Seth and Stephanie’s Report for Pastoral Review, December 2015

As 2015 comes to a close we thank God for the incredibly rich opportunities we’ve had by virtue of being called to this church and to this work. Taking stock of accomplishments and happenings at the end of a 12 month period always reminds us that almost nothing of what we do professionally can be accomplished alone—it’s all community work. We are weak individually, but as a community we are a transformation powerhouse (for individuals, communities and the world)—which, we believe, is what Christ intended when Christ formed the church.

Last year’s report was laid out through the goal statements that the Consistory had set for the year 2014. We looked at 1) Going Deeper 2) Supporting Other Churches and 3) Collaborating For Impact. This year, while those goals are most definitely still in our minds and have positively informed our work and the work of the church, we’ll lay things out more traditionally: 1) Preaching/Worship, 2) Teaching/Speaking/Advocating, 3) Pastoral Care and 4) Administration 5) Justice and Mercy.

One thing we’ll do is that is a bit different is to present some of these topics by speaking first of how they ‘roll out’ in congregational life and then sharing how these aspects of ministry are being done in the ‘parish’ (immediate community beyond the walls of the church) and beyond.

Finally, at the May 2015 Consistory Retreat we identified one additional goal that we defined as “connecting.” “Connecting” feels to us to be particularly important. It happens almost organically for lots of people, but for others, without intentionality, connecting doesn’t really happen. Some reflections on “Connecting,” and how we might do this better in 2016, will conclude the report.

Preaching/Worship:
During the year 2015 the Kaper-Dales preached on 46 Sunday mornings. This is probably 5 more times than we’d preached annually during the time that Patty was with us as co-pastor. During that phase she was preaching 8 times a year and a couple of interns would get a Sunday morning each. Most Sundays this year we followed the lectionary, except during the season of Lent, when we focused on “The Mantle of Christ”—what does it mean to “put on Christ.” Preaching continues to be very important to us, and we always put a tremendous amount of time into every sermon. That being said, even 15 years into this we find the process of writing thoughtful sermons to be a battle. It is often the case that the preacher for the week is putting an extra 12 hours into the sermon between Friday night and Sunday morning. We are both very thankful that we preach only every other week! We would like to discuss building a couple of our other ordained pastors within our congregation into the preaching rotation of the church. Even if this was just 4 more Sundays a year it would make a big difference for us. We also think the church deserves to hear from other eloquent voices and these other preachers are interested in sharing their gifts, as well.

As we encourage other churches in their efforts to revitalize one of the central things we discuss is the importance of not having the pastor preach every Sunday. If we ever leave Highland Park we think it would be important for RCHP to have this in mind as well. It is nearly impossible to be a significant community/regional presence, and do a good job with pastoral care, if you are also preaching each week. A clergy model that continues to have at least 2 regular voices in the pulpit is pretty critically important for RCHP’s way of being church.
Our sermons continue to be very focused on a careful read of scripture and on an analysis of that text as it interacts with our community as it lives a life shaped by Christ in the world. We find ourselves more and more comfortable preaching the radical story of Christ’s life, death and resurrection, and we find that key story to be the backbone upon which all our preaching and reflecting occurs. Pastors, like all Christians, are always on their own faith journeys. We are thankful for where we find ourselves right now, in terms of conviction about the story and a passion to respond to it with our whole lives. We believe that our preaching reflects these commitments more than ever.

Worship at RCHP continues to be something very special. This could have been a very difficult year of transition, with Paul leaving, but instead, it has been wonderful. Amos has brought continuity to what Paul was doing, but to say Amos ‘filled Paul’s shoes’ would not reflect what has happened. Amos brings his own shoes, and they fit really well in this place. We have watched a number of new people blossom musically and we’ve seen our musical styles and the accompanying theology develop in ways that bring great depth.

Amos has worked very hard with us to create shorter services, in order to honor the education hour. That has been working. One reason why services flow well is because of the weekly meeting that the three of us have together. By discussing the music and the message we are able to develop a liturgy that really works.

