

# SIDEWALKS

Connecting People. Shaping Ministry. Serving Others.

*A Publication of Ponds Reformed Church  
Oakland, NJ*

Winter 2023

## Capital Campaign Finish

By Rev. Nathan Busker  
Senior Pastor



On an autumn Sunday morning following worship, the congregation gathered in the fellowship hall where a stage once stood. They filled their cups with hot beverages and their plates with desserts as the café was officially opened. The café had been merely a vision for a number of years, but with the help of those who were instrumental in the planning and construction, the café became a reality. Those who generously supported the capital campaign were also thanked. Without their financial support, it would not have happened. The result is a café that improves the look of the fellowship hall and more importantly facilitates hospitality on Sunday mornings and throughout the week. The café was only one of the many objectives of the campaign.



On this autumn Sunday, the congregation brought the successful capital campaign “Strengthening Our Roots” to a close. The campaign began with a goal of \$250,000 to accomplish a variety of facility improvements. \$286,300 was pledged. With an additional \$11,975 donated from other memorial gifts and the sale of two vehicles, the congregation had generously contributed \$293,030!

The campaign paid off the balance of the mortgage for 8 Oak Street (parsonage for Pastor Debbie), paid off a loan for home improvements to 67 Dogwood Drive (parsonage for Pastor Nathan), sanctuary audio improvements, the café, renovated the downstairs bathrooms, provided much needed improvements to 8 Oak Street, outdoor painting of the church facility, indoor painting of fellowship hall, new water heater, and air conditioning in the parlor, upstairs bathrooms and offices.



\$70,000 remains for the kitchen renovation. In the next 12 months discussions will begin among the congregation and various ministries to develop an appropriate plan for the kitchen area that is both informed by our mission and ministry needs.

Those instrumental in bringing the café to life. Pictured L to R. Pastor Nathan, Kurt Vierheilg, Rob Elfers, Ken Depew, Keith Gross, Lenore Panas. Not pictured: James Nardene.

# Church Health Checkup with Agile Church *by Rev. Nathan Busker*

As I sat there in the exam room waiting for my doctor to return. She had excused herself to grab my numbers from my latest bloodwork. A formality I reckoned. Since my last visit I had been exercising more. I had dropped some weight and felt good. With such positive moves I figured everything else had improved as well. I sat waiting to receive a verbal pat on the back. The doctor returned and expressed her concern for some of my cholesterol numbers. I stopped her. Did she have the right file? Didn't she look at my weight and blood pressure? Didn't she hear about my exercise regimen? She had heard me. Although the numbers were heading in the right direction, she also cautioned me, "Let's not settle for good enough. These numbers can be better."

Not only does settling for "good enough" happen in our lives with our health, our education, our careers and relationships, it happens in the church as well. Congregations settle for good enough. It's easy to do because congregations do not have an effective way to check on how well they are doing. The result is for churches to assume they are doing well.



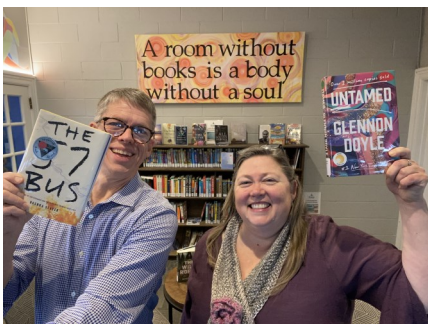
The pandemic has changed a lot in the religious landscape. Technology is no longer an option. It is a necessity. Worship attendance no longer determines how well a church is doing as people participate online. Last Sunday we had 47 people in person but as of Tuesday afternoon 78 people had viewed the worship service between Facebook and YouTube. So how does a church know how well it is doing? What does a church need to be thinking about? What new skills do pastors need to acquire in this post-pandemic world?

To help answer these questions, the consistory has hired Agile Church consultant, Coy James, to conduct a health checkup. The cost is covered in the 2023 Foundation budget. I found Agile Church while undertaking professional development. What I found intriguing about them is that unlike many church consulting services, Agile Church believes in the mainline church and holds to the same LGBTQ inclusive values as Ponds does. Progressive, inclusive, mainline and church growth are words usually not found together. Using personal observation, interviews, comparative assessment tools and other research Agile Church consultants will provide a thorough report to church leadership with insights and specific recommendations. The report will provide consistory the information needed to identify steps for the church. Like any health checkup it's not about making changes for short term gain. It's not even about growing the church numerically. It's about being the best we can be in mission to our community as the body of Christ. After the consistory receives the report, it will be shared with the congregation.

---

**What are you reading?** If a room without books is a body without a soul, what is a person who is not reading? The Lynn Ksanznak Library has incredible selections of books for any age and any interest. There are books on immigration, racism, refugees, LGBTQ+, faith as well as books to entice one's imagination. New additions are being added throughout the year. Below are two of the books you can find in the library.

The book club at Ponds recently finished **Untamed** by Glennon Doyle. Some liked the book, but not everyone enjoyed it. The book led to excellent discussion. The next selection is: **Where the Crawdads Sing** by Delia Owens.



Pastor Nathan recently finished **The 57 Bus** by Dashka Slater. A true story of two teens from completely different worlds. While riding the same bus a single reckless act by one changes both their lives.

What are you reading? Email us your thoughts on your book.



