

**Thank you for supporting your Mission and Service Ministry!**

**We thought it appropriate to provide a quarterly report, sort of a “Best of” from the Mission and Service Ministry that highlights the great work our partner service organizations have provided to our local community and beyond.**

**Also, please know you are welcome to volunteer with any of our partner service organizations individually or become part of the First Congo support team for that organization. Attend one of our virtual monthly meetings to find out more about Mission and Service’s outreach ministry. We meet the third Monday of most months. Email [jillsmith43@gmail.com](mailto:jillsmith43@gmail.com) to receive a link or sign up in Realm.**

**With warmest regards,  
Jill Smith and Nancy Brown-Koeller, Co-counselors**

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### **Habitat for Humanity / First Faith Build of the Year**

**Tim DeHart** reported that the first Faith Build family of 2021 is Hnia and Sue Thao. They have two young girls and they will be building on 6th St. in Menasha. There are four families building on that street this year, so they will have Habitat neighbors which should be very nice for them.

The dedication is expected to take place in late August. HFH indicated volunteer shifts are being determined based on vaccines, safety, etc. We hope to have faith communities volunteer for dates from May through July.

### **Leaven**

Leaven reports that winter is a time when their staff focuses on training. The distribution of stimulus checks has thankfully reduced the financial stress of many families. Leaven’s work with clients usually ramps up in October so we have proposed that First Congo create a household and hygiene products drive for Leaven’s clients at that time, when the items from the spring drive are running low.

### **Kenya Partnership Team Report**

All sponsored students reported to school on January 4th. Because of Covid, parents and social workers were unable to visit and communication of the students’ success was unavailable.

Four schools received water taps with the water tap funds! You may have seen pictures of students carrying bricks, this was to build the base of the taps at their school. **Wanda Van De Hey** said they were much appreciated.

During March, fees were collected from First Congo sponsors for the 2021 school year. There are 19 Form Four students who are currently preparing for exams in anticipation for graduating by July 16, 2021.

Because of the large number of students in the Sambalot School, parents constructed two new classrooms. However, they were in desperate need of desks. A portion of the money left in the Kenya budget (due to no trip this year), in addition to a generous donation from one of the sponsors, has enabled us to send money to provide materials for desks for those two classrooms.

## **Back Bay Mission**

During March, led by **Ken Jahnke**, a small group of vaccinated First Congo volunteers traveled to Biloxi, MS. Some of the volunteers worked on building and painting a home and some worked at the Food Pantry and the Micah Day Shelter. Thrivent Action grants enabled us to purchase and stock food in the pantry, buy underwear and hygiene products for the day shelter, and make hygiene kits. We met the new Executive Director, Rev. James Pennington, who seems terrific.

## **Pillars**

Pillars has been extremely busy these last three months. In January, the shelter was almost full. Bunks were full and people were sleeping on mats and in the hotel. As of March, there was still a waiting list to get into the shelter. The extreme cold weather highlighted a need for warm coats so on February 28th, First Congo held a coat drive. We received 120 coats and jackets. They were distributed to Pillars, Salvation Army, and the Community Coat Closet. A \$60.00 cash donation was also given to Pillars.

Because March is a difficult time for Pillars to find volunteers, **Shelley Nulton** organized five evening meals were provided and served at the adult shelter from March 9 through March 13. Thirty-two FCUCC volunteers participated in this service to Pillars.

Pillars' 2021 Report to the Community took place virtually on Tuesday, March 30. You can view online.

<https://pillarsinc.org/events/report-to-the-community/>

## **Appalachia Service Project**

Plans are being made for the fall trip even though questions remain about reopening for service work. **Valerie Schultz** is looking at the week of October 3 as the tentative date. So far, seven volunteers who previously traveled to West Virginia are interested in returning this year. Plans will develop further when social distancing restrictions are lifted.

## **Re-Member**

In January, **Eilene Hoft-March** initiated a Turtle Trek (walk/run/snowshoe fundraiser) which continued through April 4<sup>th</sup>. Donations collected will be sent to the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation to help fund fuel costs. The victory lap of the event took place after the Easter Sunday service, departing from the church parking lot.