One of the key components of our worship service is the positive experience that little children have in Children’s Worship. We are so thankful for Lara, and for Sandy Beresford and Jasmin Figeroa, who have made this time relevant and meaningful for kids. A solid children’s worship program is essential to our continued growth as a church.

In 2016 we would like to be more intentional about asking consistory members to assist in the development of prayers and liturgies. This is a tricky thing to do, in terms of scheduling, but it is not impossible. Over the years we have included more voices in this process and we will seek to do so again.

One thing we’d like to see more of in 2016 is serious attention toward welcoming newcomers and connecting with current members in new and personal ways on Sunday morning. This has started already! We are excited about the presence of an Elder in the Prayer Chapel, and a Deacon in the back of the sanctuary to greet new folks and to talk with everyone about possible engagement in ministries of the church.

In addition to English Worship at RCHP we have been blessed, throughout 2015, with worship opportunities brought to the RCHP community from Pastor Henny and from Pastor Ben. Pastor Henny, twice a month, and Ben, each week, lead a worship service in Indonesian and Spanish, respectively. These first language services are really important to a portion of our congregation and both of these services have been carried out in ways that draw people into the life of RCHP, not only in to the life of that particular worship service. We have had important conversations in Consistory and in staff meetings about how to navigate these linguistic/cultural transitions in people’s lives.

In addition to Sunday services we developed services for Seder Supper/Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Longest Night. Seth preached at the Ash Wednesday service for the
Collegiate Reformed Churches. Also, as has been the case for 8 years now, Seth developed the Interfaith Thanksgiving Worship Service.

Finally, it has been a blessing to have our choirs share their lives with others beyond our walls. We had an opportunity to sing at the town-wide MLK celebration this year, as well as the interfaith service, and on both occasions it was clear, from the response of the audience, that the music was deeply appreciated. We were particularly proud of Voices of Praise and the work they did learning about Syrian Refugees and linking that to I Want Jesus to Walk Me With.

Last year we spoke about the possibility of having RCHP praise teams ‘hit the road’ and support worship in some other local RCA churches. This year RCHP has the opportunity to do that. Keiko Kereh and Jonathan Austin have, on a monthly basis, been bringing praise music to the Keyport Community Church. This has been a wonderful opportunity for them and a blessing to the people of Keyport. We would like to encourage another team to go forth like this in 2016.

Another place for worship has been on the steps of our church. We hesitated to list this here, as it is advocacy and worship really wrapped into one, but it seems that it is firstly worship. Over the past year we’ve held two or three impromptu services on the steps of the church where we could sing songs and pray prayers of lament over verdicts involving the shooting of unarmed black men by police and over shootings in churches and communities. These have been sacred moments, really important to the community as a whole. At times like these it seems the whole parish of Highland Park expects us to lead in connecting with God.

One last worship related event this year was our Worship & Justice-A-Thon. This was a very profound all night experience of prayer, singing, testimonies and education. Many people ‘found their voice’ over the course of the evening/morning. We are thankful that this was done while Neil Selden was still alive, just so we could tell him about it! He always wanted a full night of testimonies and worship!

Finally, other sacred moments in the sanctuary this year have been weddings and funerals. We have performed 6 funerals and 4 wedding in 2015. Weddings and funerals are obviously important pastoral care moments (and extended moments, in terms of premarital and bereavement counseling). The experience of worshiping God while celebrating covenantal relationships and navigating the strange waters between life and death, is something that we take very seriously and that we remain grateful to participate in regularly.

If there is one thing we’d like to see change in 2016 it is the role of Derek Cannon. Derek’s role has blessed members (a large portion of the church loves gospel music and connects with God through this expression) and it also has the potential to draw new people to our community. Derek puts tremendous time and energy into developing music with Carl and Amos and is by far the most regular ‘unpaid’ participant in our worship program. It feels to us that Derek’s position should be honored with a small salary. Expectations could increase for Derek—so that he is both gospel choir director and a participant in outreach and evangelism through his music.

