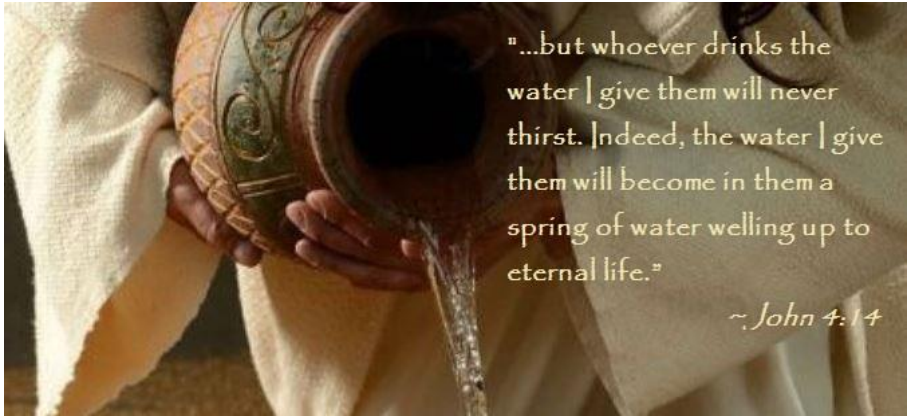


Living Water
Inclusive Catholic Community



"...but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

~ John 4:14

Our Spiritual Autobiography:
A Decade of Journeying in Faith
2008-2018
(with Pandemic Postscripts, 2019-2023)

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*Our Spiritual Autobiography:
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“It only takes one voice,
at the right pitch,
to start an avalanche.”

(Dianna Hardy, *Return of the Wolf*)

*May the voices you will hear,
in the pages & pitches that follow,
create avalanches in you!*

*Living Water Inclusive Community
Baltimore/Annapolis/Thurmont MD*



FOREWORD

Let's begin with a Wikipedia entry ...

*Spiritual autobiography is a genre of non-fiction prose that dominated Protestant writing during the seventeenth century, particularly in England, particularly that of dissenters. The narrative follows the believer from a state of damnation to a state of grace; the most famous example is perhaps John Bunyan's *Grace Abounding* (1666).*

These words feel like home to us – *spiritual autobiography as the non-fiction prose of dissenters*. We're not so sure about the movement from damnation to grace; our spiritual autobiography feels more like a movement from one grace to another, accumulating an abundance of blessings along the way. But the non-fiction by dissenters? Yes, absolutely. This will become clear in pages to follow, but for now, back to this Foreword.

On the occasion of the Living Water Inclusive Catholic Community's 10th Anniversary in 2018, we made a weekend retreat, where we were invited by our retreat leaders to write our community's spiritual autobiography. But in the years between then and now quite a lot of life intervened for all of us. Potential writers came and went. Other things squirmed their way onto our plates, and our spiritual autobiography never quite got off the ground. Still, the project never went away entirely. Instead, it seemed to go into suspended animation. And like Lazarus called forth from the tomb, it came back to life at exactly the right moment.

Five years from when we began to tell our story, we've come through the pandemic and all the challenges that the corona virus presented to our community. And all those challenges are reflected in postscripts we've added along the way. Our faith community's (by now) 15-year-story of vision, hope, dreams-deferred and resilience is baked into these pages.

So how appropriate it seems at this very time to look back over the spiritual path that's led us to this day ... to hear the stories of what community means to some of our members ... to gather the graces that have sustained us on our path ... and to look forward to how we will be led toward even more graces as we continue our journey.

Our spiritual autobiography will be in two parts: *Steppingstones* and *Stories*. (And we've added two *Pandemic Postscripts* to bring us up to the moment.) This is the story of the journey of one small faith community seeking God in ways heretofore unknown to them. It's a journey of call and response. It's the non-fiction prose of dissenters. It's our story and we thank God for it!



STEPPINGSTONES

Coming Into Being

Our community came into being with the first Eucharist we celebrated in January 2008. But its beginnings were at least a few years earlier. Two women in two different places and in two different life circumstances happened to come together in 2006 to form the nexus of what would become the Living Water Inclusive Catholic Community.

Andrea Johnson was a long-time advocate for women's rights, especially women in the Church, having served as Executive Director of the Women's Ordination Conference. Gloria Carpeneto was a spiritual director and retreat facilitator who had served for years as Pastoral Associate in two Roman Catholic parishes in Baltimore. After Gloria had resigned her position with the churches she served, she learned about the possibility of ordination with an organization called Roman Catholic Womenpriests (RCWP); she made an inquiry. Andrea was already a member of RCWP and was asked to talk with Gloria about her inquiry. A conversation followed, and a friendship began.

Andrea was ordained a priest at Judson Memorial Church in Washington Square in New York in July 2007, in the same ordination service where Gloria was ordained a deacon. Throughout 2007, Gloria and Andrea talked about forming an alternative Catholic faith community together. And in 2008, that community gathered for the first time, with members from Baltimore (who knew Gloria) and members from Annapolis (who knew Andrea). On January 20, 2008, we celebrated our first Roman Catholic Eucharist at the Unitarian Universalist Church in Annapolis MD. To accommodate both geographic groups, we also celebrated Mass every other month at the Stony Run (Quaker) Meeting House in Baltimore MD. These two churches were our homes for our first eight months, and we owe them our gratitude for welcoming us when traditional Roman Catholic parishes could or would not. Migrating like a flock of birds between two churches each month – north in January, south in February – we could begin to sense the Spirit alive in our pilgrim community.

As it happens, the Spirit moves where She will, and is often to be seen more clearly in retrospect. So it was with us. Who could have known where a three-hour conversation at a restaurant in Crofton MD would lead? Who could imagine that the Spirit was already shaping and forming a nascent faith community out of that conversation? But amazing grace was at work, and that is where our spiritual autobiography actually begins.



Discovering Eucharist in Each Other

Beginning in January 2008, our original liturgies were on the 3rd Sunday of the month at 3:00 p.m. Was it the grace of God that inspired us to begin to have a Social Hour after those Masses? In Annapolis, it was *Romano's Macaroni Grill* in the Annapolis Mall; in Baltimore, it was the lower hall of the Stony Run Friends Meeting House. We had dinner at the *Macaroni Grill*, and we brought our own food to share at Stony Run. And in both places, we not only ate; we lingered, we talked, we shared the stories of our lives, and we began to form community at a level unafforded us in previous experiences of church. Funny to think that our spiritual journey began so closely connected to food, but it did. We were learning that Eucharist was not static, not confined to whatever came between the words and music that open and close a Mass. Eucharist was becoming a verb to us. We were *becoming* Eucharist to one another, as our social hours became an integral part of our community.



Putting Down Roots

After nine months of Annapolis residents driving up to Baltimore for Mass, and Baltimore residents reversing that trip every four weeks, we knew we needed a centrally located site where we could worship together. Once again, was it the grace of God that led us to a church that was equidistant from Baltimore and Annapolis? That grace, plus a little geographical research on Andrea's part, led us to St. John's United Church of Christ in Catonsville MD, and its most welcoming female pastor, Rev. LoisAnn Furgess-Oler. LoisAnn could not have been more enthusiastic over a Roman Catholic congregation pastored by two women gathering in her church to worship. As an interim pastor, however, LoisAnn was somewhat constrained in that she walked in the footsteps of a conservative male pastor and answered to an even more conservative vestry. But once assured that our altar wine would be alcohol-free and that no fermented beverages would pass anyone's lips at any of our social hours or events ever – ever, ever, ever – we were in!

Our community met at Andrea's home on October 5, 2008 (our first Community Discernment Day, of which there have now been 45) to discuss how to move forward. Over a potluck dinner (yet another meal), we agreed that St. John's United Church of Christ would be our new home where we would meet monthly beginning later that month, October 19, 2008.



Taking Some Shape

The story of our spiritual journey would not be complete without remembering how important it was to us, as a community, to engage in liturgies that were welcoming, inclusive and affirming to all. That was our truth, and we wanted it to be the cornerstone of everything we did. Throughout our early months, Gloria and Andrea revised the *Sacramentary (Roman Missal)* into liturgies that kept the character of the traditional Roman Catholic Mass, at the same time that these revised liturgies brought the experience of worship alive. No more misogynistic language. No more atonement theology. No more exclusion of anyone from participation in all parts of the liturgy. No more sacred language reserved only to the priests. No more magic hands or magic words. The Eucharist we celebrated together would be a lived experience of our oneness with God, with each other, with our world, and indeed with all of God's creation.

