

## Accessibility and the Church

When we think about accessibility issues as they relate to our church we immediately encounter at least two main foci – our theology and values, and the practical issues involved. In the coming days there will be ample opportunities to discuss these and other aspects of whether to include an elevator in the proposed fund raising initiative. This brief article is written from the perspective of why it is important to include this project. You are invited to ponder these thoughts as you formulate your own conclusions.

Theologically we believe that God has created each one of us in God's image. Some are male and others are female, some are short others tall, we have differing skin colors, sexual orientations, and physical abilities. But each one is a child of God beautifully and wonderfully made. We welcome each one into the full life, mission and ministry of our church. In fact, we expect all our members and friends to fully participate in our common life. Our Open and Affirming statement explicitly states:

***"We welcome and celebrate all who seek the experience of God's unconditional love regardless of their ability, age, cultural background, economic status, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, race, religious heritage, or sexual orientation."***

This emphasis on "embracing everyone" demands that all of our facilities be accessible to all. Currently our entire second floor is limited only to those who can navigate the more than 20 steps required to get there. The elderly with ambulation or sight issues cannot get there. Children on crutches or differently-abled yet unable to navigate steps cannot get there. Parents who have a temporary or permanent disability and who need to get their children upstairs cannot get there. We have no idea how many have silently slipped away from our church simply because of the insurmountable barrier that 20 steps represents. Even though we say all are welcome, in reality not everyone can be welcomed everywhere in our building.

Practically speaking we are simply running out of room. Our congregation is growing. Requests for the use of our facility are increasing. We are simply running out of room to hold all of the meetings and growth groups (bible studies, meditation groups, and forums) that occur often at the same time. Part of this is due to offering our facilities to secular groups that complement our mission such as those that promote the arts, personal development, or end of life care. In addition, we are literally the town center for our community. We host local civic events, as well as Southern Association meetings on a regular basis. All this would be so much easier if we had the

upstairs rooms available but we cannot offer them because they are not accessible.

The expense associated with the installation of an elevator or lift in our church is considerable. Perhaps our mission to our members and the community at large will help us put that in perspective as we live into our mission, and embrace fully the notion that we are all part of God's creation each with differing gifts and abilities.



### Who does accessibility affect?



"We are an ONA congregation but as long as there are spaces that are not accessible to EVERYONE, we are not fulfilling our ONA mission. We say all are welcome and our doors are open to all people, BUT it's only doors on our first floor. Does MHUCC "Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God..." as Paul instructed the Romans? (Romans 15:7) I think it is immoral that there are people who have been faithful stewards of this church for over 20 years and they are no longer able to make it to the second floor."

~Jane Haubert, church member

"Our Chancel Choir often opens worship with the introit sung from the balcony. Some of our choir members cannot participate in this musical offering because they cannot navigate the stairs."

~Max Chodos, Director of Music



Although on Sunday the predominant activity upstairs is Sunday school, there are many spaces upstairs that can be used 7 days of the week, but at this time cannot because they are not accessible to all people. Here are a few examples that happen on Sunday alone:

#### **Children's Sunday School and Youth Forum:**

Our programs for children and youth provide an opportunity for young people to grow in their faith and develop friendships that can last a lifetime. Their faith journeys take them upstairs for Sunday school and Youth Forum, if they are physically able to get up there. Adults are an important part of our children's and youth programs. They volunteer to teach our Sunday school classes and maintain the library. Without our volunteers, our wonderful programs for children and youth would not be possible. By volunteering to work with our children, many adults find their faith deepened. Sadly, our volunteer pool is limited to only those that can navigate the stairs.

#### **Diaconate:**

This ministry team meets once a month on Sunday morning before worship. They need to meet in a private space because of the confidential matters they are discussing. There is an adult bible study in the Commons and Chancel Choir is using the Chapel which is also unavailable during Advent and Lent due to the Morning Watch services. Consequently, Pastor Scott graciously offers his office for their meeting, which leaves him without a space to prepare for the worship service. If the second floor was accessible, all the members of this ministry team could meet in the Community Room for the monthly meeting.

#### **Adult Bible Study**

Currently Facets of Faith uses the Commons on Sunday mornings for their meetings. They are very gracious about moving their class when necessary. We have tried in the past to hold an additional Adult Sunday School class covering a different topic but there is not a satisfactory second meeting space for the class downstairs. One group even tried using the Wedding Room. Meanwhile five potential meeting spaces upstairs are unused every Sunday morning because they are not accessible to all. The same is true for after-church forums. We cannot have more than one group meet after church for forums, programs, or meetings, because of the lack of space downstairs and non-accessible spaces upstairs. As we grow in attendance there are many new suggestions and requests for programs, forums, and small groups. Without the accessible space to meet, we cannot satisfy these needs.

#### **Chancel Choir:**

When the Chancel Choir meets prior to worship on Sunday mornings, they use First Congregational Chapel as their starting point and move into the sanctuary to warm up and rehearse their offering. If there was access to the second floor, the newly refurbished choir room upstairs could be used and the Chapel would be available for an early service and quiet meditation prior to the 10 a.m. service.

## **Affirming our Heritage, Proclaiming our Legacy...**

# **Second Century Campaign**



## **Second Floor Accessibility**

Mission Hills United Church of Christ is an Open and Affirming congregation whose primary purpose is to proclaim and extend God's extravagant welcome to all people. We are a church family committed to nurturing spiritual growth by providing a safe and welcoming worship with fellowship experiences for all to share. We respect the many and varied faith backgrounds of those who worship with us. We support peace, justice, and equality in our community, the nation and around the world. We welcome and celebrate all who seek the experience of God's unconditional love regardless of their ability, age, cultural background, economic status, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, race, religious heritage, or sexual orientation. All are welcome at the Table and into the full life and ministry of our church. We believe that the greatest commandments are to love God with all your heart, mind, and soul; and to love your neighbor as yourself.

**Be prepared to vote at the Ecclesiastical Meeting on June 12.**

**Come to the forum after church on  
Sunday, May 1 in the Commons to learn more!**