We are aware, too, that Carl Phillips will be leaving us—after a wonderful 5 years of music ministry. We have spoken with Carl about what it is that makes music ministry at RCHP enjoyable. We will be including Carl’s input with discussions with Amos and with the entire Consistory as we carve out a path forward for the ministry of music that is so essential to how we worship God.
Teaching/Speaking/Advocating:

Teaching
During all of 2015 we both held weekly bible studies (Wednesday and Friday) that were attended by approximately 10 people/wk (probably 15-20 different ‘regulars’). Both of these moments are important for the participants, as well as important for us as preachers who want to be reflecting on texts in ways that are relevant to the ears of our congregants. Both of us also participated in the Adult Education program, teaching classes that are within our area of expertise and focus.

During the month of November, I (Stephanie) offered a 4-week seasonal bible study on the topic of gratitude. This was attended by 8 people and childcare was provided.

Most of the teaching that occurs at RCHP, however, is not led by us. We are so thankful for Lara and Amos and Wendy and for all the ways that they coordinate teachers and are teachers themselves. With a longer break between services we have more frequently gotten to sit in on adult education. We continue to be in awe of the quality of the teaching and also the quality of the questions raised and issues explored. RCHP adult education is really beautiful!

For the second year we have offered an additional Sunday morning adult education class (bible study) on Sunday mornings. Though it continues to be sparsely attended it has the potential to serve a real need. We intend to continue this, and to grow it, in January 2016.

Developing a meaningful confirmation class, for the 7 kids in this year’s class, has been very important to us. We are excited to have Amos’ thoughtfulness about theological topics and his probing questioning mind which invites the youth to probe the depths of faith too. While Amos is the lead teacher in this class he is accompanied, nearly every week, by one of us. We also take turns teaching Confirmation, with each of us teaching approximately 1 time each month.

We have put a decent amount of time and energy into creating small groups over the past few years. For the most part these haven’t developed as we hoped—they haven’t sustained. There are 4 exceptions to this, however: 1) The Table 2) Monica and David Day’s home group and 3) the 20’s and 30’s group and 4) the Women’s Covenant group (which Stephanie attends each month). Each of these opportunities vary greatly in terms of content, purpose etc…but what is shared is that they are regular gatherings of church people who are seeking to develop their lives together as members of RCHP. During 2016 we will spend more time with the leaders of these groups so that we can celebrate what is working, and so that we can replicate aspects of what is working into other small groups. We have already approached one young family about a new home group that they are willing to host.

Education for children and youth at RCHP really falls into the realm of Sunday School and Youth Group. Both are educational moments—in different ways. We are thankful for the curriculum focused approach of Sunday School, and the way that children and youth who attend regularly are being exposed to the great breadth of biblical stories. We are also thankful for the ‘faith in action’/experiential faith approach that seems to be more the direction of education within youth group. That might be overstating the distinction, but there is a distinctly different thing going on in those two moments. The fact that Wendy and Lara take primary responsibility for these has been central to the growing educational ministry of the church.
Vacation Bible School has become one of the highlights of the year for our church, in terms of outreach and discipleship development. This year we had nearly 200 people involved in the program (kids, teens and adults) and each day kids learned bible stories and songs, did crafts and learned about serving others. It was a wonderful opportunity for children to get to know each other before the start of the school year and a great way to enter the church for fall programming. For the second year straight an RCHP member wrote an original musical. Amos’ work will be remembered by this church for a very long time.

Speaking

In 2015 I (Seth) had many opportunities to speak away from RCHP. All of these opportunities are the result of the work of RCHP and its ministries. There have been times, when presenting, when I wished RCHP could be a fly on the wall, to hear how I was articulating what we do and why we do it. Sometimes I think I articulate it better when I’m in other settings! In 2015 Seth spoke at Princeton Seminary (2 times), Princeton University, the Hun School, Middlesex County College, Houston (Churches Together Conference), Baltimore (Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services), Union Seminary, Pastors Conference at Stony Brook Retreat, Meals on Wheels Luncheon, and Seton Hall Prep. It is often the case, at this point, that the audiences have already heard something about the Reformed Church of Highland Park before I arrive.