Early on, we researched gluten-free communion bread and developed a tasty recipe of our own. Our altar wine was alcohol-free. We shared one cup and one plate; there would be no distinctions among anyone at our table.

Music at our liturgies evolved over time, and would eventually include everything from Christian rock to contemplative Taizé. We were graced by a dozen differently gifted music ministers who shared Happy Birthdays as easily as they shared hymns. Over the years, there would be pianos and organs, drums and flutes, violins and guitars, tambourines, maracas, and even the occasional kazoo, always inviting us all to pray in song (twice, as we're told).

As equal members of the community, our priests would wear a simple white alb (representing each community member's baptism into the life of Christ), and a stole (symbolic of community leadership). But they would eschew Roman collars and ornate vestments. Our sacred vessels would be all the more sacred for being made of simple, earthen materials. And our table would be just that – not a high altar, but a simple table, sitting on the same level as all members of our community, an accessible gathering space where all could share a meal.



Being Called and Being Named

We knew we needed a name, and for a while, we called ourselves *The Bethany Community*. Formalizing that name in November 2008, *we* envisioned ourselves living in a circle of deep friendship with Jesus, just as Martha, Mary and Lazarus had when they lived in Bethany. But naming is an act of anointing, a sacred consecration to that which we're called to be. Remembering the many times in scripture that names had been changed to reflect a new calling, we engaged our nearly-one-year-old community in this discernment. We could continue to be *The Bethany Community*, or we might find ourselves called – and therefore named -- in a different way. We wanted to discern that together.

Everyone's ideas were invited, and by January 2009, we had more suggested names than we knew what to do with! The depth and breadth of our community's spirituality can be seen in the list of names that were suggested at our second Community Discernment Day ever – January 24, 2009.

- ❖ The Community of Purple Merchants
- ❖ The Chesapeake Community of Love (or something that reflects not only the distance between those sites where we gather for liturgy, but also the connectedness we feel with each other)
- ❖ Anam Cara
- ❖ Soul Friends of the Chesapeake
- ❖ Mary Magdala
- ❖ Magdala Worship Community
- ❖ Some name that involves Sophia
- ❖ Growing by Grace Community.
- ❖ Church of the Eucharist: A New Day Community
- ❖ Living Saints Church: A New Day Community
- ❖ Community of Mary Magdalene, Apostle
- ❖ Community of Mary Magdalene, Apostle to the Apostles
- ❖ Apostleship of Mary Magdalene
- ❖ Discipleship of Mary Magdalene
- ❖ Community of Mary Magdalene, Witness of the Resurrection
- ❖ Community of Mary Magdalene, Model of Courage
- ❖ Newborn Community of Hope
- ❖ Catholic Community of Welcome
- ❖ Emmaus Community
- ❖ Bethany Christian Community
- ❖ Agape Community
- ❖ Agape Followers
- ❖ Our God's Community Church
- ❖ Shekinah Community
- ❖ Soul Friends of Magdala
- ❖ Faith Community of Hope & Healing

Before discerning our name, we spent time watching a slide show on *Ministry at the Margins*, sensing that as part of our call. We talked about what an egalitarian faith community might look like – God knows, we’d not seen one before! We had one of our by-now famous potluck lunches (food again). We prayed. And we settled into the naming.

As we sifted and sorted through 26 names, it became clear that in some way they all coalesced around the themes of friendship, discipleship and the equality of men and women in the eyes of God. But how to put those themes together? Seemingly out of nowhere an entirely new suggestion was put forth – perhaps we were called to live and share a promise of agape love that would be poured out for the life of the world in friendship, discipleship and equality. Perhaps we were called to be the Samaritan Woman of the Gospel, called to receive the Living Water of God’s eternal love. Perhaps like her, we were also called to a discipleship of sharing the message of that love with the world. Perhaps we were called to *be* Living Water, and to call ourselves *The Living Water Inclusive Catholic Community*.

And so it was. We began the new year with a new name (and a website and an email address and a mailing list of 58 members), as we set out to learn what it meant to be Living Water.



Living as Beloved Misfits

We borrow this phrase from Dr. John Plummer’s 2005 study of the independent sacramental movement. In it, he speaks about *“those who have been excluded from the full sacramental life of the Church, and who -- for whatever reason – are taking ownership of the liturgical traditions, and creatively innovating to form new communities.”* Dr. Plummer envisions these brave souls as *“... a glorious procession of beloved misfits into the divine kingdom.”*

Beloved misfits, huh?

- ✓ Excluded from Holy Orders for being a woman, check
- ✓ Excluded from full participation in Eucharist because of divorce and remarriage, check
- ✓ Excluded from the life of the Church because of sexual orientation, check
- ✓ Excluded from the Church for supporting the ordination of women, check

We checked all the boxes, and more. We were also those who were passionate about inclusion, especially inclusive language, knowing that words can wound; those who were tired of leaving Mass on Sunday, angry at the clericalism that showed up so often in Sunday homilies; those who wondered why their Church stood passionately for Birth, but not so passionately for the full spectrum of Life; those who could no longer tolerate being ruled by a medieval structure of princes and fiefdoms. Yes, we began as beloved misfits. And as we moved into our second year, we became even more bonded around that identity, and around our call to be Living Water.



Balancing Structure and Community

Maybe it was our misfit status – that sense of no longer fitting in anywhere in the Church – that moved us toward developing at least a minimum of structure in our early years. We knew that with too little structure, we could easily fall apart; but with too much structure, we could just as easily lose the sense of *communitas* we hoped to achieve. Ideally, we wanted just enough order, continuity and efficiency to form the skeleton of our Living Water Community, so that we would be free to en flesh that skeleton into something recognizable as a Beloved Community. No small task! But we strived toward that delicate balance, growing as individuals and as a community as we went. In 2009 and 2010, we would live in the yin and yang of ...

Structure ... initiating the process of incorporating as a non-profit organization in the State of Maryland.

Communitas ... beginning to celebrate two Masses every month, meaning we could come together as community twice as often.

Structure ... establishing triannual Discernment Days that would envision and formalize our ministries.

Communitas ... welcoming new friends, as our numbers (and our name tags) grew from 58 to 71 to 86 and more.

Structure ... starting the long journey that would result in our gaining IRS recognition as a tax-exempt, 501 (c) (3) organization.

Communitas ... adding a Mass in a member's home each month, alternating between homes in Baltimore and homes in Annapolis.

Structure ... formalizing a full liturgical year in our printed liturgies.

Communitas ... celebrating our first Easter Vigil, our first Mass on a Christmas morning, and then our first, full Holy Week.

Structure ... approving the purchase of the accouterments of worship – hymnals, a processional cross, *Inclusive Lectionaries*, altar linens, bread and wine.

Communitas ... initiating a weekly newsletter (please don't call it a bulletin!) that would keep members (and other interested persons) informed about our community.

In those first few years, we were guided by a document entitled *Ministry in the Margins: Prospects and Possibilities*, by Kathleen Kautzer, Ph.D., of Regis College. In her sociological research, Dr. Kautzer talked about the “*Iron Law of Oligarchy*.” Simply put, this law states that even the most well-intentioned democracies will eventually grow larger than their original vision. With growth will come the stratification of hierarchies; and with hierarchies will come a loss of the original sense of democracy. It’s called an Iron Law for a reason! It’s what inevitably happens when humans organize, and it’s hard to fight against it. Yet we continued to try to walk that thin line between structure and *communitas*.

We saw ourselves in Rabbi Martin Buber’s hope for the Israeli kibbutz; we ourselves tried to be “*an experiment that would not fail*.” We took hope from Martin Brueggeman’s vision of prophetic ministry, and took upon ourselves the prophetic tasks of “*nurturing, nourishing, and evoking a consciousness and perception that are alternative to the dominant culture around us*.”

Somewhere in there, we began supporting a day shelter for women sex workers in Baltimore City. We made micro-loans to small business entrepreneurs around the world. We spent days harvesting fruits and vegetables at a Christian farm whose produce would go to food banks throughout Maryland. We began to worship at a storefront in Baltimore City, and supported that church and its ministries to women, children and youth. We supported a labyrinth and an interfaith peace garden in a neighborhood increasingly subject to gun violence.

As a community, we visited a mosque and a synagogue, a Buddhist temple, a Quaker retreat center, and a national Catholic shrine. We organized a telephone bank to support the passage of same-sex marriage legislation in Maryland, advocated for legislation to grant ex-felons their right to vote, and held voter registration drives. The list of all we were about in our first years is long, and a visit to our website will fill in more blanks. What's important to our story is that somehow, in these early years, we broke the Iron Law of Oligarchy. We did not divide into hierarchies of power. Beloved Misfits, we were not stagnant, but continued to hear our call to be flowing, living water.



