

Restoring and Maintaining Health in a Community of Faith

“Love the Lord with all of your heart, mind and strength and Love your neighbors as you love yourself” are the two great commandments affirmed by Jesus in his conversation with a temple lawyer in the Gospel according to Luke. These commandments form the basis of a community of faith’s well-being and they are the challenge for followers of Jesus Christ to live fully and faithfully.

Yet, they also define our relationship with God and our relationships with each other, whether members of this community of faith or not. Both are, also, fragile and capable of being broken and shattered by human actions that betray God and betray persons. We at Penfield Presbyterian know this truth all too well and have experienced the pain of the wounds of shattered lives in two traumatic incidents of sexual abuse.

Our current Safe Ministry policies, procedures and practices have continued to evolve over the past thirty years to assure a safe and welcoming community for all persons and prevent sexual misconduct from happening. We have developed a reporting procedure that includes Session, appropriate leadership of the Presbytery of Genesee Valley and when necessary law enforcement; we use the practice of two adults in a classroom with no child left alone with one adult; we perform criminal background checks of all employees, including pastors and associate pastors; we have annual training for all congregational leaders and, most recently, the congregation was trained about sexual misconduct and how to be alert to behaviors sexual predators employ; we are installing security cameras outside and inside the building;

and we are creating practices for health crisis that may occur during worship and other congregational events. To read our Safe Ministry policies, procedures and practices, please contact the church office at ppcadmin@rochester.rr.com or calling at (585) 377-1620.

Because we believe there are no secrets in a healthy community of faith, we will share some of our painful history which resulted in trauma to staff and community. The first occurred about thirty years ago when a male senior pastor committed an act of sexual abuse to a female associate pastor by kissing her while she was seated in her office. This unwanted sexual advance was not initially dealt with appropriately. It later became the subject of a Permanent Judicial Commission (PJC) investigation and trial where the associate pastor was able to tell her story of the incident and its effect upon her and the retired senior pastor took responsibility for his actions. The PJC did rebuke the retired senior pastor.

The second occurred in the 90's when a long-time member and Deacon of the church confessed to sexually abusing several boys both in the congregation and in the Boy Scout Troop of which he was a leader. The pastor at the time heard the confessions but failed to alert the Session or law enforcement as the law required in a misguided and ill-informed attempt to resolve the traumatic experience of the boys through mediation. Eventually, Session was notified, and law enforcement was notified, and appropriate actions were taken. The perpetrator was arrested, tried, convicted and sentenced to prison. The boys were provided access to trauma therapy. The congregation subsequently engaged in a multi-year discernment and healing

process and implemented policies and procedures to prevent such trauma from being perpetrated ever again.

What we learned from both traumatic experiences is the truth of the Hebrew understanding that one person can destroy a community. Not only were the associate pastor and the boys deeply wounded by the actions of people in positions of authority and leadership, but their families were shattered, and the Penfield Presbyterian congregation was wounded and lives today with the effects of those actions.

However, God is always creating new life and seeks to guide humanity toward healing and well-being using knowledge, experiences that teach us lessons, skills and tools. We have used all of these to foster healing and find the new life God intends for all people to experience.

The path toward healing and well-being is often long and difficult, and we are walking down that path committed to the well-being of all people who are our neighbors because God is with us every step of way and is showing us the power of truth-telling, hope, and love that is grace. A grace creating new life today and every day.