Advocating

Advocating is different than ‘justice and mercy programs.’ There is a wide range of our activities that fall under this rubric. Firstly, I (Stephanie) have committed to a task force on homosexuality for the Classis. RCHP is represented through me and through Liz Estes. We are trying to create a document that explains why our Classis is open and affirming. This group has met regularly throughout 2015. This matters especially now that we, as a Classis, have officially become open and affirming! This distinction will lead to new scrutiny from the denomination and I have helped articulate that response.

We have advocated in various settings that the bed mandate of 32,000 immigrant detainees/night be lifted. This has led me (Seth) and Jean, Erika Spring and others to meet with Congressman Pallone and staffers for Congressman Smith.

We have advocated for the McCain-Feinstein Amendment that would make it very hard for the CIA to engage in torture again. This led Colin Jager and me (Seth) to read the torture report on the steps of the Department of Justice and, three months prior, it led our church to hold a 5 hour reading of the torture report.

In June we gathered a group of 15 and spent the day in Washington D.C., advocating for bills that support better funding for hunger programs in America and better funding for hunger programs in the developing world. We did this with Bread for the World. This trip was deeply moving for many who attended, and particularly formative, we believe, for three youth delegates.

Part of RCHP’s advocating comes simply though the groups that we invite to use the building. Each month there are meetings of Parents of Students of Color, NAACP, NAMI, Green Peace
and Marc’s Coffee House. All these groups are advocating for a more just world in one way or another. From time to time one of the pastors, or one of our other members speaks at these events and/or engages in actions that they sponsor.

Hosting Conferences: There were four major educational conferences hosted at RCHP this past year. They were about World Renew, Stephen Ministry, Human Trafficking (Jimmy Lee from NYC) and Solitary Confinement. All four of these events were educational events that really seemed to fit our theme of ‘collaborating for impact.’ Each event drew a dozen or more congregations together for a time of learning.

**Pastoral Care:**

Pastoral care is such a huge category. To us, it is the work of being present with congregants in their moments of need. When they are in a moment of experiencing the reality of being ‘poor in spirit,’ ‘meek’ or ‘mourner’ they are first priority in our book. You can say that these are the “first tablet” of the sermon on the mount. Our priority, with pastoral care, is to care for the suffering and isolated. Some of those people are in our church, and some are outside the bounds of the congregation. As our reputation as a caring church grows there are more and more people coming from the surrounding community, and even communities beyond Highland Park, seeking the pastoral care and support that is offered here.

The second category of people we try to provide pastoral care to are those who are part of the ‘second tablet’ of the sermon on the mount. We try to support our peace makers, those who act as comforters, those who are persecuted for justice’s sake.

The third category are probably those going through ‘stage in life’ transitions. For example, confirmations, baptisms, pre-marital counseling…happy time stuff…but stuff that needs significant theological reflection.

We provide approximately 13 hours a week of pastoral care/counseling to people between the two of us. We try to build a fairly regular visitation routine around a handful of shut-in members in our church. This has gotten much harder this year, since we are without Awatt. Pastor Awatt was an absolute blessing in terms of pastoral care. His absence is dramatically felt by us and by the seniors in our community. The reason we cannot fill Awatt’s shoes, in terms of regular pastoral care, is because the needs of people who come to the church from outside the church are so high. Frequently Lisa has 5 or more referrals in a week of people who need to meet with us. These visits range in topics from domestic violence, divorce, drug addiction, DCF involvement, mental health issues, financial issues, housing crises. We have, thankfully, developed quite a web of case managers and helpful partners over the past few years. We are not overwhelmed by these requests for care—but they do take time.