Seeding Servant Leaders

During the years between 2010 and 2019, we were fertile ground for the growth of Roman Catholic women's call to ordained ministry. One by one, women who had felt called to priestly ministry for years joined Living Water; and one by one, they were nurtured by the community into their ordinations and into pastoral service to Living Water and elsewhere.

First came a religious educator, then a mental health counselor. They were followed by a liturgist/educator and an immigration advocate. A chaplain, a university administrator, a childcare worker, and a passionate advocate for LGBTQ rights followed. In the end, the Living Water Community seeded eight Roman Catholic Womenpriests beyond our two original founders. Honestly, as a faith community called to prophetic ministry, what did we expect?

What did we expect would happen when women's voices were respected? What did we expect would happen when women were an integral part of our liturgies? What did we expect would happen when women in our community saw people who looked like them (Gloria and Andrea) at the altar and in the pulpit? We didn't have to beg and plead for vocations to the priesthood; the Spirit had tossed those calls like seeds into the rich soil of our community, where living water assured that they could take root and grow.

But our servant leaders were not limited to priests. So many members of Living Water stepped forward in ministry. So many felt welcomed and invited to serve in ways they had not experienced before. Sitting around a table at any one of our Community Discernment Days, we would be reminded of Paul's egalitarian vision of community. In our day, there was certainly no problem with slaves or Greeks or free men. But we might have felt the sting of hierarchy among us. We might have valued some ministries over others. We might have gotten into those turf battles we had seen so often in traditional Parish Council meetings. We might have waited for our priests to have the final word in decisions we made. But we didn't, and therein lies the character of this community.

No two ways about it, early in our lives, we had all been infected with the slow virus of clericalism. For our priests, the virus might have manifested as unthinking superiority, the right to rule, entitlement as God’s chosen ones. For other members of our community, it might have shown up as acquiescence to that superiority, entitlement, and divine rule. The virus lurked in each of us, just as it had lurked in the Roman Catholic Church for centuries. And we needed considerable vigilance over it, so that it didn’t emerge in us unawares. When there were disagreements among us, we tried to be sure that the priests didn’t “pull rank,” and that others didn’t let them do that. In the same way, we tried to assure everyone – even those who believed it least – that their voices were equally heard and equally valued. We had broken canon law merely in the act of coming together as we did. But allowing the Spirit to grow our community as She did was perhaps an even larger transgression. We were in clear violation of Canon 519 of the *Code of Canon Law*, not to mention Canon 536, Subsections 1 and 2 which clearly state ...

519. The priest (parochus) is the proper pastor (pastor) of the parish entrusted to him, exercising the pastoral care of the community committed to him under the authority of the diocesan bishop in whose ministry of Christ he has been called to share, so that for that same community he carries out the functions of teaching, sanctifying, and governing, also with the cooperation of other presbyters or deacons and with the assistance of lay members of the Christian faithful, according to the norm of law.

536 §1. If the diocesan bishop judges it opportune after he has heard the presbyteral council, a pastoral council is to be established in each parish, over which the pastor presides and in which the Christian faithful, together with those who share in pastoral care by virtue of their office in the parish, assist in fostering pastoral activity.

536 §2. A pastoral council possesses a consultative vote only and is governed by the norms established by the diocesan bishop.

Just like the 50's TV show, *Father Knows Best*, “he” governs those faithful who serve and who pray and who do the work of church. In turn, the governed may raise their voices in consultation, but never in decision-making. Yet in our group of Beloved Misfits, we were consciously trying to follow the promptings of the Holy Spirit as we journeyed together. And that Spirit-voice resided in each of us – not one of us – and certainly not in Father as we had come to know him over the years.

Of course, we were differently gifted. But those tongues of fire were divided equally over all our heads, and we invited the Spirit to show her wisdom through our collective voice. Over the years (through the pandemic in 2020 and into 2023) we would meet as a discerning and governing body 45 times, and never once did we fear violating canon law, since love always and ever superseded that law. (You might even say we were synodal when synodal wasn't cool!)



Embracing Loss and Failure

We did not know grief until early 2013. That was when, in January and February, two beloved community members went home to God. Anne and Bill – two loving souls, they fed us with beauty and humor and their deep sense of God alive in them, even as they left us. Our shock and our grief were palpable, as we celebrated our first funerals and remembered their lives with joy. Over the years, we would lose fifteen more of our friends. And every year, we would memorialize them on All Saints / All Souls Day, companions on the journey whose spirits still resided with us and still blessed us. They are present to us every time we gather, but never more powerfully than at the Easter Vigil when we sing the *Litany of the Saints*, and we ask all those holy men and women – *our* holy men and women – to pray with and for us.

Now for those failures. We could have avoided them if we had just remembered to be ourselves. If only we had not tried doing things as we had seen them done elsewhere. We tried a Stewardship Month, complete with a pledge card for time, talents and treasure – NO WAY! We tried advertising, paid and free, to get new members

and grow the community – WHAT A BUST! For a while, we celebrated a Saturday afternoon Mass to attract additional members -- NOT GONNA HAPPEN! We structured spiritual conversations to take place during our Social Hours that were intended to get us talking about the Sunday readings – NO COMMENT ON THIS ONE! We would list all the hymns on a whiteboard before Mass so they would be visible to everyone; only no one ever looked – WHY DID A WHITEBOARD SEEM SO IMPORTANT? We were blessed not to have bigger failures than these, and part of the blessing was the lesson we learned about staying true to our vision of church – doing what we were called to do, and not just imitating what we had seen others do in the parish churches we had previously attended.

As we walked through one misstep after another, one of our members eventually said that maybe we should just strive to *be* there – strive always to *be* present and *be* true to our vision – so that whoever needed us could always find us. Wiser words were never spoken. Even today, our name tags tell of visitors and members up and down the East Coast – and we didn't pay a penny in advertising for that!



Experimenting and Expanding

By the time 2014 rolled around, there were members in Baltimore and in Annapolis who – for a variety of reasons – found it difficult to continue to gather in our central location in Catonsville. We began to have Home Masses in both locations on Sundays, as well as Masses in churches there. Starting in 2008 with one Mass every month that alternated between Baltimore and Annapolis, we had grown to six Masses each month, in three churches and two homes. Soon we added yet another site, in Thurmont MD. Over time, we would worship at:

- *Unitarian Universalist Church, Annapolis*
- *Stony Run Friends Meeting House, Baltimore*
- *Faith Community of Peace, Baltimore*
- *St. John’s Grace United Church of Christ, Catonsville*
- *Newborn Community of Faith, Baltimore*
- *Bethesda United Methodist Church, Baltimore*
- *St. Luke’s Episcopal Church, Annapolis*
- *Faith Community Methodist Church, Baltimore*
- *St. Philip’s Episcopal Church, Annapolis*
- *Church of the Nativity and Holy Comforter, Baltimore*
- *Harriet Chapel, Catoctin Episcopal Parish, Thurmont (Frederick County MD)*

(It's important to note here that Beloved Misfits didn't get a very warm welcome from Roman Catholic parishes, where we were not allowed to celebrate Eucharist. So when we needed churches where we could gather, it was always our Protestant brothers and sisters who came through. Three cheers for ecumenism!)

We worried, of course, that separating into smaller groups for Eucharist might damage the integrity of our community as a whole. But we continued to come together as one community on two Sundays each month at St. John's Grace UCC in Catonsville; our integrity didn't seem all that damaged. At these total community liturgies, several of our members offered Reiki after Mass, a gift of healing where the graces of our liturgy could continue to flow. And a pleasant if unexpected side effect of separating for liturgies in different geographic areas was that our numbers in those areas actually grew.

Over the years, we shied away from the structure of Committees, and responded instead to needs in our community as they arose. We made calls to voters to support marriage equality legislation in Maryland and wrote letters urging our Governor to return voting rights to released felons who had served their time. We conducted a Voter Registration Drive, focusing on those ex-felons, and others who might not have easy access to

registration. When two historic churches burned in our community, we offered our prayers and our financial support. We supported and marched in PRIDE parades. And in a small act of *keepin' it real*, we committed to twice-monthly collections of paper products for a local food bank; the SNAP Program (food stamps) does not allow for the purchase of toilet paper, and this was definitely a need unmet!



