a part of Mission Trip Birdsboro and Beyond since its inception, and Pastor Deb Parker-Hill have led a new nondenominational community mutual aid network that will connect people with needs to people who can help.

Through a visioning process, the congregation asked itself some basic questions, Wells said.

What do you see in the community that breaks your heart?

What do you love about the community?

What are the important issues that need to be addressed?

"People from the community were invited, and we came up with a lot of different things," Wells said. "Care of the elderly, children not having things to do, homelessness and food insecurity. Big list of things."

The congregation discovered that people were passionate about each one of those issues, but it didn't solve the problem of what to do about it, he said.

"We came to start looking into mutual aid networks because they can actually address all of those things and have the flexibility that they can constantly change if needs change or if the situation changes, the network can also change," Wells said.

Parker-Hill gave an example of a woman who needed curtain rods hung in her home and asked for help with that small project.

"She couldn't climb on the chair and use the drill, and so something as simple as that," Parker-Hill said. "But if you're isolated and don't have anybody to do that for you, it means a lot."

Parker-Hill emphasized that the network isn't transactional in the sense that those helped are required to contribute to the network.

"It's not like OK, we did this for you, so now you do something for us," she said. "It doesn't work like that. But she, on her own, spontaneously said, 'You know, I can't hang curtain rods, but I love to bake. If you ever need baked goods, let me know.'"

Birdsboro Shares is, at its most basic level, people helping people help each other, Wells said.

The types of help include grocery or medication pickup and delivery, transportation to medical appointments, wellness checks or friendly visits to help reduce isolation, basic household repairs and handyperson jobs, and pet care.

Another recent project that the mutual aid network accomplished was the construction of a wheelchair ramp.

“They filled out the form on our website,” Wells said, “and that that was just one of a multitude of needs in that situation.”

Wells sees the mutual aid network as a manifestation of the concept of the body of Christ at work in the community.

“Mutual aid is a little bit like that, in that everybody has something to offer,” he said. “And it’s not charity. It’s considerably different, and a lot of people don’t want to ask for charity. But this isn’t. You’re not asking for charity. We’re all sharing.”

To participate in Birdsboro Shares, go to the St. Paul’s website, stpaulsbirdsboro.org/birdsboro-shares-mutual-aid-network/, and fill out the form.

“Christ never said, ‘Build me temples.’” Wells said. “He said, ‘Go, go out.’ So, you know, the point is to be out doing things.”

No matter how small the congregation is.

“You know,” Wells said, “there were 12 disciples who changed the world.”