An additional way we provide pastoral care is by bringing people together to care for one another. Our monthly Senior Prayer breakfast is one opportunity for regularly meeting with seniors. Additionally, most Thursdays we have lunch or at least conversation with the Sewing Circle. We have gone with the Sewing Circle for a birthday party for member Kay Pitt at her nursing home in Old Bridge. A December trip to Princeton Seminary for a Christmas Concert is just one more of these special outings that doubles as pastoral care.
Some of the best group pastoral care happens in groups that we are not participating in. The Table with Jasmin provides pastoral care to some of our neediest members. The Prayer and Meditation Group brings together many people for spiritual enrichment, among them many who feel isolated. Prayer Shaws brings together a group of folks who build trusting relationships, even while they make beautiful shawls to give to those in need. It may make sense to speak more with the leaders of these groups about the ‘pastoral care’ aspect of their ministries. Some think about it, but others may not have articulated their function in a pastoral way.

Stephen Ministry provides an essential service to the members of this church, and an essential service to these ministers! Without Stephen Ministers there would be a whole swath of people with high level need in the church who were not receiving the support they needed. We know it is the case that the regular care and concern of a Stephen Minister will outshine our pastoral care that is less frequent. Stephanie continues to work closely with Franco Juricic and John Rametta (Stephen Leaders) as they lead the team of 11 Stephen Ministers. Stephanie meets with potential care receivers to explain the program and determine if they would be a good candidate for this type of care. If concerns arise in the Stephen Ministry partnership, Stephanie frequently meets with the care giver, the care receiver, or both of them to work through the concerns.

One other helpful piece in the work of providing pastoral care is our interns. Over the past year interns regularly visited shut-in members and a couple interns were particularly good at befriending and caring for people in need of care. Jess Munger is also extremely important within the life of our church. She quietly impacts a whole lot of people who are struggling to hold their lives together.

Finally, working with Bonnie and Carol to establishing Church Based Mental Health Services has shown us that we can provide essential services on our property even for people with very serious clinical issues. We have found that the presence of Mental Health Services on site helps a lot of people ‘stay in community’ in ways that are more likely to succeed.

Fellowship as Pastoral Care: For some it may be a stretch to call fellowship events pastoral care, but we see it as very much a form of care. Isolation is one of the most devastating realities facing our congregants, and the events that bring people together—people of all ages—really matter to the life of the church. This year the pastors either planned or participated in the planning of the Fishing Trip, Softball Game, June Church Picnic, Camping, Easter Party, Halloween Party & Bazaar.

Administration

Over the last few years we’ve come to realize that “administrating opportunities for disciples to serve” is likely the most important thing that we do. We, as a community, create fertile soil for growth in faith and action, and that leads people to engage here—and it is what keeps them here. Now that we have a larger congregation, and a larger staff, we spend more time encouraging staff and committees, overseeing interns and making recommendations about starting and stopping and tweaking our communal work. There are a few administrative tasks that we’d like to talk about categorically 1) finance 2) property 3) committees/staffing 4) bringing people in (receiving members) and then we’d like to talk about the variety of ways we ‘administrated opportunities for service to others” in 2015.
Finances: This year, like every year, we created a budget that was a challenge, but not outrageously optimistic. It appears that we will meet our budget for 2015. Our expenses are down and our income is up from 2014. We are thankful to God for the generosity of the congregation. Some of the decisions made over the last year are benefitting us greatly. For example, our gas/oil expenses dropped by $5,000 from 2014 to 2015. This is largely because of the new wall units we have in the sanctuary, which allows us to dramatically reduce the frequency that we need the boiler in the sanctuary. Also, staffing costs are down, as we chose not to replace Awatt's position, we are staffing The Cave with interns and we are getting Princeton Seminary to pay for more and more of the interns they place here. Overall support is up by over $10,000 for the year and, by the end of December, that number should be much higher. A solid finance committee meets regularly and reviews Sharon's excellent work.

Staying on top of the finances, however, is a busy job. The many tracks of funding for the church need constant oversight. It is a joy to work with Sharon Buck.

