



## **Report on a Visit to Barrington Congregational Church, UCC, Barrington, RI**

**September 28-October 1, 2017**

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### ***Background***

**Barrington Congregational Church, United Church of Christ (BCCUCC) was founded in the 1660's when John Miles, a fugitive from the Massachusetts Bay Colony, gathered a congregation of Baptists and Congregationalists north of One Hundred Acre Cove (just north of the present church site).<sup>1</sup> Following Miles's death, the congregation split under its new leader, and the Baptist contingent moved (together with their meeting house) to North Swansea, and the Congregationalists remained. In 1711 the first Congregational meeting house was built on what is now Jenny's Lane in Barrington. In 1717 the township of Barrington was recognized by the colonial government, as "the parish of the Barrington Congregational Church" and in 1737 the meeting house was moved to its present site alongside the Barrington River. Its original building was replaced in 1806 by the current structure, known widely as "the white church." In 1944, a house south of the church was purchased to provide more room for the Sunday school. Ten years later, the congregation voted to raze the house and a new education building, dedicated in January 1956, was built on the site. The facilities appear to be structurally sound and well-maintained, though the office/educational building is beginning to show its age. The church has lots of parking, including a lot rented to the state of Rhode Island for use by commuters.**

**The church's website describes its mission as "a Christian community that worships God, embraces all people, ministers to one another, works for justice and peace, and renders loving service to God's world."**

**It also expresses the church's open and affirming position:**

**We believe that all people are blessed and loved equally by God. Following the teachings of Jesus we heartily welcome everyone into God's covenantal community.**

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<sup>1</sup> Historical material taken from BCCUCC website.

**Whatever your race, ethnicity, age, socioeconomic or marital status, variety of thoughts and beliefs, physical or mental ability, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression – whoever you are and wherever you come from you are welcome into the full life and ministry of our church.**

**The church now supports an annual budget of \$466,863 with about 80 percent coming from living members and friends, 11 percent from investment income and 5 percent from rental income. Sixty-nine percent of the church's expenses cover personnel, 19 percent goes to buildings and grounds, 6 percent to mission support and 6 percent to office and program.**

**In September 2017, I was asked to assist Barrington Congregational Church, UCC with a general assessment by defining its current realities, including strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats and to provide recommendations for strategic next steps in the church's ministry. This assessment is designed to inform a new strategic plan for the church.**

**I conducted a site visit to Barrington and met with about 65 members, staff and friends in individual and group interviews. My interviews included several community leaders, including Barrington's town manager, police chief, school superintendent, state representative, social service workers and local clergy.**

**Four intense days is not enough time to understand all that is to be known about the internal dynamics of a congregation and the complexities of its relationship to its broader community. I may well have missed or misunderstood some important dimensions of your life together but over the course of my time with you several themes emerged that I hope will be helpful as you work together to shape your church's future.**

## **THE SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS CONTEXT OF BARRINGTON**

### **CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH, UCC's MINISTRY**

**Church members are very aware of the changing context of ministry in the early years of a new century and the unique challenges of ministry in New England. In recent years the country has seen an accelerating pace of change in every sphere, including religion.**

**In preparation for my visit I assembled US Census data for persons and households living in Zip Code 02806, which covers Barrington. Using resources available to the United Church of**

Christ through MissionInsite, I developed a profile for this area. This profile is an attachment to this report.<sup>2</sup>

In 2017 this area includes an estimated population of 16,393 persons living in 6,027 households. The population declined 3 percent from 2000 to 2010 and is up 0.48 percent since 2010. The population is projected to stay about the same over the next decade. The town is accustomed to a stable population, which peaked in 1970 at 17,554 and has held steady at roughly its current level for over 40 years.

One of the most important tables in the MissionInsite report appears on page 5 of the FullInsite report. There we see the number of births, deaths and migrants in the past year. There were 137 births and 168 deaths and an in-migration of -5, for a net population loss of 36 persons.

This community is remarkably homogeneous: 93 percent are white, 0.5 percent Black/African American, 2 percent Hispanic and 4.4 percent Asian/Pacific Islander.

