



WOODBURY UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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Rev. John A. Thomason, Pastor

The Life of the Church **by Pastor John** **May 6, 2020**

Dear Church Family,

In our *Messenger* “Kudo” section, we’ve been recognizing church members and their family members who are “frontliners” in the battle with the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the first persons we spotlighted was *Rev. Paul Hibbard*, who serves as a chaplain at two area hospitals. This past Monday, I submitted an article to the Connecticut District describing Paul’s “extension ministry” as a United Methodist Elder. I’d like to share that article with you, his church family.

EXTENSION MINISTER IS A FRONTLINER **By Rev. John Thomason** **Pastor, Woodbury UMC (CT District)**

“I wash my hands more often!”

This was Rev. Paul Hibbard’s response when I asked him how his ministry had changed during the current pandemic – hardly a novel behavior during the age of the novel Coronavirus! What grabbed my attention was the fact that Paul is washing his hands in a different setting and for a different reason than most clergy. Paul is a “frontliner,” serving in a New York Annual Conference extension ministry as a chaplain at Waterbury Hospital and Griffin Hospital in Derby. Handwashing is a critical measure in health care institutions, where patients and staff alike are especially vulnerable to the virus and other infections.

Paul Hibbard’s path to ministry began in a similar helping agency, the Southbury Training School in Southbury, CT. After earning an undergraduate degree in meteorology, he received a Master’s in therapeutic recreation at Southern Connecticut State University. He then served for 10 years as a recreational therapist at the Training School, a residential facility for adults with intellectual disabilities.

During that period, Paul experienced God’s call to channel his instincts for caring in a new direction – ordained ministry. While pursuing the M.Div. degree at Drew Theological Seminary, he began a student pastorate at Gaylordsville UMC in 1995. He endeared himself to that congregation and remained their spiritual leader for 10 years. He then spent the next 9 years as pastor of Watertown UMC.

In both pastorates, he challenged his churches to realize their mission through “missions” – front line engagement beyond their own communities with people who were recovering from natural disasters or lived in a permanent state of want. He led 3 mission trips to Biloxi, Mississippi; 3 trips to Iowa; 2 trips to Prattsville, New York; 1 trip to Long Island; and multiple youth mission trips to West Virginia.

Mission projects are by their very nature task-oriented, but what meant the most to Paul in each of these endeavors were the relationships he cultivated with the people he served – in his own words, “hearing their

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stories, their hopes and dreams and struggles.” It was this experience of one-on-one ministry in urgent situations that drew him to hospital chaplaincy as a new way of living into his pastoral calling.

In 2014, Paul began a 2-year period of training in the Clinical Pastoral Education program at St. Francis Hospital in Hartford. In 2016, he was employed as a staff chaplain at Waterbury Hospital and took a similar position temporarily at Hartford Hospital. A year later, he left Hartford and began dividing his chaplaincy time between the hospitals in Waterbury and Derby. Extension ministry positions are not traditional pastoral appointments. United Methodist chaplains apply for employment just like other job candidates at health care institutions; then they are approved by the Bishop for extension ministry in the Conference.

For the first four years Paul served as a chaplain, he was a “generalist,” visiting all hospital units including the ICU. He and other chaplains were required to visit all newly admitted patients as well as respond to emergencies. The pandemic of 2020 dramatically reshaped Paul’s job description. He now spends proportionately less time with patients because there are fewer admissions (e.g., for elective surgery), and also less time with patients’ family members because they cannot enter the hospital. He spends proportionately more time with hospital and nursing staff, who appreciate his listening ear and warm support as they cope with the stress of treating COVID-19 patients and others who are seriously ill. On occasion, he has held services of blessing for nursing teams as they begin their shifts. Each morning, Paul or another chaplain brings a message of encouragement to the entire Waterbury Hospital community over the public address system.

Hospital protocol prevents Paul from seeing COVID-19 patients. But those who are hospitalized for other reasons have the same emotional and spiritual needs as patients who suffer from the virus. Because visitors are not allowed in the hospital, chaplains are the only persons besides the medical staff who can be present to care for patients. Paul and his colleagues provide patients with human contact that they would otherwise not have. Best of all, chaplains help to bring patients into contact with the healing love of God and the compassion of God’s people.

Paul and his fellow extension ministers are true frontliners in the greatest health care battle we have fought in our lifetimes. He takes standard precautions to remain safe and well; but the fact remains that his ministry is taking place in a high-risk setting. Paul has the constant prayers and support of his home church, Woodbury UMC, as well as his wife Diane and daughter Rebecca. He also describes himself as “heartened by the community support” his hospitals have received, expressed through gifts of food, posters of gratitude, and even live entertainment for patients and staff. My hope is that, having learned more about Paul’s unique and invaluable ministry, you will join me in expressing your own gratitude and support.

Grace and peace,
John