Property: This year, as has been the case for the past two, property expenses have been next to nothing. Harry Pangemanan has taken full responsibility for keeping RCHP in great shape and he works with us to recruit a variety of people in need to assist him with this work. In an entire year we spent less than $5,000 on upkeep and maintenance in 2015. Those numbers are 1/3 of what we were paying 10 years ago, when we needed to call a construction expert for any number of projects. For this work to be maintained Harry will need to keep working with us, and with additional members of Consistory, to identify deferred maintenance and to address problems before they happen. *As Harry's work down the shore wanes (which won't be for at least 10 months or so) we'll need to talk about whether the church could use Harry's gifts in a more formal, paid, capacity.*

2015 was a wonderful year for the pastors, in terms of property, as Consistory approved a complete redo of the parsonage kitchen! We received that as a wonderful gift to us, from the church, but also as a gift to future pastors who might enjoy this place. We also made a contribution to the parsonage ourselves, as we added a shower and completely overhauled the downstairs bathroom/laundry room.

Staff/Interns: Over the past number of years RCHP has adjusted to being a “program size” church. We have added staffing and interns to cover our vast array of programs. We are fortunate to have been very happy with nearly every staffing and intern arrangement over the years. Partly, we are easy to please. Partly this is because the church itself attracts the kind of people who will succeed in a working environment with us and with the eclectic congregation that is RCHP. An average of 6 hours a week goes to meetings/conversations with staff/interns about the particular duties of their work and about their ideas for making this an even more meaningful place.

Newcomers: It has always been an important role of ours to incorporate newcomers. We put lots of time and energy into immediate follow up with visitors, to building an email list of newcomers and working toward incorporating newcomers into the life of the church community. However, as long as we are the first contact for newcomers there is the potential that we will set the wrong expectations. A one-on-one visit with the pastors might not happen again for months! We led 4 new member classes this year with 28 joining. We are aware, as we enter 2016, that for the first time in 10 years our church is hitting a plateau, in terms of growth. While we received 28 members in 2015 we lost many families to moves. Also, while we received members, we did not receive many young new families—families that will become the backbone
of supporting the church of the future. We baptized 7 babies this year, but realistically there were only 4 baptized who we will likely see on a regular basis. Of the 28 new members who joined there was only 3 children. This is a significant drop off for us from recent years.

As we enter 2016 we’d like to find a way to build community outreach/evangelism into the job description of one of our pastors. We need someone who can put a much larger focus on finding ways to bring more families into the fold. That same person, potentially, could strengthen our efforts at warmly receiving people once they’ve made it through the doors. In addition to thinking about this from a staffing perspective it needs to be on the docket for the consistory to really think about together.

Committees/Consistory: We feel that Consistory has been very strong in all the ways that we have asked the Consistory to be strong. Meeting attendance is good, committees are generally strong and morale is good. We need to ask, however, if a different moment in our ‘organization life’ requires different responsibilities from the Consistory. We don’t know the answer to this question, we’re just open to the reality that things are changing.

**Justice & Mercy (Serving the last)**

It is our feeling that the radical work of serving people who are suffering is key to why RCHP is a wonderful (even ‘successful’) church. People are motivated by a church community that seems to live the message of the gospel. We find, too, that our preaching is a ‘second act,’ a reflection on the ‘first acts’ of service in the world. We cannot imagine trying to teach in a place that doesn’t work constantly on behalf of those in need. All aspects of being a pastor are fulfilling—but actually ‘extracting demons’ ‘driving out diseases’ and bringing about transformation as a community full of the Spirit is where the wellspring of God’s presence is most fully experienced in our lives.

This year we engaged in some many different forms of justice and mercy work. Firstly, this was the year that Churches Improving Communities really exploded. While our Hurricane Sandy work has been going on for some time now, this past year we were mandated to work on 40 homes and spent $100,000.00 to that end. That was in response to a grant we won from the NJ Fund for Hurricane Sandy Relief. The grant started in November, 2014. Working with church members Harry, Carrie, Deb & Anthony, and working with church leaders from other congregations too, to oversee this process, was deeply moving. We far exceeding the goal of 40 homes during this 12 month period and, along the way, we secured enough funding to keep our program going for many more months. Watching work groups stream into our building for hospitality from all over the country, and watching them come back tired after a hard day of work, was motivating for all of us.