Barrington is an aging community with a median age of 42, up from 39 in 2000 projected to rise to 47 in 2022. Over the next ten years the fastest-growing age cohort will be those 25-34 (up 10.5%) and 65 and over (up 9.2%). The 35-54 age cohort is projected to decline 8.7 percent while the school age population (age 5-17) will decrease 7.1 percent.

The school-age population has been declining over time. In 2010 it was 23.7 percent of Barrington's population, declining to 16.6 percent in 2017, projected to be 11.4 percent in 2022 and 9.5 percent in 2027.

The vast majority (91%) of Barrington's population live in family households, though the area reflects some of the changes in family structure experienced across the country. For example, 22 percent of those over age 15 have never married and 5 percent are currently divorced or separated. Nine percent are widowed.

Education levels are quite high. Thirty-one percent of adults hold college degrees and another 36 percent also have advanced degrees. Only 3 percent of adults have less than a high school education. Household and family incomes are above average for Rhode Island and Massachusetts. The average household income in the area is \$150,394 or about 50 percent

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<sup>2</sup> MissionInsite provides interpretive tools that can be accessed online without a paid subscription. See <http://www.missioninsite.com/church-local/local-churches-resources.shtml>

higher than the two-state state average of \$97,542. A fifth of all households report incomes of \$200,000 or more. In 2017 less than 2 percent of the area's families live in poverty.

There has been very little housing construction in recent years. Twenty-eight percent of the town's homes were built before 1939 and only 3 percent are new since 2000.

Housing values are also high. Ten percent of housing units are valued at \$1,000,000 or more with another 29 percent between \$500,000-999,999.

Pastor Dale Azevedo and I enjoyed a productive session over lunch with representative leaders of the Barrington community. They describe Barrington as a "healthy" place. One local official worried that "It can't really grow much more. We're fully developed, financially sound. Executives, leaders, rich people want to come to town."

Another leader outlined four concerns for the future:

- a. We have to continue schools at their current high level. That means dealing with elders' resistance to funding schools;
- b. Affordable housing. The state's goal is 10 percent "affordable" but Barrington is only at 2 percent;
- c. Maintaining the community where it is and staying who and what we are. That means increasing housing options for the elderly in town;
- d. We need to deal with the hidden poor population in town.

The subject of Barrington's "hidden populations" generated a lot of discussion. "We are stuck with the label of incredible wealth," said one leader. "The label lets us overlook some real issues in town." People gave examples including recent teen suicides, alcohol and drug abuse and wild parties. "Too often we over-rely on the police and the schools to be our problem solvers when these really are community-wide concerns that need the whole community's attention."

Barrington's excellent schools are seen as a big draw but attract some families who cannot afford "the Barrington lifestyle." "We get people who want great schools for their kids but end up getting strapped because of credit card debt or excessive mortgages. Parents are proud of their kids' performance in school but they are embarrassed their children can't have what others have." A social worker pointed to isolation and mental health issues in town that often go unnoticed.

The leaders said they are frustrated by the absence of an effective ecumenical or interfaith council. "We need to be in regular conversation with the religious community," said a local official. "We want to engage the spiritual and moral side of community life but don't know