Deepening Our Spirituality

It felt important to us to know more about the many ways that individuals beyond our community encounter God on their journeys. So in 2014, we began a series of ecumenical and interfaith visits to a Muslim mosque, a Buddhist temple, a Catholic shrine, a Jewish synagogue, a Quaker retreat center, and a labyrinth on the grounds of a local Roman Catholic church. We participated in services, sat for teachings, and contributed to each in support of their ministries.

At the same time, we felt called to reflect on our own journeys as well. Even Beloved Misfits can appreciate church history, theology, scripture, social justice, women's rights, spirituality, human development and more. So we initiated a series of Adult Faith Formation afternoon presentations (later to be renamed our *Journeys in Faith* series). Three times each year we invited prominent speakers to share their ideas with us, in 3-hour to full-day workshops, and we followed these sessions with liturgy, so that we would learn and pray and worship together.

Our sense of being led by the Spirit was deepened through several annual day-long retreats that also began in 2015, offered by two Quaker Friends who guided us through prayer and reflection on living as Beloved Community. We thought we knew each other well; but these retreats brought us to a new level of *communitas* that deepened our love, respect and appreciation for one another. Our retreats enabled us to recommit to our vision of how we responded to the Spirit's call to be church.

Around 2016, we began a Spiritual Book Exchange at our Social Hours, an idea whose time truly had come. Over the years, so many of us had accumulated so many books, CD's, and DVD's that the harvest was bountiful. And yes, we had our fair share of holy cards, pamphlets, rosaries and medals that (as any Catholic will tell you) just can't be thrown away. So they came to our exchange as well. In a spirit of gratitude to the givers, each one was taken, though we never knew – and did not ask – exactly where they ended up!

In 2017, we began our preparations for our 10-year anniversary in earnest. As we approached our tenth year as a community, there was a felt need among us to look back, to take stock, to rejoice in all the graces received and to anticipate those graces yet to come. We made a weekend retreat with our Quaker Friends, this time in an

Episcopal retreat center set in the low, rolling Catoctin Mountains of Western Maryland.

Anyone who was there will remember the driving rain and pealing thunder that began just as we were arriving at the retreat center on a Friday afternoon. We may never have been closer as a community than when we opened the door for each of our friends who came in, one-by-one, drenched and dragging luggage. We worried about the possibility of bad weather all weekend, but we needn't have. Once that rain had gathered us all in, it moved further west, and we got on with our retreat during the sunniest of August days. It's hard not to have a full heart when you get up in the morning gazing at mist on the mountaintops, and you go to sleep at night under clear, starry skies, far from the light pollution of any nearby cities.

In previous retreats, we had reflected on *communitas*. But this time, the Spirit invited us to add the element of Commitment. Prayerful promises that were made on that retreat are promises that have been kept in the intervening years. Here are our prayers and pledges moving into our tenth year:

What commitment am I willing to make to the vision of Living Water as we celebrate ten years and look toward ten more?

- *I commit my time and talent to the on-going good works that this community will take on in the future for your honor and glory and for the good of all people.*
- *Jesus, help me to be a positive presence among the members of Living Water Inclusive Community always.*
- *Loving God, if it be your will, let me once again be involved with spreading your work and word in Frederick County. Thank you.*
- *May our hearts be open to the movement of the Spirit; may we journey forward without fear; may we rejoice in that which brought us together and nurture the Divine which resides in each of us; may it be so.*
- *I deeply desire to learn conversational Spanish to use that skill to work in social justice/legal aid/family or criminal justice.*

- *Godde continue to bless this Spirit-filled community with people who seek a deeper relationship with you and who work for the greater good of our community and world.*
- *That our community would always be dedicated to being the face of God to each other, to our neighbors, and to the world, may we share the Christ -light in our hearts to all people in compassion, humility and faithfulness.*
- *I desire to make an irrevocable commitment to all that this community bears witness to. My voice, my hands, my spirit, and all of my gifts are at the service of the gospel as it is lived in our community.*
- *I pray that Living Water may continue its inclusive ministry and outreach for social justice and expand both in the years to come to new people as a welcoming way to reflect the love of Jesus for all.*
- *God, you have given me many blessings and graces in my life. Help me to discern the path I am to walk with Living Water, and the gifts I have to share.*

- *All sustaining mother/father God, continue to strengthen us to be Living Water for each other and for any who seek justice, peace, and a place to belong.*
- *I pray that Living Water may continue to grow – opening wide to young and old, all sorts of people who seek a vibrant spiritual community. And I commit myself to work and co-create, and to take a leading role.*
- *I commit to attend liturgies, bake communion bread, participate in discernment days as I can and be open to listening for other ways to be attentive to the needs of community members that will be helpful.*
- *Gracious God, I commit my time and talents to spread the good news of LWICC to all those with whom I come in contact. I ask for your help in this endeavor.*
- *Dear God, I promise to frequently support the mission of Living Water.*
- *I pray that with the healing and growth of my own being, I may be able to offer my gifts more fully to the growth, mission and well-being of the Living Water Community and friendship with its individual members.*

- *I open myself in faithfulness for the well-being and flourishing of Living Water Inclusive Catholic Community and I trust that I will be given/will have all that I need to fulfill my part, with the help of God. Amen.*
- *Thank you God for Living Water; the whole community is such a blessing. I hope we continue to grow and strengthen throughout the years.*
- *Good and Gracious God, God of Blessing and Hope, I raise my heart, hands and spirit in gratitude for all you have called me to be. You called me to the Living Water Community to be a presence to all who join me in celebrating a renewal of Church. I commit myself to the daily, on-going purpose, mission and vision in bringing Living Water to those who are seeking a renewed sense of Church. Amen.*
- *Open our eyes, guide us to find the role Living Water is called to play in healing today's racism and separatism, alt right and alt left.*
- *I commit to bring attentive emotional and material support to those in LWICC who could benefit from help, whether or not they ask. Also, to respond to calls for assistance as they come up.*

- *May I be instrumental in furthering the free flow of Living Water; may it become a flood of inclusive Christianity. May I be supportive of taking the message to people and places yearning for spiritual freedom and growth. May the sequel to the Acts of the Apostles originate in Living Water.*
- *Just as geese, may we always be together in spirit, leading when it is our turn to do so and following when necessary, looking to the Beatitudes as the guide on our collective journey.*
- *I wish to be more aware of people who could receive information from me about the Living Water Community and how it could be for them a new home in their religious life. Welcome them!*
- *My prayer is that God in us be activated in us as individuals and as a community consistently so that we yield miracles.*

A concluding liturgy celebrated in an old, renovated grain silo crowded us into a circle so tightly pressed around the table there was no room for anything except *communitas*. The metaphor was not lost on us – we are never closer than when the Spirit unites us around the table in prayer, passion and purpose. Thus ended our retreat.

By the time 2018 actually rolled around, we celebrated our 10th anniversary in the sanctuary of St. John's Grace UCC in Catonsville; actually, we celebrated it twice. Our first celebration was a more intimate affair, attended primarily by current members of our community. Our second celebration, however, was a homecoming, to which we invited everyone we could track down who had ever worshipped with us since our community first gathered in 2008. Not all 300+ persons could join us. But the thoughts, prayers, humor and good wishes sent to us by those who were invited were a testimony to the role Living Water had played in their lives, even if only briefly. And we celebrated ten years exactly as we had begun them – with an amazing spread of food, blessed by God, contributed and shared by all.



Remembering Some of the Details

These pages were not intended as pure chronology. They certainly weren't intended as any compilation of lists of things we'd done. Instead, they were an effort to track the movement of the Spirit in our midst during our first ten years. But details are important, for as Pope Francis has told us ...

LOVE IS IN THE DETAILS

Let us not forget that Jesus asked his disciples to pay attention to details.

The little detail that wine was running out at a party.

The little detail that one sheep was missing.

The little detail of noticing the widow who offered her two small coins.

The little detail of having spare oil for the lamps, should the bridegroom delay.

The little detail of asking the disciples how many loaves of bread they had.

The little detail of having a fire burning and a fish cooking as he waited for the disciples at daybreak.

A community that cherishes the little details of love, whose members care for one another and create an open and evangelizing environment, is a place where the risen Lord is present, sanctifying it in accordance with the Father's plan. There are times when, by a gift of the Lord's love, we are granted, amid these little details, consoling experiences of God.

(GAUDETE ET EXSULTATE, 144–145)

So here are a few details of our lives in our community, in no particular order, but in ten years of 5,259,492 minutes, these are pre-pandemic moments that we will never forget ...