Secondly, Neighborcorps, which is in its second complete year, gained significant traction in the county. Working with a steering committee that is (again) made up largely of RCHP church members, gave us opportunities to really start meeting people in and out of jail who are re-entering Highland Park and surrounding communities. Helping this program find funding and legitimacy was a high point of 2015.

Thirdly, throughout this year we piloted Church Based Mental Health Services. It was such a convincing program that the denomination made a $15,000 contribution to jumpstart it! We have written other grants and we have formed a consortium of 6 churches that are working
together to start this program in 6 locations starting January 1st. We intend to hire a director by the end of December, 2015.

The Affordable Housing Corporation purchased 1 more building and ‘took over’ management of two others during 2015. Just today (as we write this report) we received word of another $150,000 grant that was received to take on a new project in Keyport. The 2015 additional sites provide housing for 5 Rutgers students leaving prison, 2 asylum seekers, 2 women on housing vouchers, and 1 refugee family with three kids. The board continues to be made up of 14 church members and two community members and meets monthly to oversee its 14 buildings and the 75 tenants who call our buildings ‘home.’

Immigration Detention remained strong, for the 6th straight year. We have become known throughout the state, as the church that is most faithful to the visitation of detainees. A close working relationship with First Friends makes this work particularly strong. The weekly visits continues to lead to occasional releases, with people like Domingos Macia being released into our community. On average 7 people make visits each week.

RCHP took on more 1-time fundraiser projects than it has in many years. The beauty of these efforts was that each one was somehow integrally linked to what the Spirit was doing in our church. These were not disconnected ‘one-offs’ but carefully considered projects that seemed to be taken on in response to God. We would like to see more efforts like these unfold in 2016, both because they raise funds, but also because they raise awareness and sometimes lead to new committees and ministries.

- Here is a list of some of these fundraisers, with reflections.

We held a fundraising concert for Lower Raritan River Watershed. We raised $1100.00 and built a new relationship with a quality partner in environmental work. This event, and the energy that went into it, helped spur on the restart of our environmental committee.

We held two fundraisers for refugee matters around the globe this year. The first fundraiser was basically a plea for funding after another boat of refugees sunk in the Mediterranean. This brought in $250. One month later we learned about ‘landless people,’ from Myanmar and Bangladesh, floating on the coast of Indonesia. We encouraged our Indonesian members to hold a food fair to raise funds to support refugees after the Indonesian government agreed to take them in. That raised $2,000.00. All of these efforts helped us to prepared for the growing troubles that we witnessed around the globe this year, as refugees tried to find a place to be received. This helped prompt the our Central NJ Interfaith Coalition for Refugee Resettlement. This coalition has dominated the last 45 days of 2015 in our church community. We have raised well over $20,000.00 and we are prepped to bring refugee families into our community immediately.

After the earthquake in Nepal in May we raised $1600, which we sent to the RCA as part of the RCA’s effort to address that crisis. This fundraiser motivated the youth group, and all the children really. We had kids bringing in donations in little boxes that they made.

During Vacation Bible School Pastor Stephanie helped bring bring attention to Heifer International. The kids were so enthusiastic learning about how to help families get what they needed for basic living. The fundraiser brought $1900 to Heifer International, and it brought an
awareness about sustainability to the children of our church. We had guests from the Congo and Zimbabwe who visited us during the week to share about sustainable living in Africa.

In September the Island of Dominica, home to three of our church members, suffered through a severe hurricane. We raised funds, we collected goods (another church member works for a company with a Dominica affiliate) and we advocated for Congressman Pallone to push for more U.S. support for the Island. Our $1,000 donation prompted a $2,000 from the RCA and some attention from the congressman. This engagement was deeply meaningful to our congregants from Dominica.