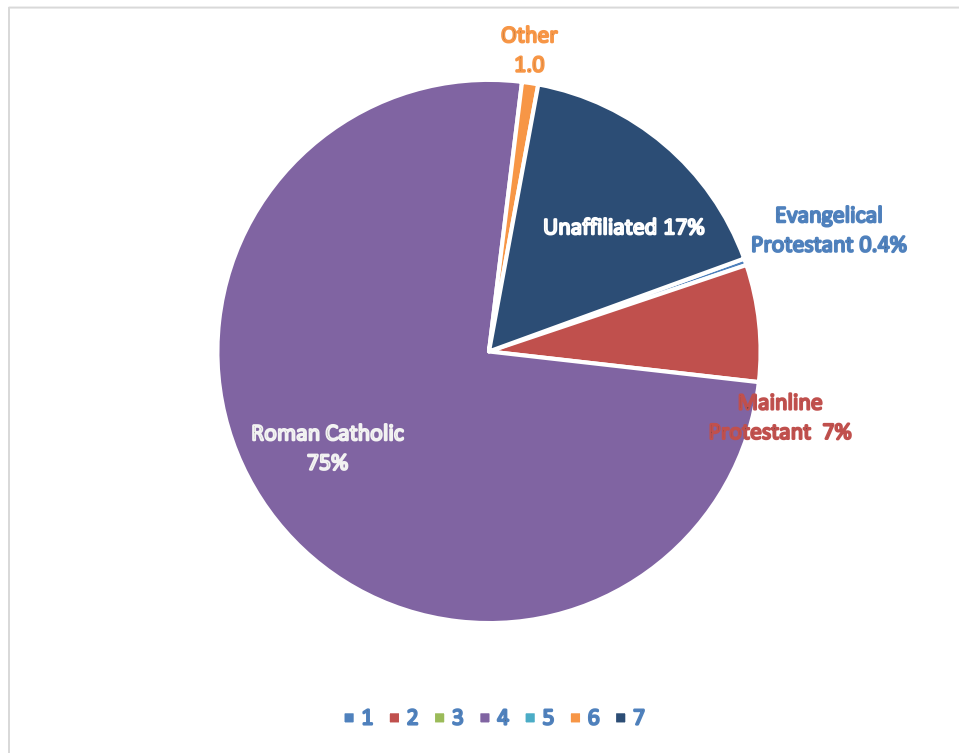
where to turn.” Another leader sees the faith community as a resource in identifying those in need. “We have resources,” she said, “but we need information.”

### *Religious Affiliation Data for Bristol County*

By policy, the US Census does not collect data on religious affiliation. Fortunately, every ten years a coalition of 236 American religious groups known as the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies assembles data on congregations and membership at the county level.

The figure shows that Roman Catholics represent are the largest religious group (75%) in Bristol County followed by Mainline Protestants (7%) and “others” (1%). Evangelical Protestants comprise less than 1 percent of the county population. What is most striking, however, is the large number of persons not on the rolls of any of the 263 groups in the study. This “unchurched” population of 8,249 persons amounts to 17 percent of residents of the county.

Religious Affiliation in Bristol County, 2010.<sup>3</sup>



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<sup>3</sup> By comparison, the state of Rhode Island is 44 percent Roman Catholic, 5 percent Mainline Protestant, 2 percent Evangelical Protestant, 3 percent other. Unaffiliated persons in the state number 475,648 or 45 percent.

**Mainline Protestant Adherents in Bristol County, 2010**

	<b>Adherents 2010</b>	<b>Percent Gain/Loss, 1980-2010</b>	<b>Adherence Rate/1000, 2010</b>
<b>American Baptist Churches</b>	211	-45.8	4.2
<b>Episcopal Church</b>	1,201	-68.1	24.1
<b>Evangelical Lutheran Church</b>	428	6.8	8.6
<b>Presbyterian Church USA</b>	117	-78.6	2.3
<b>United Church of Christ</b>	915	-6.3	18.3
<b>United Methodist Church</b>	599	31.9	12.0

The same data source allows us to look at individual denominational change over time and documents mostly declines over time for Mainline Protestant churches in Bristol County. UCC membership declined 6.3 percent in the 30 years between 1980 and 2010. United Methodists and Evangelical Lutherans grew during this period but American Baptists, the Episcopal Church and Presbyterians have all declined. The Assemblies of God grew 164 percent, albeit from a small base. The Catholic population grew 16 percent in this period.

The real story in these statistics, however, may be the number of unaffiliated persons in Bristol County. Nationally, persons reporting no religious affiliation or “nones” now account for more than one out of five American adults, up from less than 10 percent in the 1970s. The ranks of the unaffiliated include self-described atheists and agnostics (31%), persons who do not think of themselves as religious (39%) and those who do think of themselves as religious but say they have no religious affiliation (30%).

Many of the nation’s 56 million unaffiliated are “religious” or “spiritual” in some way, but unprecedented numbers of Americans are choosing not to affiliate or identify with recognizable faith communities. Perhaps more significantly, more than a third of Americans between 18 and 30 report they do not identify with organized religion. This does not mean that the nearly one in five in the population of Bristol County who are not on religious rolls is not in some ways religious. In fact, the Pew Forum study found that 70 percent of religious “nones” believe in God, 60 percent call themselves either "religious" or "spiritual," and 40 percent say they pray.