- ❖ When we picked zucchinis so large we needed the support of more than a few sturdy Boy Scouts to carry our harvest for us ... when a bird flew into the sanctuary during an Easter Vigil and looked a lot like the Holy Spirit flying around ... when a beautiful, deaf rescue dog greeted us at the beginning of liturgies during the Holy Week Triduum ... when we celebrated Eucharist poolside at someone's home, the Gospel was the story of Jesus walking on the water, and our presider chose not to try that out ... when a UCC church transformed into Vacation Bible School, and we celebrated Mass inside a tropical rain forest, a castle or a rocket ship ...

- ❖ When we spilled water, broke coffee pots, lost power, sweltered with no air conditioning, or shivered with no heat at our liturgies and our Discernment Days ... left homilies lying on a table at home ... swept up the remains of a stinkbug invasion in a sanctuary ... felt our teeth chatter in the cold rain of an outdoor Mass and picnic in the park, foolishly trusting that winter was behind us ... wore the wrong liturgical colors or prayed the wrong liturgical prayers ... struggled to beat the alarm system as we fumbled to lock unfamiliar doors.

- ❖ When we looked forward to the best chocolate candies of the year, all those brought in to Social Hour the Sundays after Christmas and Easter ... enjoyed a Mardi Gras King Cake on the Sunday before Ash Wednesday or Paschal Lamb Cakes after the Easter Vigil ... salivated in anticipation as our designated fire starters grilled hamburgers and hot dogs at our Labor Day picnics ... came to Discernment Days knowing we'd be rewarded for all our work with amazing pot luck lunches.

- ❖ When we reassured a parent whose adult child seemed lost ... comforted a spouse who had lost a partner of many years ... offered food and companionship to an unhoused man who stayed with us for a while ... prayed and anointed a member with end-stage cancer ... made up back-to-school backpacks for low income students ... donated hundreds of pairs of socks and face cloths and candy (at their request) at Christmas to a shelter for unhoused men ... blessed stuffed animals on the Feast of St. Francis for special needs and medically fragile children in foster care ... collected children's books for correctional inmates, so they would have books to read to their children on visits.

When we ... when we ... when we ... probably each of us has a hundred more memories of these details of love. These are the details too small to be counted as steppingstones or turns in our labyrinth. But they form the pebbled path we walked upon during our first ten years. As Pope Francis says, they've granted us consoling experiences of God. Taken together with our steppingstones, they form our spiritual autobiography – that non-fiction prose written by dissenters, that story lived by Beloved Misfits.



STORIES

Sharing Our Journeys

You can't tell a *community's* story without listening to the *individual* stories that give that community its character. It's an old analogy, but it still works – a stew with carrots and peas is different from one without. Ingredients matter!

So ten members of Living Water (four men and six women) agreed to share their journeys in faith that landed them on the Welcome Mat of this community. Theirs are stories of hope, disappointment, anger, strength, resilience, and amazing tenacity in seeking God. Theirs are near-mythic stories of heroes and heroines who embarked on a quest, slayed their dragons, and came out stronger on the other side. And theirs are stories that resonate with the experience of us all. Details will vary, but our common Roman Catholic DNA will recognize the path, the quest, and the goal.

Humble as they are, our ten story tellers agreed to anonymity, knowing that each of their stories could be all of our stories. They agreed to have their stories summarized as vignettes, paraphrased in the first person, and written without direct quotations. So without further

ado, let's look at ten snapshots of ten lives that had been lived in the traditional Roman Catholic Church, and see what they have to tell us. No comments or interpretations for now. Just enjoy these vignettes of pilgrims on their journey to God.

#1. I waited 50 years.

I wanted to be an altar boy (except I was a girl) from the time I was ten years old. It took me until I was 60, but on my birthday – finally! After 50 years of waiting, I finally served at the altar of a church where two kindly, old Irish priests welcomed me and encouraged my service. I felt like I finally mattered. I could be close to the altar and, truth be known, do everything those two priests could do. Serve as Lector, Eucharistic Minister, Music Minister ... everything was open to me except, of course, presiding at Mass.

Still, I could turn my head, look the other way, and pretend not to feel slightly less-than-fully-functional (or acknowledged, appreciated or affirmed). While this parish wasn't entirely life-giving, neither was it death-dealing. It provided me – as a woman – every opportunity for service that was available to me. I was as satisfied as I believed I could be.

But not for long. The two old Irishmen left, and in came a new pastor. He was a fire breather on the issue of abortion. And he promised us all a one-way ticket to Hell if we voted for Barack Obama. This parish was choking the life out of me. He preached. I listened as long as I could, then I just walked out. And I never went back, not to that church or any other. At least not before Living Water. All the life that religion had choked out of me has begun to blossom again in this place of authenticity, community, and love.

#2. I'm not even Catholic.

I was raised in the First Christian Church, and frankly, sports were always more my thing than church. My partner is Catholic, though, so that's how I know the Church.

Seems to me there were always just too many rules and requirements for me to become a Catholic. It'd be more than I could handle. I don't like being preached at, and I certainly don't like just sitting there quietly and not talking with anyone else. Honestly, I feel I get plenty of church in all that I see around me.

But give me a church where people greet me and know me and ask how I'm doing. Give me a church where I can ask questions and share my thoughts with

other people. Give me a church where I actually *want* to listen to the homilies because they're believable and down-to-earth. Give me a church where I can believe that God is a She, present in everything and everyone, giving me wisdom to live a good life. Give me a church where no one is ever rejected. That would be my church. Actually, it is my church, Living Water, where I feel the warmth of community.

#3. Three strikes and you're out.

For Catholic theological reasons I didn't fully understand as a child, I was forbidden to attend my own grandfather's funeral – *Strike 1*. I heard some things about some unspeakable actions of priests with minors, and even though they were being addressed, just being in the room where they were being talked about ate into my soul – *Strike 2*. I attended a liturgy at a cathedral, and I was just about shocked into paralysis as the priest – just before Mass began – started reciting a long list of all those who were not welcome to receive Communion. No women who had practiced birth control, no divorced and remarried couples, no one living together without benefit of marriage. I just knew there were invisible “*No Women and No Gays Allowed*” signs everywhere – *Strike 3*.

It took years, but my blood finally hit a boiling point. Three strikes, three traumas, and I was pretty much finished with the Catholic Church.

I'm from a large-ish Catholic family. And I'm grateful that in that tradition, I came to love God and love celebrating liturgy. But to me, a church must be not only welcoming and inclusive, but also accepting and affirming. When words and phrases like "*living in sin, homosexual, disordered, divorced & remarried*" form an acceptable part of a judgmental vocabulary, well, as I said, three strikes ...

There has to be authenticity to a church's welcome, and frankly, I have not found that in even the most progressive of Catholic parishes. I find God most often in nature, and in the faces of spiritual people seeking God together. I found that authenticity in Living Water, and I could never go back to a traditional Catholic parish.

#4. I'm a gift to the Church?

I was single for so long. And a traditional Catholic parish is no place for a single person. There were, of course, those Catholic SWORD (Single, Widowed or Divorced) Groups that I joined. But even there, I had the feeling of not-quite-being-accepted as a full member of

the larger Church. A Jesuit priest who facilitated one of those groups once said to me, “You are a gift to the Church.” But as a single, divorced woman without benefit of annulment, I felt only rejection, and no understanding, respect or comfort from that Church.

My soon-to-be-husband and I discovered Living Water through an article in the local newspaper. We met with one of its pastors in a bar (yes, a bar), and talked for hours that first time we met. Her welcome was like a breath of fresh air. I felt safe talking with her, as though we had known each other for a long time.

When we came to Mass for the first time at Living Water, it was like meeting survivors of a great pain, who recognized that pain in each other. Growing together in God, we have become friends who understand, appreciate, love and support one another. It’s truly Christian community for me. And whether the institutional church and its hierarchy know it or not, that Jesuit priest was right – we are *all* gifts to the Church.

#5. Pull me into the 21st century.

I have a foot in two worlds. I'm still a member of a traditional Catholic parish. But I'm also a member of Living Water. I'm not sure why I'm still in the first. But I do know why I'm in the second. I want to live my faith in the 21st century.

Maybe it's the rebel in me, but I really *like* seeing married women as priests. I like the atmosphere that creates. In Living Water, we're single, married, gay, straight, male, female, even Catholic and not Catholic, and I like that diversity and inclusion. We're not as ethnically or racially diverse as my traditional Catholic parish, but for now, I can live with that. For me, it's outweighed by a liturgy where we can all participate, and homilies we can all understand and apply to our lives.

My spouse loved Living Water, and I came to the community through her. She was a spiritual seeker; I think she made me one, and I'm glad to continue my journey with Living Water. I guess I'll always be a little uncomfortable with all the touching and embracing this community does. But that's a small price to pay for how uplifted I feel when I'm here, and how supported I feel on my journey. So I think I'm here to stay.