We cancelled our March and April 2021 volunteer trips and all 2021 trip billing was suspended. Due to the suspension of trips to Pine Ridge, a donation of \$2000 was given by the Mission and Service Ministry. The money was donated in order to hold our coveted spot of visiting Pine Ridge during their Pow Wow event. The people of Pine Ridge are always in need of donations.

## **Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women**

On Valentine's Day, a MMIW2S vigil was held at Houdini Plaza. A virtual event was held simultaneously from 12:00-2:00 p.m. and was seen on the ESTHER Facebook page livestream.

In March, Mission and Service Ministry voted unanimously to donate \$2000 to help fund MMIW awareness billboards in the Fox Valley. The Maynard Beemer Fund was able to pay for this contribution. Our First Congo members will work closely with the Native Justice Coalition to choose locations for the billboards.

### **Rights of Nature/Menikanaehkem**

This is a developing relationship and a new educational and service-oriented pursuit in our church which was created by church members who studied the Doctrine of Discovery last year. **Eilene Hoft-March** reported in February that plans to find ways to connect our congregation to our Menominee neighbors are developing. One suggestion given by a Menikanaehkem leader, Guy Reiter, is to find out more about the Rights of Nature movement.

A plan is being made to show the film “Invisible Hand” in October. We hope this will be coordinated with a book study in our Wine and Word group. A panel discussion is also being considered.

### **Samaritan Counseling Center**

Annette and John Grunseth, in conversation with some members of the LGBTQ+ community, heard that there was a wariness about using church affiliated centers because some church-based counselors engage in “conversion therapy” or other non-affirming styles of counseling. **Christine Danz** shared this with the Samaritan Director. They reaffirmed they are an open and inclusive center and have and value their LGBTQ+ clients and staff. They have the rainbow flag on their website as an ally symbol. SCC is also planning an awareness campaign about who they are and the services they provide (emphasizing available to everyone), aiming to make their name a “household word.” Given the disconnect between the perceptions, M. & S.M. brainstormed people/places/events the Center might connect with to spread the word that they are a safe place.

### **Highlights from Bill VanLopik’s ESTHER Organizer Reports**

#### January:

The Equity and Racial Justice Committee has helped to recruit two black community members who will submit their applications to serve on the Grand Chute Police and Fire Commission.

Record numbers of participants attended the Prison Reform Task Force Meeting (28) and the Mental Health Task Force Meeting (18).

#### February:

The WISDOM Environmental Justice statewide coalition had an excellent meeting with Rep. Katrina Shankland (D-Dist 71) regarding an upcoming environmental bill she will be introducing. She is thankful for the support of the coalition.

Representatives of the Equity and Racial Justice Committee had a fruitful meeting with Appleton Mayor Jake Woodford regarding the Diversity and Inclusion position which is now open.

## March:

ESTHER is recruiting Wisconsinites to participate in the virtual Madison Action Day event on April 15th.

Kristin Welch and Leann Bartz are the new Co-facilitators for the Mental Health Task Force. Their presence will assure us that the task force will continue to address issues that especially effect our Native American brothers and sisters. These new leaders have many new ideas for future issues.

The Equity and Racial Justice Committee continues to grow in members and outreach. Two members of the committee, Gwen Gibson and **Cindi MacSwain** (from FCUCC) have now volunteered to serve on WISDOM's statewide Racial Justice Committee.

The Outagamie County Justice Committee has recently decided to adopt Restorative Justice methods to be included in their service to the local communities. Some people on this board are members of ESTHER who have supported this type of service. This is great news.

## **College of Menominee Nation Scholarship**

This is a new outreach development in our church. **Eilene Hoft-March, Nancy Brown-Koeller** and **Sandy Gillum** explored options to acknowledge the historical land our church is sited on and worked with the College of Menominee Nation to create a scholarship for a tribal member there.

The concept was endorsed by pastoral staff, presented and adopted by the Mission and Service Ministry, and confirmed by Congregational Life and Church Council. Pastor Laurie shared the concept with UCC Conference Leadership and Planning who agreed that a virtual presentation may be shared at the Wisconsin UCC Conference in May 2021.