

RFS Report to the District Superintendent and District Committee on Building and Location

*Behold, I am doing a new thing;
Now it springs forth . . . Isaiah 43:19*

Regarding Par. 201: Reversing Falls Sanctuary is not a church by any traditional definition, but we are a mission of the Brooksville United Methodist Church. We are a “new spiritual community,” and I believe the New England Conference is encouraging the formation of new spiritual communities. The definition of what that means for us at Reversing Falls Sanctuary is still evolving. We have considered and rejected the idea of holding regular worship services on Sunday morning or at some other time because significant numbers of our community worship on Sundays at the Brooksville United Methodist Church or at other area churches: UCC, Catholic, UU, Quaker, Episcopal, and Lutheran. We are ecumenical and multi-faith, but just as John Wesley sent his people to Anglican churches for worship and communion, so we encourage folks in our community to continue their faithful participation in the religious communities from which they come. It is not our intention to compete with or to diminish in any way the work and witness of Christian churches on the Blue Hill Peninsula. But we have found that ours is a spiritual community that some area Christians, Buddhists, Jews, and some others, long alienated from their Christian upbringings, have been hoping to find. And every program we offer, every meeting we have, every work project we organize, opens with a fitting spiritual ritual. Moreover, some of our Sunday afternoon programs have been worship services. For example, we have held Celtic services as well as worship services inspired by and using materials from Taizé’.



RE: Par. 202: Reversing Falls Sanctuary is a place where the local church does “encounter the world,” and that is the case in two significant ways at RFS. The concerns of the world come to Reversing Falls in the participants themselves. They embody in their lives and in their commitments in the world the very encounters we seek. Moreover, many of those unaffiliated with Christian churches, and some affiliated with no religious institutions of any sort, find in the programs and the fellowship of RFS a way back to an authentic spiritual life. Some of those who were alienated from the church in their youth came to RFS initially with some suspicion, even hostility, toward church and religion. That “dividing wall of hostility” has broken down, and as RFS has been an extension of the hospitality the BUMC and the early Christian core at RFS offered in Christ, so that hospitality has been accepted and returned in full measure. One of our number who embraces Buddhist spirituality calls us “the church of the open door.” An elderly Catholic poet of some distinction dubbed us a “parish of neighbors.” And one of those neighbors, a member of the Taos Pueblo, said RFS was the only building with a cross he ever felt comfortable entering.

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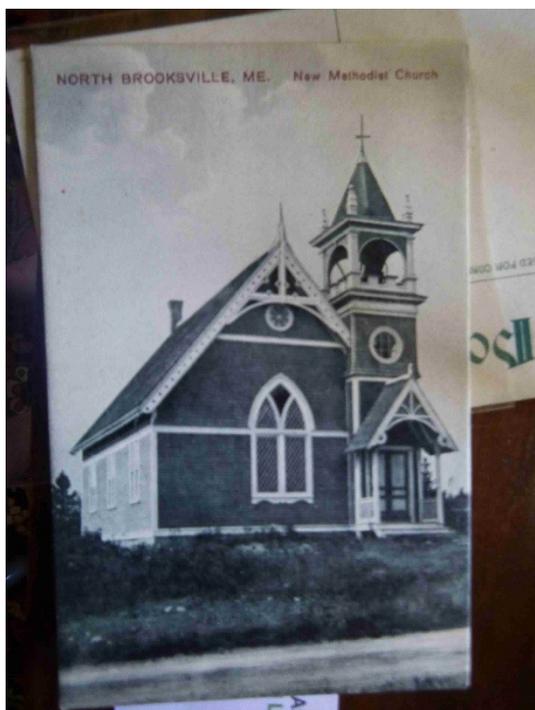
Par. 202 calls the church “to defend God’s creation and live as an ecologically responsible community.” That has been an explicit part of the mission of RFS from its formation in 2001. We have sought to fulfill that mission in improvements made to the building, in programming, in projects, and in collaboration with and support for other organizations from our neighbors at the Good Life Center to 350.org. RFS has given significant financial support to the Wabanki initiative to Heal the Wounds of Turtle Island and to New Roots on the island of Bequia.

Re: Par. 203: Though RFS is not a local church, we have been attentive to disciplinary requirements and restrictions. Not all the members of RFS are baptized Christians. But this diverse group of people, who are serious about their spiritual lives and journeys, have met in this time and place and have found each other to be companions on the spiritual path. We have come from different spiritual experiences and traditions, and our journeys may take us down equally diverse paths. For now, we are content to be together as we honor each other's experience and learn from each other's traditions.