# A New Post-COVID Chapter for the Ponds Food Pantry *by Amy Jolin*

After years of remote operations, the Ponds Food Pantry is opening its doors! After waving a sad farewell to Joanne Preiss after her years of service, the pantry is being reinvented by a new steering committee with members from Ponds Church, Messiah Lutheran Church and the community. The pantry reemerges after COVID with a newly refurbished facility and the happy return to in-person pantry hours.

The Ponds Food Pantry receives its donations from generous people from every part of the community. These donations allow us to meet emergency needs for anyone who shows up at our door. The pantry has been part of Ponds ministry for many years, and we are committed to keeping it that way!

Here's how you can help!

Your donations of nutritious non-perishables can be

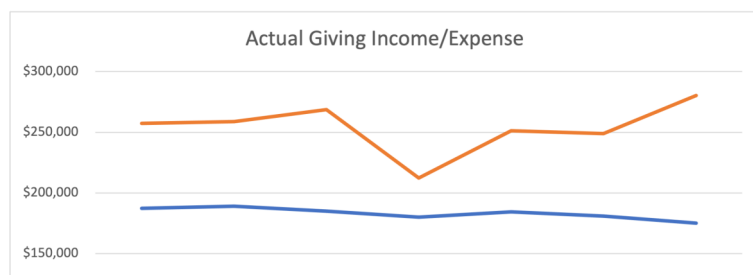


dropped off just inside the back doors of the church. We also welcome your volunteer time for many tasks, including sorting food donations and assisting guests during in-person hours. You are most welcome! Please contact the new Pantry Coordinator, Tyffany Mendez, at [Tyffany@pondsnj.org](mailto:Tyffany@pondsnj.org) or [food@pondsnj.org](mailto:food@pondsnj.org).

## The Heart of the Matter

By Rev. Nathan Busker

After a couple of months wrestling with numbers, rows and columns, the 2023 budget was approved. This came after much work by the Administration Committee and discussions among Consistory. Based on the faith commitment cards turned in and other historical data, the 2023 budget anticipates giving to decrease by \$4000. That is not a surprise as people have moved out of the area. Meanwhile, expenses are increasing. The 2023 budget anticipates a shortfall of \$36,000. The chart shows over recent years a steady increase in expenses (orange) while giving (blue) is trending downward.



This is not really a budget. This is one of many ways to look at the support and the cost of ministry. Budget is a misnomer. People give in a variety of ways because they believe in the work of this ministry. These numbers are one angle of the values of the congregation and where our heart is.

## Where has the congregation's heart been last year?

It's been in a community resident's home as Pastors Debbie and Nathan prayed for a mother who was dying. It's been with teenagers as they prepared to profess their faith. It's been in many communities as volunteers from Ponds helped improve the homes of others through Rebuilding Together North Jersey. It's been with community residents as they grieved the loss of a loved one. It's been in the parking lot hosting an outdoor concert featuring Andrew Schwarz to kick off Pride Month. It's been with a pastor while taking some much-needed time off. It's been celebrating with two couples who got married - Katie and Alex; MacKenzie and Scott. The congregation's heart has been in Newark as members fed the homeless on Broad Street. It's been developing relationships with the local Sikh community. It's been with teenagers on Sunday evening as they grow in Christ. It's been with children on Sunday morning. It's been in the pulpit and in the pews as the good news of God is proclaimed and the people respond. It has been teaching others about the Bible. It has been in Bible study groups. It has been present as the congregation recognized the gifts and service of others. The heart of this congregation has been listening to others with love and support and participating in Friendsgiving by opening our doors. It has been with care packages to college students. The heart of this congregation beats strong for God's mission. Where will our heart take us in 2023?

## Ribbon Cutting of Renovated Space!

By Rev. Nathan Busker

With the Super Bowl in less than two weeks, there will be stories about the many great players on each team. We may learn about a player's upbringing and how he overcame the odds to be on the team, or the player who was undrafted and is now a starter. For as much as there will be focus on individual players, they will not win the Super Bowl.

Whether we are watching the World Series, the Stanley Cup, the World Cup or even a game among children it always requires a team effort. There is no place that is more true than the church. The Apostle Paul talks of the body being many parts that while different in function are equally valued and necessary.



Renovating what was known as the Old Fellowship Hall was a team effort. It involved many volunteers from the community, Rebuilding Together North Jersey (RTNJ), Ponds Reformed Church and IBEW 164. The renovation involved financial support from countless individuals totaling over \$6000; a \$35,000 grant from the Reformed Church in America; a \$5000 grant from Advent Lutheran Church in Wyckoff; a

\$15,000 grant from Bergen County Food Security Task Force; two new commercial freezers donated from Bergen County; and a \$11,000 grant from the Sayer Memorial Fund. Besides these grants RTNJ secured grants that equipped the food pantry with shelves and furniture. The food pantry was set up and the food moved from its temporary location to its new space thanks to an Eagle Scout project.

IBEW 164 donated over 500 hours that involved five Journeyman and four apprentices. They alone donated over \$30,000 in volunteer hours. Between Keith Gross, Mark Sciacca and scores of other volunteers, more than 1,500 hours were donated to renovating the space. This was a team effort.

In this post-modern, post-pandemic time this experience of partnerships and collaboration among many groups is the new model for mission. It is one that is long overdue. The Church of Jesus Christ does not live unto itself, but is inviting others to join it in mission. It will only be as a team of diverse groups that lasting change will be achieved.



*Laura Wray Cutting the Ribbon to the new food pantry!*



Be on the lookout for our new interview series! Ken Depew being interviewed about his life at Ponds.