**THE BARRINGTON CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH, UCC INTERVIEWS**

I begin this section with a reminder that my visit focused on the church’s challenges and aspirations. I also heard strong affirmations of what the church has been, is now and can be in the future. Here are some representative comments:<sup>4</sup>

- The Sunday service is a part of our lives. It just is.
- We are building a village here.
- I moved here in the 1990s and discovered having a time set aside every Sunday nurtures me during the week.
- I’d like to believe that the spirit led me here. I was always religious but the church rejected me as a gay man. What drew me here was the rainbow flag outside. This is my sixth Sunday as a visitor.
- Church has always meant family and a way to connect, to care. I never felt like I didn’t belong here; this is where my finger is on the pulse of what I can do.
- I’m just not one to shop around or walk away.
- I want a strong Christian foundation but not the fire and brimstone and that’s what I get here.

One question I asked in almost every interview had to do with members’ initial attraction to Barrington Congregational Church, UCC.

**Reasons for Affiliating with BCCUCC**

Community Involvement/Social Justice Commitments (including ONA)	24
UCC Connection	20

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<sup>4</sup> When I use quotations in bullet points, as I do here, each comment comes from a different individual. In this section I am focusing in the comments of lay members.

<b>Children and Youth Programming</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Family Connections/Grew Up in Church</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Invited by Friend or Pastor</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Warm/Welcoming Spirit</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Music and worship</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Location in Neighborhood</b>	<b>5</b>

The most frequent response to this question referred to the church’s commitment to community involvement and social justice. “I love what this church stands for,” said one member. Another says, “I’m an activist. So this is where I belong.”

Twenty members mentioned the church’s United Church of Christ or Congregational connection as a reason they were originally attracted to the congregation. Several persons see the United Church of Christ as a welcome alternative to more restrictive religious traditions. Programs for children and youth were mentioned by 15 persons. A dozen members said they grew up in the church or married a member. The same number had been invited by friends of a minister.

The high quality of the Sunday morning worship experience (including the music program) and the church’s “welcoming spirit” were mentioned by 7 members.

**Issues Raised Most Frequently During Interview Sessions**

<b>BCCUCC and its Community</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>Membership Development</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Finances, Including Building Concerns</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Various Programming Concerns</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Governance Concerns</b>	<b>6</b>

***BCCUCC and its Community***

Barrington is a lovely community. I learned from members and community leaders that people want to live here. Its schools, physical beauty, recreational opportunities, economic base and location in an attractive metropolitan area are tremendous assets.



Barrington Congregational Church, UCC fits well in its community. You have an attractive “campus” in a prominent, easily-accessible location. Over the years you have provided more than your share of leaders in the town. A town official referred to “the white church” as a landmark and reference point in the town: “We give driving directions with the church as the starting point.”

Here are some comments from my interviews:

- We’ve got to get beyond being the “big white church.”
- I resist our being known as “the white church.” It sends the wrong message about who we are and what we want to be.
- People in town deal with the reality of exhaustion. Young people’s attention span is not there. The sense of obligation is less strong.
- We have to get out more. People here don’t want to talk about religion.
- It’s too easy for people with privilege to marginalize those who are different. That needs to be challenged.
- The loud anti-evolutionary forces dominate the media. We need to present alternatives. In religion I have always felt there are many ways “home.” In this economy I understand why people are so busy just trying to survive.
- I remember when we had over a hundred kids in church school but there was no soccer on Sunday mornings.
- For many people in town church is something you grow out of.
- My brother manages a tennis club. They, too, are missing younger members. Who will replace them?
- There is so much conformity in this town. How do we help people develop empathy? Here it is striving for image over community.
- How do we keep mission in the forefront when we are so comfortable? How can we embrace a new identity that is based on something more than the affluence of our community?

As I reflect on these and other comments I am struck by what I would call a certain ambivalence about BCCUCC’s life in Barrington. You are proud of your community and its many advantages and of the church’s historic and contemporary role in making it what it is. You want to be of service to your neighbors, especially those who have been left behind. Most members appreciate the fact that BCCUCC is well-respected in town.