#6. *We're all sisters here.*

The first time I ever made a retreat, it was when my kids were away. Was I shocked to learn that all the other women on retreat with me were nuns! I remember saying to the group, toward the end of the retreat, “*But I’m not a Sister.*” Somebody piped up and said, “*We’re all sisters here.*” That got a laugh from everyone. But for me, it was a turning point. On that retreat, I realized I needed something different from what *church* had come to mean in my life.

I knew I needed to be in a church free of the hypocrisy I had seen and heard in the homilies of so many priests; free of criticism for the simple act of thinking outside the theological box; free of judgment for something as personal as divorce; free of the heartlessness that would prevent a 4-year-old from serving as a flower girl at a beloved babysitter’s wedding ... and why? ... because she was a Protestant marrying a Catholic, that’s why.

I knew I needed a community where I could be sure ‘*we’re all sisters (and brothers) here.*’ And I found it in Living Water. Inclusiveness ... homilies with a message that moved me to action ... married women priests who challenged my ideas of God and church ... the intimacy of Masses in members’ homes where we could connect with God and each other – it was all there. When I lost a child and thought I’d lost my connection to

God as well, Living Water remained my community. Even when, in my grief, I couldn't be very present to everyone else, they never let me forget, *we're all sisters here.*

#7. What I needed was a keystone.

Although I was raised as a Roman Catholic, I've always been interested in exploring spirituality and other religions. The more I learned, the more I understood all the spiritual riches that Catholicism had kept from me. To be honest, I pretty much left Catholicism behind as I delved more deeply into Wicca, Tarot, Astrology, Eastern religions, and more. But then I met the person I would marry, and – you guessed it – he was a devout Roman Catholic.

About this same time, I met a woman who would become my spiritual director, and who would eventually be ordained as a Roman Catholic woman priest. She introduced me to the mystical tradition within the Catholic Church that I never even knew existed. Over time, I realized that Catholicism could serve as a keystone I needed to integrate all the spiritual paths I had walked. Gradually, I was able to return to my Catholicism and feel comfortable with my spiritual tradition. My journey reminds me of Carl Jung's *ouroboros*, the snake that eats its own tail, the ancient

and universal symbol for the completion of the circle of life. I felt I had come home.

My spiritual director introduced me to Living Water where I have been a member of the community since it was founded. These days, I usually worship with my husband at his more traditional Roman Catholic Jesuit parish; because I'm once again comfortable in Catholicism, I'm happy there. But I sometimes return to Living Water, and whenever I do, it's like I have never been away. There's always such a sweet sense of welcome and joy there. I liken Living Water to the warmth of James Taylor's acoustic guitar. There's a purity and a simplicity in this community that speaks to me of the purity and simplicity of God.

#8. I've been resisting since Vatican II.

I suppose I'm one of those people who are called *cradle Catholics*. But to tell the truth, the cradle was never all that comfortable for me. I've always loved the traditions and rituals of Catholicism. But I was never very fond of that patriarchal structure whose job it was to oversee and regulate the experience of those same traditions and rituals.

I thought that the Second Vatican Council might change all that. And to some degree it did. So I tried my best to cooperate with whatever seemed to be moving the Church forward and to resist the resistance-from-within that wanted to hold all progress in check. I continued my pattern of cooperation-and-resistance for more than 40 years until one day resistance just won out. There was just so much wrong with the exclusions, divisions, and injustices in the institutional Church – especially toward women – that I could stay no longer. I removed myself from my parish. And I found that I didn't miss it at all.

While all of this was happening, I attended a Call to Action conference. There, I heard a panel of four women speaking about their ordinations with Roman Catholic Womenpriests. They were committed to justice for women, and willing to risk excommunication because of their specific stand for justice for women in the Church. And that attracted me. I felt I'd met some kindred souls. After that, it was only a few steps between that panel, my attending liturgies at Living Water, and my beginning to host welcoming and inclusive Living Water liturgies in my home. I guess you could say that I've come full circle, and that my Catholic cradle has become comfortable at last!

#9. In one sense, we're all coming out.

I was married to a man for a long time and had two children in that marriage before I gradually became aware of my feelings for women. It took me a little while to come to grips with my sexual orientation and to risk coming out, first to myself and then to the world. So you can imagine how much I identified with one of the women priests who serve Living Water when she said to me that discerning and acting on her call to ordination was a coming out for her. Now that I think about it, maybe everyone who joins the Living Water community is, in one sense, coming out – each in his or her own way, owning their truth and acting on it.

I have a lot of hurtful memories of a large, suburban Catholic parish where I raised my children, but where I never felt I fit in. The parish school was quite conservative in the religion they taught my children, and the priest was definitely judgmental about working Moms (which I was). Still, my family was as involved in the parish as any other. Yet when our house flooded or my husband was hospitalized, no one visited, called or even sent a card. Church on Sunday seemed very *pro forma*. When the sexual abuse scandal exploded in 2002, that was the final straw for me. I couldn't bear the hypocrisy one more minute.

I have a great need for authenticity, for honesty and for courage in myself and in others. And I have found all of those in Living Water. As I talk with others in our community, I realize that they, too, have had to leave the familiar behind; take a stand for their beliefs; and risk rejection from family and friends for that. We may not all share the same sexual orientation; but as people seeking the Divine outside the strictures of a patriarchal, hierarchical church, we all continue to come out together.

#10. Men play horns, but women play strings.

You'd think the military might be the last stronghold of white, male privilege exercised by a controlling male hierarchy. But I've actually seen the military evolve over the years. In our bands, it was always assumed that men would play the horns (larger lungs, for more air power) and women would play the strings (smaller fingers, for finer movements). But when someone came up with the idea of blind auditions, all that changed; you couldn't see who was behind the curtain, blowing a horn or bowing a violin. So women began to be more included across orchestral lines, and LGBTQ folks were right there with them. It might take a while; but when the military sees that a problem needs to be solved, it moves toward a solution.

So why is it so hard for the Catholic Church to do the same? I truly believe that assuring the equality and inclusion of women and all they have to offer is the issue of our time. And nowhere does that issue seem more ignored than in the Roman Catholic Church. Over the years, I've been involved in a number of faith communities that cross different religious traditions. But it's only been in the Catholic Church where I'm confronted with *this* reality – if I ever had a daughter, she could not be ordained to ministry there. And I can't make any excuses for the injustice of that.

It was almost miraculous, the way my wife and I discovered Living Water. A magazine that neither of us had subscribed to just showed up in our mailbox one day. We read an article in there about Roman Catholic Womenpriests and we found the Living Water Community not more than half a mile from our home. We practically ran, not walked, and we've been members ever since. I almost don't have words for the experience of being part of this loving community of compassion and support. But I believe that, together, we are discovering the essence of something far beyond ourselves. And women, at last, are leading the way.



Listening to Our Words

These ten stories are the gems that shimmer through 15 hours of conversation and 42 pages of notes. While each vignette lives and breathes on its own, together they represent broad themes that have characterized our Living Water community from its inception – themes that weave themselves throughout our story. So in addition to vignettes, let's look at some of the original language that was used most often in these conversations, as members put words on their experience of Living Water. *Please note the italics; this is where you will find the words of our collective voice in our spiritual autobiography.*

There is *authenticity and honesty* in this community, as together we *search for God* in our lives and in our world. We *share values* that are reflected in the *actions* we take, both in our community and beyond. The *vitality* we feel in Living Water comes from a strong *sense of presence* – the presence of Christ in the Eucharist and the presence of Christ all around us. Ours is a community of *healing*, where pain – especially the pain we have felt on our spiritual journeys – is acknowledged and brokenness can be made whole.

This community *invites, welcomes, educates, challenges, loves, includes, blesses, forgives, reconciles, anoints*. It is a community of *equality, diversity and inclusion*. It is *non-patriarchal, non-hierarchical, decentralized*. It is *life-giving*, recharging spiritual batteries and energizing spiritual journeys.

Pastoral leaders are *servant leaders* here. Their lives of prayer and commitment to the Gospel are reflected in *homilies that touch minds and hearts*, and that are grounded in the reality of the lives of God's people. There is a refreshing *consonance* between their words and their actions. They are *one with* this community; their own spiritual journeys are not above, outside, ahead or beyond the experiences of others. They are *humble and respectful*, and they *treasure the lives and experiences* of others in the community.

