

Pastoral Letter  
January 23, 2022

Dear Members and Friends,

I want to ask your help. I want to ask you to help in preparing for what will be needed for the time before us. To look at where we are and where we will be heading into the weeks ahead. There is new *energy* heading our and your help in making sure we are ready as we can be - is so very important.

First, though, we need to look back and realize where we have been since March 16, 2020 –a year and ten months ago. We could never have imagined what was ahead or how challenging our personal lives and the ministry of this congregation would become. Our priority to stay safe and connected (somehow), to continue worship (in whatever ways we could), and to maintain all the programs from Bible Jam to Leadership meetings online (which we did), highlights just a bit the wave that crashed into us and that we were determined to survive.

Think of our ministries that are so important to this congregation and so challenging in the best of times: growing youth programs, staying active and a force in justice programs, expanding Christian Ed, inviting new members to join us, intentional community outreach and the comfort of just being present with one another – all these and more were nearly wiped out! We spent enormous amounts of time in providing worship and pastoral care, which left little time for anything else. We set priorities and did our best. You may remember teaching one another Zoom so we could see each other, hear each other, talk and be together. For months we had daily and weekly Zoom meetings, increased phone calls, did everything and anything so folks knew they were not forgotten, helping those who needed food, medicine, or a ride to a doctor. And we regularly reviewed our priorities and adjusted – we are moving in to just such a time, again.

You know how hard this all has been. You know. But I want to say it again: “This has been hard” and the impact is still being understood. We have persevered and have a way yet to go. And we are going to keep going...

I hope you recognize how this congregation has been a leader in our communities and Association during this time. After just five months into the pandemic, we began in person worship on August 30, 2020. With protocols and safety practices carefully observed and managed, we returned as soon as we could. We needed to. We needed to be together. Online. In-person. Together.

***Still, we had ups and downs.*** Three times before the end of 2020, we suspended worship out of safety concerns, implementing the protocols of our Sanctuary Return Committee, calling and notifying people that someone in their close proximity had tested positive. And we kept going, even when *in-person Christmas* was suspended a few days before because of positivity tests. Within two days, everybody stepped up; came in and recorded the liturgy, created “choir pieces” online through Sean and the choir’s great care and commitment - and we had Christmas Worship. Online? Yes. We had Christmas worship. An incredible effort on top of already incredible efforts. What a blessing!

I hope you remember just how hard you and we have worked during these 22 months under the *oppressive* conditions of these times. Heather, Sean, Laura - all of them and you, your prayers and all the ways you were able to step up has to be celebrated not forgotten. Keeping the lights on, the grounds safe and landscaped, managing the spaces for twelve-step groups especially struck hard as churches and venues closed around them. Caring for the pre-school, working with Sharing a Meal as they converted their servings to take-out and never closed during the pandemic, They never closed! Irish Step classes! So grateful to all..

And, you know, I am not sure how we did it, except that we always *believed* and *believed we could*.

Last year we stepped up even more. We were in in-person and online worship every Sunday in 2021, including our Lenten observations. We returned for Easter Sunrise on the Great South Bay (Thank you, Mike and Bill and Sayville ferry!), had our Bake Sale, have been blessed with the return of choir practice and eventually The Chancel Choir singing only the postlude so we could minimize the potential for air-borne transmission of the virus from singing. We hosted (you amazing committee!) The Victorian Tea; conducted a highly successful Pack and Play Fundraiser; organized and livestreamed a Foster Care Town Hall with Suffolk County DSS; expanded our Pride Celebration in June to different speakers each Sunday; enjoyed the return of our Christmas Concert, and Christmas – in our sanctuary – on Christmas Eve! And in those last two months of the year, we felt the extreme loss and celebrated the lives of Karl Hasselriis and Don Gray.

We are strong in God’s love and the Spirit that carries us.

And we are still not back...but nothing over these months has been done without care or love. Like you, I long for the return to one-hour worship, full choir participation, Passing the Peace; looking into your eyes as we share the Communion meal. I can’t

wait for Hospitality, Children's return, maybe even Confirmation Classes and so much more.

So, there's a snapshot of where we have been, much of which you already know because you have been a part of it. And still...

*It is easy to wonder in times like these. To wonder where "this" is, or wonder why this is so, or how come we are doing it this way? Rather than wonder – please, engage me and our leadership in conversation. Let's talk. The art of discourse needs a little practice everywhere you look. Let's start here.*

From everything I see, in 2022 things are going to change very quickly. As this recent variant recedes and we emerge into spring and outdoors, freed up by better treatment and prevention – I believe we will "be back" in earnest. The energy is even more pent up than last year, when we had a brief taste of what it could be like to de-mask (before Omicrom descended on the world.)

We have accomplished much during this time. Without any pride or hubris, we are a model for returning to worship – and have been from the first wave that struck in 2020. There are churches and communities of faith who have yet to open, or opened briefly, only to close again. Thank you for the support and challenges you have brought us in keeping *this community of faith* safe and strong and together, living into the Gospel in the ways we never thought we'd need to learn.

***Please speak your piece.*** Your voice is really important, always has been, and continues to be. Send me your thoughts. Call and make an appointment. Talk with others and "take notes" so we have your ideas to build upon. Please. If there's something you've been thinking about saying, something you think needs to be changed, something you really like – write it down. Let me know. Let someone know. Congregational life means that we all have a voice and are willing to be part of this church in all the ways we can, from membership to liturgist to being in worship (in person or online). Most importantly, though, it means that we care for each other without ceasing.

Thank you for taking the time to consider these things. In different times, we would be having this conversation at congregational luncheons or hospitality. I really look forward to hearing from you. Even more – seeing you! Stay in touch! Keep the faith!

With love,  
Ray

### ***Announcements – 1/23/22***

1. Bible Jam resumes on Tuesday, January 25<sup>th</sup> at 10:30 AM and 7:00 PM. For this week, we will have the morning session in person in the Vestry and online. Please join us. Find the online link at [www.sayvilleucc.org](http://www.sayvilleucc.org).
2. Aging Well: A Conversation about the Benefit of Years! Join Jane Ann Groom and me for a conversation about Aging on Wednesday, January 26<sup>th</sup> at 11:00 AM. We are exploring whether this is a group that might be helpful. Please join us. Your input is welcome and besides, always nice to visit with Jane Ann. Online: Follow Zoom link from [www.sayvilleucc.org](http://www.sayvilleucc.org)
3. Ushers and Liturgists are needed. Please see Sue Lanchantin to sign up. Your help would be very much appreciated.
4. Are you interested in learning how to help prepare worship, including bulletins, selecting music, creating PowerPoints, Media and bringing the message? Do you have an interest in Christian Ed? Please let Ray know if you have interest in any of these areas.
5. Are you interested in considering membership in Sayville Congregational United Church of Christ? It's good to have a church home and a voice in the decisions that are made that guide this ministry in our community and the many ways we serve. We would welcome telling you more! Just give Ray a call.
6. Please plan to join us on Sunday, January 30, 2022 when we welcome Barbara Salva as a new member! Welcome, Barbara.
7. The Chancel Choir – you can join! Want to sing with this amazing choir under the exceptional leadership and direction of Sean Cameron? Let Sean or any of the choir members know!
8. Please stay in touch. If you have some needs or concerns, please let us know. Ray is always available for pastoral care, as well. We are here for you in all the ways we are able.