The Barrington tension between wanting to preserve what you have while also wanting to shake things up a bit was also present in my interviews. For the most part, people are positive about BCCUCC, its programs, its staff and lay members and its impact on the community. People also appreciate an emphasis on decision-making by consensus and making sure all voices are heard. In the words of one member, “We have robust discussions. We do battle and then we move on. Discussions are intense but people don’t walk away - yet.” Others are ready to shake things up a bit:

- I loved it when someone put a lobster in the manger scene at Christmas one year. It livened things up a bit. Sometimes we just need to do something wild.
- Our programs in general need more energy, warmth and variety. The education building seems more serious and stiff than worship.
- We used to be the cool kids, then we were not.
- We need Sunday to rock, like the movie Sister Act. People need stimulation, to be uplifted. I think it would go over well.
- This church needs to be willing to get unstuck, to try something new.
- We need to unleash passion once in a while.
- The old guard has to loosen up a bit.

I find that ambivalence about life in Barrington to be not a sign of weakness but a sign of health and an opportunity for growth. You strike me as a community that wants to be fully in but not fully of your Barrington social context. Yes, your building is a landmark, a reference point in town, but your steeple points upward toward higher aspirations than merely continuing as the old white church in an affluent, homogeneous community.

During my visit I heard a lot of talk about the rainbow doors outside your office/education building. I learned that for the community leaders I met they are evidence that there is life and color in the old white church.

In one large-group session a member voiced opposition to the doors. Others disagreed, including two high school students. "All the kids love it," said a Barrington High School student. "I'm at St. Andrews," said another. "I can't even tell you how many people comment on the doors in a positive way, saying 'I can't believe what your church has done.'"

The doors were put in place to express BCCUCC's Open and Affirming stance toward the LGBT community but I believe they have been received as more than that. In the words of one member, "I have never thought of the rainbow doors as only representing one type of diversity; I look around and I see many different people today."

I did not find a consensus on what community issues are most pressing for BCCUCC members. Clearly there are concerns about the community's youngest and oldest people. Community leaders I met put a lot of emphasis on persons experiencing stress due to isolation and loneliness. Suggestions I heard from the congregation include an annual Celebrate Barrington Day and monthly dinners for local residents. Others raised concerns about bullying and helping young families with parenting concerns.

One possible concrete step toward increasing BCCUCC's role in the community would be an initiative to resurrect an active clergy association or fellowship of congregations. Barrington's town manager volunteered to help make this happen.

## ***Membership Development Concerns***

Here are some of the things I heard about finding the next generation of BCCUCC members:

- We need to stop the bleeding with an increased presence in the community.
- The church's place is in the community. We need to do more to insert ourselves.
- We are missing a strong middle. Where are those in their 40s and 50s?
- I don't have a clue where the next generation of members is going to come from. There is much too little outreach.
- There are lots of people who consider this their church but they aren't here.
- The town is full of kids. They're in soccer, dance classes, school, but not in church.
- There are not as many kids as before but they are out there.
- People get their kids through confirmation and then evaporate.
- You need to get out there and keep the doors open. A friend keeps asking me, "Are you still letting everyone in at the old white church?" My answer is you bet!
- Just getting the word out is the issue.

Barrington Congregational Church, UCC became a strong congregation by building a comprehensive intergenerational ministry serving families with youth and children. The church fit well in its town and enjoyed a positive reputation as the wider community grew in the post-war period. The church enjoyed considerable success in holding its members as they moved through the life cycle and achieved a reputation for programmatic excellence, especially in its Christian Education ministry. You became an important liberal force in a changing community, tackling social issues both locally and globally.

Like most Mainline Protestant congregations, you have experienced some difficulty maintaining your membership and participation levels as the wider community has changed. The range of religious options for people in Barrington is broader than ever and individuals and families have increased demands on their time. The Millennial generation is distinguishing itself in its changing patterns of social engagement and the meaning (and the appeal) of traditional membership is changing. If weekly or nearly-weekly religious participation was once the norm, members feel free to attend once or twice a month and consider themselves "regular" attenders.

