

TALENTS

When we think of talents, we often picture musicians, artists, dancers, or actors. Perhaps a sports figure. In Matthew, scripture speaks differently. A man, leaving on a journey, left his property in the hands of his household staff, giving each different amounts of responsibility according to their talents. The servant with the most, fearful of losing everything, hid his money safely, but had no gain. The poorest risked what he had bravely, and succeeded.

At Woodfords we today are given so many opportunities to serve. Sometimes we hold back and avoid risk and change, not spending our talents. Other times, we courageously take on the challenge and try to bring the church forward to better serve God. For a few minutes I'd like to reflect on the work of Woodfords folk who built the character of this church before it became the community we know today.

Woodfords Church was dedicated in 1872- 137 years ago. But wait, the roots of this congregation go back much earlier than this. In 1765, the first church was a small chapel on Capisic Street. People came by horse and carriage from neighboring towns. This church was closed during the American Revolution when the English burned Portland and the men joined the military, and the women and children moved inland for safety. After the conflict was over, many people returned. They reopened the church and chose a strong leader, Caleb Bradley for its pastor. It was an active place for many years. Caleb and Bradley Streets were named in his honor.

After the disastrous Portland Fire, hundreds of people had lost their homes. They left the inner city to rebuild in safety. Many chose the Woodfords area where a tavern keeper, Chauncy Woodford had established his business. The community grew and more businesses developed. The neighborhood women, tired of the long walk to the chapel on

Capisic Street, began holding their church school and women's groups meetings in available space near their homes. Families gathered together and decided they needed a church of their own. They raised \$800 and purchased the plot of land where Jones & Rich now stands. By 1871 they had raised \$6,000 and borrowed \$5,000 more and began the structure. The men did the carpentry work and the women provided them with food to keep going. They also made the rugs and the pew cushions. Most of the work had to be done in the evenings and on the weekends. When it was ready there were 26 charter members, 8 men and 18 women, including Hannah Woodford and Mary Baxter, who donated the round stained glass window now in our chapel. The Deering sisters gave us the bell we still use today.

By 1920, the membership had multiplied. Twelve thousand dollars was raised to buy Mary Harmon's house across from the church. It was replaced by the present parish house. Her home had already been used to house overflow church school classes. By the mid twenties the school numbered 1,178 students, the largest Congregational Church School in America.

Memorial Hall was a gift of the Leach family in honor of their son, Donald, who was killed in World War I. His wife Iona lived with her in-laws and all three of them dedicated themselves to supporting the church and community. Iona later married Raymond Grant. At the conclusion of her life of service, she gave a bequest to the seniors of our church now known as the Grant Fund. Its purpose was and is to bring opportunity and safety to our older folk that many would not otherwise have. This fund provides emergency support, life line communications, bus trips, luncheons and study programs to assist us to take care of ourselves. In return, many seniors serve on committees and boards of this church and contribute their experience, wisdom and energy in every area of need.

By 1956 with the return of grateful military survivors of World War II, and the national surge in church membership, Woodfords outgrew the seating capacity of our church across the street. Led by members like Paul Merrill, Ken Hillman and Don McDonald, together with a host of men and women from our membership of 2,000, our present church, cloister, and chapel were built. The chapel was a gift from the family of George Meloon, a local florist.

From this congregation many members stepped forward with the encouragement of our fine pastors to inaugurate unique programs.

Ann Morrill (a teacher) and Katrina and Al Rich (parents of a retarded son) saw the need for a school of train-ables. Under their leadership a small school began in our Undercroft where it functioned well for several years. It grew so large it needed an established building of its own and more staff. It continues to serve today.

Berger Johnson and others recognized the need for a half-way house for former mental health patients returning to the community. Woodfords was a catalyst for the establishment of Shalom House. Our Women's Union provided many personal touches including hand-made quilts for every bed.

More recently, an energetic worker, Freddie Wagnis, and others recognized the need for food and supplies for the needy in Portland before the system kicked in. Working with other churches the Food Pantry began its mission and continues today with generous volunteer support.

Not all dreams succeeded. Dr. Thompson and others wanted to provide seed money for housing for the elderly before senior housing had become common. Not enough support

caused this project to fail, but it alerted many people to a need, and now we have varied senior centers.

These are only a few of many ways Woodfords people have used their talents, extending our influence and care beyond our walls. The Women's Union made beautiful quilts all year. Sold them in the Cloister on Blanket Sunday and bought hundreds of blankets to send to needy people here and abroad. We joined Amnesty International to fight for the freedom of those imprisoned unjustly. Summer conference sites at Pilgrim Lodge and Rockcraft have been supported physically and monetarily. Missionaries have been sponsored. The Gate, a 60's coffee house for street youths at State Street Church, was manned and mothered. A summer playground for the neighborhood was held in our parking lot. The Lay Ministry program reaches the home bound and our current Missions program supports so many people here, across the country and abroad. It has always been this churches role to see a need and try to meet it. There are many of you doing just that today, building new traditions.

There have been three major changes in my lifetime at Woodfords that have altered our congregation dramatically.

In 1957 George Sharpe and a small delegation were sent as delegates to Purdue University to our National Synod to vote on the merger of the Evangelical and Reformed Church with our Congregational Denomination, forming the United Church of Christ. They returned with reports of success and, with a leap of faith, Woodfords became the first church in Maine to embrace the new denomination.

A second big event led by Carol Gillis, Anne Bencks and George Sharpe and others was the two year study and acceptance of becoming a Just Peace Church. This upholds the

principles of respect, listening and discussing in making changes in our church and community.

The third and most recent of the major concepts is the acceptance of our role as an Open and Affirming Congregation, an idea still being debated in many places, but an accepted, natural and intrinsic part of our church today.

Those of us who are here this morning are heirs to the struggles and generosity of many souls who have given willingly of their energy and spirit. Many seniors here today were part of these projects and changes and many remain active in these causes. We are very grateful for you who are younger, dedicated and clear in your vision for our future. We will continue to give you our support, our well wishes and our love as we try to do God's work in this special place.

-Avon Oakes, May 2009