Neil and Lee Selden were just beginning to get excited about Neighborcorps over the past year. They wanted to contribute funds. They were able to do this by drawing congregants in to be part of a play that Neil wrote. The play was a Neighborcorps fundraiser that brought in $1050.00 and brought attention to the program. Partly because of the way that Neil and Lee brought attention to Neighborcorps, and attention brought to the program by other church members, RCHP members responded with energy to an opportunity to work at the Middlesex County Fair—for Neighborcorps. We raised $4,000 more for the program, and 65 people had the positive experience of working together for a shared cause.

- In addition to fundraisers that were topical in nature, and that grew into other forms of engagement and further movement in faithful service, there were a couple other unique service-oriented projects that occurred this year that should be incorporated into the assessment of the year.

In August RCHP led the first ever “Classis New Brunswick Week-Long Work Trip to North Carolina. This trip was funded 1/2 by RCHP and 1/2 by Churches Improving Communities. Service trips have been important to us for years, and it was great to share this opportunity with other congregations. In addition, because of the success of this trip, and the success of our Churches Accomplishing Long Term Recovery work, Harry was sent for 1 week in early November to do Rapid Response to devastating flooding in South Carolina. Both of these opportunities have impacted not only the participants on the trip, but serve as a mark of pride for the congregation. Showing love through hard work on behalf of those who are suffering is a hallmark of RCHP.

In August the father of Arnaud, one of our Burundian asylees, came for a major surgery. This was coordinated through Jean, and it involved incorporating another church in North Jersey into the position of playing ‘host’ to Arnaud’s Dad and sister. Over $3,500 came into the church from fundraising efforts to support Arnaud’s Dad, with the fundraising mainly carried out at Rutgers—through the French department. This was a beautiful offshoot of our detention ministry.

In August Ebenezer Mercer, who originally received asylum after gaining the support of RCHP in 2009, moved into a ‘second parsonage’ in South River. Ebenezer recently brought his three children from Ghana and he and they have established a household that is affordable and where there is a very supportive community. This has been overseen by RCHP-Affordable Housing.

Last thoughts:
It should be stated in this report is that 2015 is the year of RCHP members pursuing RCA ordination. We are thankful that Liz Estes, Franco Juricic, Sarah Kok and Justin Karmann are all engaged in ministerial formation through the Classis of New Brunswick and that they are taking steps toward ordination. Of the 5 individuals in the process in our Classis, four are members of our church. In 2016 we’ll be finding more intentional ways to support these seminarians (especially Franco and Liz) and we’ll be looking to identify other potential ministers for the churches in our region.

It should also be stated that Carol Turner’s engagement this year has been a particularly wonderful blessing. There are, of course, dozens (hundreds) of important participants in the life of the church, but it is something about Carol’s particular moment in life that makes her unique. Many churches rely heavily on recently-retired individuals to play a central part in their operations. We haven’t had many people in that stage of life. We are reminded, through Carol’s work, that it is important to work with recently-retired individuals within the life of the church. It is likely that we have potential new members in the community who are at this stage in life and could make significant contributions to our work as a church.

Last, last thoughts: At the Consistory retreat we identified one new goal for this year. The goal was “connecting.” We simply list the ideas here that were generated at that meeting. We have intention to more formally pursue the things listed here during 2016.

‘Connecting’ both within the church and in the larger world (as per Neil) follow:
• Improve online resources (provide faces of the consistory on the website and provide more about each committee and its mission);
• Get to know our people better and keep track of their needs and talents (take turns attending new members class, conduct a survey of talents);
• Develop relationships with elders and deacons and the congregation (maybe assign elders and deacons to different tables at potlucks or assign elders and deacons to visit different small groups and help elders connect with newly baptized and newly bereaved members in a more systematic way);
• Encourage relationships between and among cultural subgroups and reestablish Thursday lunch with pastors/elders/deacons in the café;
• Maintain relationships w/ those who have left the church; consider becoming a ‘teaching church’ and look for more opportunities for interfaith connections.
• Overcome geographical distance///‘online something’//

The Peace of Christ to you,

Seth and Stephanie Kaper-Dale
December 14, 2015