Your members are concerned about what they see as an aging congregation. They appreciate the fact the church has a steady stream of visitors but wonder whether enough is being done to encourage them to return. A lot of the work is dependent falls on staff and a small core of volunteers, some of whom are beginning to experience burnout. Several members feel the church could be more pro-active in engaging the local community.

I think BCCUCC is wise in pressing forward in its traditional areas of program strength (community outreach and advocacy, music ministries, ministries to families, children and

youth, etc.) but you need to be realistic and strategic as it you do so. You also need to remember that young families are by no means you only neighbors.

BCCUCC's future membership will depend on one crucial factor: the ratio between newcomers and departures. Churches add members in three ways: they are born into the congregation, they transfer in from other congregations and they are added from the ranks of the unaffiliated. Similarly, churches lose members in three ways: they die, they transfer out into other congregations and they withdraw from active religious participation and enter the ranks of the unaffiliated.

As is the pattern in Barrington, BCCUCC loses more persons to death than it adds through baptism. Your annual report for 2017 recorded 15 deaths compared to 4 baptisms. Several members told me that once their kids are through school they will be moving on.

The question I am left with is how will BCCUCC replenish its membership over time? The answer, I think, is from the ranks of the unserved or underserved population of the surrounding area. Remember that Bristol County's population includes over 8,000 persons who are not included in the membership of any religious body.

#### **Recommendation**

BCCUCC's future, I believe, lies in large part in its ability to reach out to neighbors who currently have no religious home. Surely, some of those potential new community members will be young families but you may be better advised to appeal to those not currently being served by existing congregations.

BCCUCC does very little to let the community know who you are and what you stand for. The rainbow flag and doors are conscious attempts to communicate a message to the population beyond your membership. You need to do more of this and to identify "entry points" through which non-members can find ways into church involvement. In the future it will be important to develop strategies to let potential members know you are alive and well and that you welcome their participation.

BCCUCC needs to learn to think of programs it develops for its members as having the potential to attract neighbors who currently have no faith community. Your Our Whole Lives program is a good example.

#### ***Finances and Building***

Financially, Barrington Congregational Church, UCC appears to be stable with an operating budget of over \$467,000, mostly covered by current member and friend giving with additional rental income from the preschool and parking lot. Your growing and carefully-managed endowment contributes nearly \$50,000.

Many members worry about the congregation's longer-term finances. Here are some representative comments:

- We always seem to find the money when we need it.
- There is a Barrington "gloss" that things will work out.
- A lot of the pillars have died or won't be here in five years. There are fewer pillars in my generation.
- Younger people don't have a financial mindset. They are willing to fund projects but not general support.
- The finance team is "magical."
- The finance team is pretty conservative. They also have a lot of power.
- Money is always a challenge. There's been a loss of people with the capacity for major gifts. We once had four or five MDs in attendance every Sunday but now we're down to one or two.

My conversations with stewardship leaders suggest that BCCUCC's current financial health is due in large part to a long-term dependence on a small number of sizeable pledges from aging members whose life situation is changing. In general, members don't feel as knowledgeable about the church's finances as they are about other aspects of your life.

The church has no comprehensive long-range financial plan but ought to consider developing one. Such a plan would include realistic projections of member income. Your long-term plan should include identifying and nurturing that next generation of major donors and an active planned giving program for members to "replace" their pledges after they have moved on.

A few members complained about a lack of financial transparency. One member says "Finances are held awfully close to the vest. We're frugal but generous." For one couple, "The financial concern is very real. Membership is down and that brings financial stress. We would like to see a lot more transparency in finances."

The Finance Team's and Treasurer's reports in the 2017 annual report are brief and might be expanded in the future to give a more complete summary of the church's financial life.

BCCUCC's campus alongside the Barrington River is a major asset and could, many feel, be even more of an asset to the wider community. The church has done an excellent job maintaining its sanctuary and making it accessible to the public. A new handicap ramp provides greater access to the church's fellowship hall. Some expressed the hope that the sanctuary or fellowship space might be used more as the community's "meeting house" and envision regular community gathering to explore issues of the day.