There is *laughter, friendship, joy (and great food!)* in this community. There is *personal connection, love, and genuine compassion* for all. *Stories* are shared willingly and received tenderly and with respect here. Living Water is truly a *breath of fresh air, a safe space, a place to call home* – in short, God is in this place, and we are blessed to know Her.

Some of us may have arrived at this community angry and hurt at how we were treated in the institutional churches/parishes of our childhood and even our adult years. "*The Church choked the life out of me. ... The*

Church squelched me. ... The Church talked at me, but rarely listened to me. ... The Church rejected me. ... The Church devalued and disrespected women.” But for all of that, we arrived *because* those very churches and parishes had taught us the value of our history, our traditions, and most of all, the eternal truth of our holy scriptures. And we were seeking what those very scriptures told us we might hope for, a community about which it could be said, *“See how these Christians love one another.”* Our lives in our churches – as crazy-making as they might have been – had taught us one thing. As St. Augustine is said to have remarked, *“Solvitur ambulando – everything is solved by walking.”* We had been walking in faith all our lives. Dissatisfied, we never ceased our journeys. And it was that sacred walking that led us to the welcoming doors of the Living Water community.

On January 21, 2018 we celebrated ten years of life in this community of faith. Together, we echoed what Dag Hammarskjold had said years earlier about his own spiritual journey – *“For all that has been, Thanks. To all that will be, Yes.”* And so, as brothers and sisters in this Eucharistic community we call Living Water, we continue our grateful journey into every Yes that is yet unknown to us.



PANDEMIC POSTSCRIPT

2019 through 2021

The experience of the pandemic had such a profound effect on our community, we found we could not stop writing our autobiography in 2018 as we'd intended. And so begins a pandemic postscript ... or two.

The time between January 2019 and March 2020 was uneventful but not unfulfilling for us. In the language of the business start-up world, we had come to that point where “*everything clicks, and your business is firing on all cylinders.*” To bring it back to language maybe more appropriate in the religious context, there were several reasons why we believe our faith community had continued to grow and had not declined into impotence:

- ✓ We'd never fallen into an unhealthy focus on growth.
- ✓ We'd never lost sight of our mission.
- ✓ We'd never lost touch with the absolute importance of hospitality.
- ✓ We'd never become irrelevant to the larger society.

- ✓ We'd never become completely comfortable with the status quo.
- ✓ We'd never lost our connection with the Spirit for guidance.
- ✓ We'd never lacked for leadership within the community.

Over the two years after our 10th anniversary, with sadness we lost some community members to death, others to diminishment, and some others to relocation. But at our core, we remained healthy, vibrant, and as engaged as ever. We celebrated two more Holy Weeks, Palm Sunday through Easter Vigil; two more Labor Day liturgies and cookouts in Patapsco State Park; two more Thanksgivings, Advents and Christmases. We continued to gather for our community's Discernment Days, for afternoons of Faith Formation, for social hours, pot-luck brunches, for Masses in our members' homes, and special dinners on special occasions. Our charitable outreach continued at the local, state, national and international level. Not as humorous as it may appear at first, every two weeks for two years we continued to supply our local emergency food pantry with pounds and pounds of toilet paper, realizing that this essential was not an item covered by SNAP (the *Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program* formerly known as food stamps).

As we moved into 2020, Living Water had stabilized into the proverbial well-oiled machine. We were mere weeks away from another Holy Week, a trip to Harriet Tubman's Underground Railroad Museum, an interfaith visit to a Sikh temple, and an afternoon of Centering Prayer & Sacred Circle Dancing. But for us, as for everyone else on the planet, a huge surprise was just around the corner.

At a Mass in two members' homes on March 8, 2020, we joked (albeit nervously) about the virus that everyone was talking about and that seemed to be spreading. We offered lighthearted elbow bumps and air hugs at the Sign of Peace. Then on March 11, the *World Health Organization* declared Covid-19 a pandemic. On March 13, it was declared a National Emergency in the United States. And on March 15, we replaced our regular Sunday liturgy at St. John's Grace United Church of Christ with a conference call liturgy on *FreeConferenceCall.com*. No one could have told us what we would be in for over the next two years.

Along with everyone else in the world, we held our breath, and hoped it would be over soon. But it was already the 3rd Sunday in Lent. And when our President predicted that we'd all be back in church for Easter services, we were more than a little skeptical of that.

So we continued our liturgies – including Holy Week services – via telephone conference calls. It was clumsy and awkward, but we could not imagine not worshipping together.

And then, the miracle of Zoom! Beginning on May 10, and for nearly every Sunday since then, we’ve been staring at each other in two dimensions, enclosed in tiny boxes, communicating from one electronic device to another. To paraphrase Dr. Seuss, “*Oh, the things we’ve learned ...*”

- Don’t schedule your liturgies for 10:00 a.m. on a Sunday morning. About a million other churches are doing that on Zoom these days, and as we all learned in May 2020, that can break the internet!
- Don’t forget to Mute yourself, or you’ll treat everyone to an a *capella* rendition of our music, or maybe worse, a private conversation you’re having with your spouse.
- Don’t forget to *Unmute* yourself or you’ll deliver one very silent homily.
- If you have a cat or dog walking around, just be sure to *keep* your pet’s *face* pointed toward the screen.
- A little make-up goes a very long way on Zoom.
- If you absolutely can’t get into the Zoom Room for liturgy, leave peacefully and enjoy the rest of your day; God will know you tried!

Praying together as a Zoom Community we learned a lot that we'll look back on in years to come. We'll laugh, we'll cry, we might even cringe. We'll wonder how we did it. We'll continue to discern how God's calling us to go forward. But mostly, we'll stand in awe of the fact that even in the absence of those precious times when we exploded from our pews to pass the Sign of Peace or when we grazed at the buffet table during our Social Hours, we still held together. Same church, different pew, same community, different way of being ... ever the Beloved Community.

We're *still* a glorious procession of beloved misfits. We're *still* a community of seekers, searchers, labyrinth-walkers. Our autobiography is *still* written as the non-fiction prose of dissenters. We move into the unknown, trusting the transformative power of Love in the person of Jesus our brother. We pray that wholeness will continue to emerge in us. We strive to love like God.

Coming out of the pandemic and unsure of exactly what awaits us on our journey, we remember the last words that Pedro Arrupe, the Jesuit mystic, spoke before his death in 1991 – “*For the present, Amen. For the future, Alleluia!*” And always, always, we strive to be as we are called – Living Water – in community with each other and for our world. And that deserves an *Alleluia!*



BUT WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

2022 through 2023

Looking back over these pages, it didn't seem quite right to end our story in 2021. After all, most covid restrictions were still in place, and we could not really say where we would land when life returned to normal (if, indeed, it would ever return to "normal"). But it's been a few years now since the pandemic upended every aspect of life as we knew it. A lot has happened to us since 2021. It's now 2023. And as this last chapter of our autobiography says, *There's More!*

Throughout 2022, our community had one foot in each of two worlds. Believing we might go back to where we were pre-pandemic, we tried (and hoped) for that. But experience soon taught us what so many others – from megachurches to small faith communities – came to know as true: there really was no going back. So much in our culture had irrevocably changed as a result of the pandemic. We had lived through what journalist David Brooks has called a “*cultural convulsion*” – political and social division, the national exposure of systemic racism, and even near economic collapse. It would have been

easy to just let go. But clearly the Spirit's invitation was to move forward into some unknown, trying to keep our community together. So 2022 became for us a time of treading water, holding on to what we were until we could discern what we were being called to be.

It wasn't until 2023 that with all covid restrictions lifted we could really see where our Living Water Community stood. We would continue to evolve, as we began to see what a *new* normal might be for us. But in this year, 2022, it was all about holding on, or maybe more to the point, coming to realize that God's ways are not always our ways. In 2022, we came to know what Dickens meant when he wrote, "*It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.*"

How was 2022 the best? Throughout the pandemic and thereafter, we found that the liturgies we offered on Zoom were a gift we were happily able to share with friends well beyond our community here in Maryland. Spiritual seekers who found us on our website or through word-of-mouth were grateful for our presence on-line. Zoom afforded us the opportunity for a free flow of ideas in response to homilies shared; and a community of conversants developed. Although many of us would never meet in person, our Zoom liturgies affirmed a belief deeply held by our community – the value of attending to every voice on our walk with God.

For many, this was a first opportunity to share deeply in this way, and it became a vehicle of grace, a way of being open to Presence even when presence was not an option.

Our decision to use Zoom for liturgies – rather than one-way, livestreaming on Facebook or a similar platform – enabled as many as were on the call to actively participate. And that decision – a decision to celebrate Masses that were more participatory than performative – was, we believe, truly Spirit-led.