Re: Par. 204: I believe we fulfill the thrust of par. 204 in our "missional outreach . . . to the local and global community." That we are a nurturing community has been testified to again and again by those who have come to us burdened with grief, or the experience of discrimination, or just having been alone in their spiritual hunger. I think we are evangelistic in the sense that John Bryan, who was for many years editor of Zion's Herald, explained to me years ago at Annual Conference. He had appealed to the conference to evangelize the Passamaquoddy and Penobscot Nations. I asked him what, given the history of missions to the Native American peoples in this country, we could offer. He said we should go to them to learn. Interestingly enough, RFS has been engaged intensively in that very kind of evangelism with the Wabanaki Peoples for more than two years. And we have learned a great deal. RFS is known as well for our commitment to and our work for peace and justice in the world.

Members of the RFS community actively provide leadership to other community organizations including Healthy Peninsula and the Community Compass, an organization that facilitates communication and collaboration among the many groups on the peninsula that are working to serve the needs of the community.

Reversing Falls Sanctuary has deep historical roots in Brooksville. The North Brooksville United Methodist Church was built in 1900 by local craftsmen in the Stick-Eastlake style which makes the building a candidate for the National Register of Historic Places. A Methodist congregation worshiped weekly in the building for 100 years. In 2000 the dwindling congregation merged with the South Brooksville United Methodist Church, and the building was made available to serve the Brooksville community and the peninsula in the 21st century. From a missional intention to be one church in two buildings in service to one community, Reversing Falls Sanctuary was born.



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During Advent season in 2000, Lay Leader Rebecca Poole organized a series of Christmas Carol sings. Thirty to forty people, mostly families with children, came out each week to fill the sanctuary with song. This led a handful of folks from the Brooksville UMC to begin planning programs and events at the N. Brooksville building.

What has been our mission?

- *To build strong community bonds*
- *To support local artists and musicians*
- *To care for our earth*
- *To welcome people on diverse spiritual paths*

What have we done to fulfill that mission in these 18 years that we have been a new multi-faith community for the Blue Hill Peninsula and Deer Isle?

We started with a leadership philosophy to which we still adhere: that leaders do not stand either in front or in the center, but rather step back to the perimeter of the circle creating a space where others may step in to share their ideas and their creativity. The result is that what transpires is of greater depth and significance than what the planners could have imagined. Nevertheless, we evolved a structure, a program pattern, that began with ritual and song that addressed the theme of the program, proceeded to a reading that posed a question or issue for discussion, then opened the floor for community conversation, closing with a blessing in poetry, prayer or song. We have modified that pattern many times depending on the occasion, but we return again and again to the importance of ritual, of song, and of community conversation. Particularly fruitful have been those conversations aimed at the evoking of stories. We found early on that the best time for our programs was Sunday at 4 p.m. though we have offered programs and special events on Saturdays and on weekday evenings.

In the first several years after the merger of the two churches, the Brooksville United Methodist Church worshiped on Sunday mornings at the N. Brooksville building during the month of November and for some special worship services including a baptism. And every year Reversing Falls Sanctuary has held worship services during some Sunday afternoon programs. These have included services inspired by the Taize' community using Taize' worship materials with special emphasis on Taize' music. We have found a special affinity for the Celtic spiritual tradition.

Several among us have been to Iona so for worship resources we have used the *Iona Abbey Worship Book* and especially the prayer books by John Philip Newell. We have found much of value in *Celtic Daily Prayer* from the Northumbria Community. Both Taize' and Celtic services have been well received with requests for an increase in frequency. We have held a Shaker service led by a member of our community who is a volunteer at Shaker Village. In years when the Good Friday service was not held at BUMC, it was held at RFS.

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We have been the venue for funerals, weddings and baptisms for those who are neighbors in North Brooksville, for friends and constituents of Reversing Falls Sanctuary, and for those who are unchurched. Our venue and our participation in planning have resulted in several funerals and a baptism that were powerful spiritual experiences for all in attendance and a significant outreach ministry to our community. Every year RFS provides leadership for a community memorial service honoring the residents of Brooksville who died the year before. This service is held at the Dodge Point Town Landing. That memorial service began after the death of one of our number, a member of the Taos Pueblo. He was killed in an accident on a Thursday. Because of his indigenous beliefs, it was important to send his body back to Taos for burial as soon as possible. It was summer, and the body had to be packed in ice. The funeral home charged his widow \$4000 to be paid in advance just to get his body to Santa Fe. We had scheduled a fund raiser for RFS that Saturday with a dozen area artists sketching members of the larger community, their children and grandchildren. Folks paid whatever they chose for their sketches. We raised \$4,000 for the widow.

For several years RFS hosted a weekly Tibetan Buddhist meditation. Plays produced at the New Surry Theater and at the Bagaduce Theatre have been rehearsed in our space. A piano class has been offered to community children on the Grand Piano at RFS for the past two years. We understand ourselves to be one the few public community places available and feel a deep responsibility to continue that open availability and to maintain the building for those purposes.

Our commitment to raising the ecological consciousness of our members and of the community has been a recurring theme in our programming and in our community work. We are blessed to have in our area several individuals who are nationally and even internationally known for their environmental expertise. They have been generous in sharing their wisdom with us. Not only have we observed Earth Day and have created events

to coincide with national events sponsored by the NRC and 350.org., we have extensively explored the relationship of ecology and spirituality. At least three of the six week Lenten studies we have held over the course of sixteen years have been devoted to that subject.