There is no long-range capital improvement plan. The education/office building was dedicated in the 1950s and is beginning to show its age.

## Recommendation

BCCUCC needs a long-term financial plan that projects future income and spending. You also need a capital improvement plan. More member education about the church's current financial situation would be welcomed by most members. One way to do this might be a series of public meetings as you develop the long-range plan.

### *Various Program Concerns*

I was not asked to conduct a detailed review or assessment of current programming at Barrington Congregational Church, UCC but over the course of my time with you many people shared insights and opinions about what they feel is working and what is not. I am happy to share some of what I heard.

For a church of your size, BCCUCC has a very extensive program life. I have worked with churches two to three times your size that have less going on Sundays and throughout the week. Some members question whether these programs have sufficient focus and are driven by a clear vision of where the church is heading. Programs rarely end in themselves; ideally, they are driven by the church's vision and the needs of its current and prospective people. As you plan for your future, you will want to ask hard questions about whether this combination of programs can get you where you want to go.

The same is true of staffing. BCCUCC is fortunate to be in a position to support two full-time ordained staff members and several additional program staff. The presence of these staff makes possible the range and quality of programming you enjoy, especially in a time when lay volunteers face increasing pressure on their time. Members are not always clear about roles and responsibilities of staff and volunteers. Some wonder whether annual goal-setting is done and whether adequate accountability measures are in place. As the church gets clearer about its future you will want to ask how you can best deploy staff toward pursuing the congregation's future goals.

The fact that BCCUCC has experienced a lot of staff transitions over the years, not all of them pleasant, has increased the lay members' confidence that you can weather staff changes fairly well. As one member told me, "the ministers come and go but the people stay." At the same time, several members are concerned about the absence of clear personnel policies and an active personnel or human resources team.

While I heard a lot of concern about declining participation of children and youth in Christian education programming I heard a lot of appreciation for what happens in those programs. I am impressed by the new attempts by the Christian Education and Youth Team to reach out to new families beyond the current congregation. Some members wonder whether the traditional Sunday morning formats continue to be sustainable given social and cultural

changes in the broader community. It is always helpful to ensure good communication among staff, volunteer leaders and parents.

The church building is viewed as both a major asset and a potential drain on resources.

I have mentioned a few member concerns about communication. You would benefit from a more formal communications review. Developing such a plan involves asking several key questions: What is our message? Who wants/needs to hear this message? What are the best and least expensive ways to reach these audiences?

My sense is you have most of the pieces in place for internal communication. Your Sunday bulletin is packed with information, you have an excellent website and I appreciate your pastor's blog, "From the River's Edge." You could do more to communicate to the broader public what the church believes and stands for and lets them know you actively encourage neighbors and friends to be part of your life. One person suggested an exterior signboard to promote programs and share messages with the community.

You will also want to think about building a more robust database of members, friends and supporters via Facebook or other social media. Adding 25-50 new contacts a month should be an achievable goal.

As noted, community outreach and advocacy are priorities for most members. I heard no outright opposition to these efforts but there is some murmuring about them. As one person put it, "Social action is important but we can't forget those in our community who don't seem to be limping even though they really are." Another wishes the church could do more "to get families to spend time on their own spirituality."

## SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Up to now I have mostly tried to reflect the content of what I heard in my time with you. My own opinions and biases may have sneaked their way into the text but my goal has been to focus on what I heard from your members and friends.

In this section my goal is a bit different. It's to share some affirmations and concerns based on my visit and preparation of this report.

### Affirmations

- BCCUCC has a caring, serving, supportive core membership that has thrived for many years despite occasional internal conflicts and change.
- You have clarity about the church's identity as a progressive Christian alternative in the Barrington area.
- Many of you have a healthy ambivalence about life in Barrington.

- You are serious about mission and social justice.
- You show strong commitment to being an Open and Affirming congregation that is inclusive of the broad range of residents of the area.
- You have a well-located, attractive and visible physical plant that has served you well in the past.
- There is lots of readiness face the future with energy and confidence.