As was our discernment that, despite our status as a small faith community unrecognized by the Archdiocese of Baltimore, we were nonetheless called to participate in the worldwide Synod on Synodality initiated by Pope Francis in 2021: *Towards a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission*. The six synodal conversations we had on Zoom in February 2022 served two purposes for us. First, they reminded us that since we call ourselves the Living Water Inclusive *Catholic* Community, and since our priests are members of *Roman Catholic* Womenpriests, we have deliberately chosen to remain a part of the Roman Catholic Church, within which we serve as prophetic voice. Secondly, they enabled us to articulate once again our vision for a Church evolving, and our role within that vision.

Involvement in the synodal process was particularly important for us, since with the rest of the world, the pandemic had shaken the earth under our feet. Knowing that the document we produced from our conversations made it to the Vatican, and was shared on internet bulletin boards around the world gave us a renewed grounding in the best of our Roman Catholic tradition, and a special communion with our brothers and sisters around the world.

Throughout 2022, we kept our community together with weekly mailings, sharing every piece of news we could gather to keep our diaspora as one. We maintained our previous levels of charitable giving, and our gifts continued to go around the world. We offered retreats, book clubs, topical discussion groups, contemplative prayer and even Reiki on Zoom. We organized an amazing bus trip for the community to the *Harriet Tubman Museum and Educational Center* that brought us together as we had not been since before the pandemic. Anything and everything we could think of to do in the absence of gathering in person we did it. And our numbers grew, although many of them were online presence only. Our community weathered covid, and through it all, Zoom was, indeed, an amazing grace.

And how was 2022 the worst? As vaccines became available and covid restrictions loosened, the possibility of gathering in person again became more real for us. Balancing our in-person and our on-line gatherings became a challenge.

As much as the Zoom liturgies kept us together during the pandemic, we had lost some members of our community who were simply Zoom-averse. They were either Zoom-fatigued from interacting on small screens throughout their work weeks. Or they didn't like the feel of the technology. For whatever reason, they did not participate in the Zoom liturgies and looked forward to returning to sanctuaries.

But how to balance a full Zoom schedule (for those who appreciated that) with a return to sanctuaries (for those who preferred that) given limitations of space, human resources, finances, and ever-changing covid guidelines? Of course we knew that our community could not be “all things to all men (and women).” But we tried nonetheless. And in that process, we went this way and that, back and forth, scheduling and rescheduling in an effort to accommodate everyone. Our very small community became a microcosm of what organizations and entities around the world were experiencing, that hybrid combination of “classroom and on-line learning,” where, ultimately, neither was entirely satisfactory.

We will always remember this about 2022. It may have been the first year we lost sight of a clear vision, and in that sense, almost lost our way. We learned that treading water can be downright dangerous to the life of a thriving, evolving faith community if we tread that water for too long. We held together – the best of times; but we floundered – the worst of times. We probably could not have continued in this way for much longer; nor would we have wanted to.

But by the grace of God, we entered 2023! This was the year that all covid restrictions were finally lifted. And when they lifted, so too did a mist that had clouded our vision for a while. As we came more fully into 2023, we might well have been singing the words to an old song ... *I can see clearly now, the rain is gone. I can see all obstacles in my way. Gone are the dark clouds that had me blind. It's gonna be a bright sunshiny day.* The beginnings of 2023 did look like they had the potential for bright, sunshiny days for us. No more masks! Freedom of movement! Vaccines and boosters for everyone! A return to normal at last! It's not that there weren't still obstacles in the way; only that we could see and address them now.

It's been 15 years since our journey together began. And like so many other faith communities, we're experiencing what author & emerging church pastor Brian McLaren calls "shrinkling," that combination of fewer numbers (shrinking) and aging participants (wrinkling). We're older and there are fewer of us.

Almost since our inception, our community has served much of the State of Maryland. But fewer of us are able to drive all those distances anymore. As grandparents and great-grandparents, we find our family commitments are often even more demanding than they were 15 years ago. As our members have gone home to God, or moved away to live with their adult children, or relocated to senior living communities, fewer homes are available for our beloved Home Masses. Sanctuaries in Protestant churches have always been most generous to us in our rental agreements. But diminishing numbers of participants means less income means we might not be able to afford all those sanctuaries anymore. 2023 will be the year that we will no longer tread water. We're aware that difficult discernments will have to be made, and we trust that the Spirit will guide us through them.

Beginning such discernment for our future, in 2023 we have had Zoom conversations and Discernment Days concerning how we're being called to move forward. In one such 90-minute conversation, for instance, Zoom was mentioned 17 times; liturgy was mentioned 18 times; but

the importance of community was mentioned 31 times. It appears that Eucharist, in person and/ or on-line, is what *brings* us together. But community in Christ – our shared life in the Spirit— is what *holds* us together.

Community discernment has shown us many things that will keep our community vital. We have learned, for instance, that outreach will always be necessary; but advertising probably won't be. Numbers will always be important; but more important will be the depth of relationships we have come to know in smaller, more intimate groups. Good stewardship will always demand that we keep a watchful eye on our finances; but never to the detriment of the social outreach that is so much a part of who we are. Returning to some sense of normalcy is what we long for; but not if that longing clouds our vision of how our community might be being called to evolve. In short, we believe the Holy Spirit continues to call us to be spiritual seekers; but She will never invite us to be religious bean-counters! Our community will always be open to the fluidity of evolution.

How this will happen remains to be seen. But we are encouraged by the words of Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner who once said that the future always entails *“relinquishing old, tried ways and risking untried paths where the future historical outcome cannot be adequately foreseen ... Security lies today no longer in the past, but in the future.”*

We could go on and on with our *Spiritual Autobiography*. But we’ve decided to bring it to a close with the voices of our community in discernment for the 45th time since we first gathered in 2008, as we look toward our future. This is a distillation of many of our voices responding to the question: *What is your greatest hope for our Living Water Community moving into the future?*

- ❖ My greatest hope for our community is that we see ourselves as sowers of the seeds of a new model of church in which everyone can bloom and contribute to the richness of life that God intends. Martin Luther King referred to it as the Beloved Community.
- ❖ My hope for Living Water is that the community (whose members are getting older) will continue to survive and even thrive through an influx of new members.

- ❖ My hope is that others will open their eyes to the joys, community and spiritual growth that the Living Water community offers unconditionally, unlike the stifling and traditional roles found in the institutional, hierarchical Catholic Church.
- ❖ My hope is that the seeds we plant today will blossom and bloom into a Spirit-led future we cannot even imagine.
- ❖ I hope we will always be sowers of seeds on new paths, never satisfied, always seeking.
- ❖ I hope we will continue to stand with our arms open to welcome those who are broken in ways we may not always understand.
- ❖ I hope we never forget the problems of the world that lie just beyond our own doorstep.
- ❖ I hope that no matter what happens to our community in the future, the loving energy we have put out into the world will continue to circulate and find a home.

These days, we take into our hearts the words of the theologian Frederick Buechner who said, *“You can survive on your own; you can grow strong on your own; you can prevail on your own; but you cannot become human on your own.”* We continue to thirst for the authenticity of community where spirituality can deepen,

and unity can prosper. We want to be what ethnographers call a *thick community*, a rich tapestry woven of thoughts, feelings, values, relationships and a shared vision. We look to the future with hope and realism. And we know that wherever – and however – we are, God will be.

We own the words we have written – a spiritual autobiography, as Wikipedia calls it – the *non-fiction prose of dissenters*. We dissent in love and in the hope that our Beloved Dissent will move others onto that path. And we finish our story with the prayer that we prayed before each of our synodal conversations in 2022. It guided us then; it continues to guide us today.

*Spirit of Life, Spirit of Truth,
Spirit of Freedom, Spirit of Love,
whenever we gather it is in your name,
as we ask that you make your home in our hearts.*

*May all that we do be grounded in love
and in our desire that your Church become
a welcoming beacon of God's Love,
a sure promise of Christ's Compassion,
and a sign of your unifying Presence
in us and in all Creation.*

*May we be Living Water in your world,
assured of your Being among us, within us,
before us, behind us,
over us, under us, around us,
now and forever.*

AMEN.



*We've shared our story, but we'd love to hear yours.
Please contact us, and let's continue the conversation.*

Rev. Gloria Ray Carpeneto, Co-Pastor,
gcarpeneto@comcast.net

Bp. Andrea Johnson, Co-Pastor,
amjohnson1969@gmail.com

Visit our website: www.thelivingwatercommunity.org

Email our community:
livingwatercommunity@comcast.net