Our concern for the environment has been expressed in more than study and awareness raising. We collaborated with the Good Life Center in sponsoring a weekend conference on sustainability with a focus on food, shelter, jobs, and energy. The community breakout session resulted in the creation of the Brooksville Farmers' Market. And our interest in food security gave birth to the Greenhouse Project which resulted in providing technical assistance and support in building more than 150 greenhouses at schools and at the homes of individuals in Hancock and Washington counties. Our concern for shelter and energy conservation resulted in our hosting one of the earliest Windowdressers builds to manufacture window inserts to save energy and to help heat homes.



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RFS is a new spiritual community, but we have not severed our Christian roots. Our first Lenten series in 2001 featured a telling of Mark's Passion narrative in a liturgical setting. The call to Lent which precedes every session during the Lenten series is by Joan Chittister. For a number of years some 60 to 80 folks gathered for a Twelfth Night celebration, the procession led by three large puppets of the three kings.

The most beautiful and the most cherished event of the year is the annual Advent Spiral with always over 50 in attendance. For Christians the spiral evokes the journey Mary and Joseph made to Bethlehem. For others it is a journey to the

center of the self or to the center of the universe. Accompanied by soft and lovely music, one by one we walk the spiral with unlit candle in an apple, then as we return we each set the apple on a stump, filling the dark sanctuary with light. For everyone it is a deeply meditative and prayerful time.

No program is planned at the sanctuary without attention to its spiritual dimensions. This fall will feature a 5 week series entitled Kaleidoscoping Christianity. Seven community theologians will address Natural Theology, the concept of "God," of "Salvation," and of "Faithfulness." Then the series will end with a lecture by Cynthia Bourgeault who will consider ecology and spirituality in the thought of Teilhard De Chardin. This will give the non-Christians in the community an opportunity to listen to gifted theologians they know and respect wrestle with key Christian images, hopefully demonstrating that the faith they rejected was an inadequate exposition. And it will give Christians in the community an opportunity to hear what troubles others about Christianity and to respond to the challenge of articulating the faith in a 21st century post-modern context.

From the onset of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq to the mass shootings in Orlando, Sandy Hook and Parkland, to the separation of families on the border, RFS has offered vigils, ritual, conversation in which to share our grief and to offer balm to suffering souls. One of our most important programs each year is a Martin Luther King, JR. observance. Each year



a different dimension of the intersection of racism, injustice, and discrimination is addressed in ritual, in conversation, and in song.

The role of the arts in the life of the RFS community has been central, and almost every artistic endeavor informs our programming: painting, pottery, music, fiber arts, theater, film, dance, writing. The sanctuary space has been transformed with trac lighting creating a beautiful space where numerous exhibitions and events have been held:



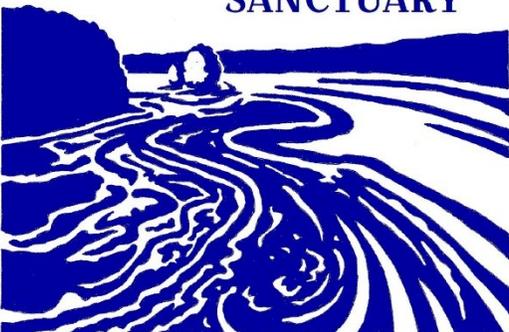
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- a farm/arts project
- a series of Advent paintings
- a fiber arts exhibit
- authors' readings and writing workshops
- many films including films of Maine artists by one of our RFS community
- a play based on the Trial of Anne Hutchinson with 25 RFS community members in the cast and 100 in attendance
- an Iraq War Quilt exhibit
- more than several art exhibits featuring the paintings by Rob Shetterly in the Americans Who Tell the Truth series. The photo is of one of his exhibit openings showing the effect of the trac lighting.

Reversing Falls Sanctuary has 15 people offering leadership on the Board of Directors, the Program Team, and the Building and Maintenance Team. There are around 85 to 90 persons who come regularly to programs with attendance running from 20 to an occasional more than 100 with a usual attendance of 30 to 40 — and that does not include those who come only to the monthly Women's Circle. The list of constituents runs to more than 300. All of these folks have become interested participants in the RFS spiritual community because of the vision and courage of a United Methodist Church with about 25 members back in 2000.

This is what our neighbor and our ambassador to the world, Rob Shetterly, has written about the impact of the Reversing Falls Sanctuary:

REVERSING FALLS SANCTUARY



I cannot imagine how we would be without Reversing Falls Sanctuary. Its programming has enhanced this community intellectually, spiritually, artistically, morally and musically. Perhaps even more though, RFS has deepened community relationships that did not previously exist.

Submitted by Gary Vencill
Ex-officio Member
Board of Directors
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Brooksville, Maine