### Concerns

- The source of your next generation of members is unclear. Your young families are clearly wishing there were more people like themselves. It is time to give serious attention to becoming a community that not only welcomes but actively invites participation.
- You face some fiscal uncertainty. You seem to be on top of short-term concerns but need to give more attention to the longer term. You need a long-term financial plan and a capital improvement plan.
- Sometimes staff roles are not clearly understood. You would benefit from clear personnel policies and an active personnel/human resources ministry team.
- Communications seem a bit scattered. You need a communications plan that addresses both members and the wider community.
- Some members feel a lack of transparency, particularly around finances.

Think of Barrington Congregational Church, UCC's ministry as a three-legged stool.

One leg is *community outreach*. More than most churches, you are deeply committed to community service, outreach and advocacy. You do this well.

A second leg is *servicing your own people*. You now have an opportunity to take new initiatives in faith formation and spiritual development. I sense that this is also an area of future growth. As people begin to gain a greater sense of self-affirmation they are also ready to grow spiritually and intellectually. You will have new opportunities to take new initiatives in faith formation and spiritual development.

The third leg I will call *congregational development*.<sup>5</sup> Here the opportunity is to envision and build a vision for the church as a progressive and strong presence in Barrington and the surrounding area. This includes some hard thinking about a plan for membership development.

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<sup>5</sup> Congregational development includes membership development but also leadership development, stewardship, communications and governance.



**My knowledge of Barrington is limited but in most metropolitan areas in the US certain groups are generally overlooked by faith communities. These include nontraditional families, singles, gay and lesbian persons, interracial families, persons with disabilities, alienated Catholics, those who consider themselves “spiritual but not religious” and others who often don’t always “fit” in traditional congregations. With over 8,000 persons in Bristol County not affiliated with any congregation, surely there are opportunities to attract new populations to a new ministry. A small group of BCCUCC leaders might be given the task of reviewing this report and accompanying demographic materials (as well as the Pew Forum report on religious “nones”) to draw out implications for the future shape of a new ministry within or “alongside” your current program.**

### **Challenging the Narrative of Decline**

**As I have reviewed my notes and reflected on my time with you I have been struck by hints of what I will call a narrative of decline. Barrington Congregational Church, UCC has a rich past. Like its community, for many generations it has been an attractive destination for upwardly-mobile persons. People remember times when BCCUCC was more of a “player” in town. The sanctuary was full on Sunday mornings, programs for children and youth were booming and you were known for the quality of your worship and music programs. You have made a positive difference in Barrington, advocating for equal rights, peace and acceptance of LGBT persons.**

**In the 1960s and 1970s things began to change in the community and in the nation as a whole. Churches faced new forms of competition for people’s time, the range of religious options increased dramatically, the two-worker family became the norm rather than the exception and Sunday morning became a time for sports and other activities. Old-line Protestantism began to lose some of its appeal and impact.**

**I believe it is possible for you to challenge the “decline narrative” by proposing in your new strategic plan a positive alternative vision. You will need some victories and some bold goals to renew BCCUCC’s sense of confidence about the future.**

**There is no manual or roadmap for such an effort but there are resources to assist you along the way. The Center for Progressive Renewal works with dozens of congregations like yours and can provide assistance in finding, training and coaching pastors and lay volunteers renewing congregations.**

### **MOVING AHEAD**

**Barrington Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, is a mid-size congregation whose members care deeply about the church and its future. Most members seem ready to meet the challenges the church faces.**

I have listed and discussed a number of issues that emerged from conversations with a cross-section of BCCUCC's members.

Churches at turning points in their lives need to be able to point to periodic victories to reassure members and leaders that change is possible and that better days lie ahead. Samuel Freedman tells a wonderful story about the arrival of a new pastor at St. Paul Community Baptist Church in Brooklyn, New York. He and his assistant made a promise to one another: that every Sunday there would be one improvement that the congregation could see. It might be as simple as a repainted railing or a new poster on the wall but it would be a positive and a visible change – each week!<sup>6</sup>

Achieving a few visible victories along the way will help members understand that you have a bright and sustainable future!

Thank you for the opportunity to get to know you a bit. I look forward to working with you in the future.

November 2, 2017

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<sup>6</sup> For more, see Samuel Freedman, Upon This Rock: The Miracles of a Black Church (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), p. 94.