

The Episcopal Church of the HC

OTM Community Ministry Portfolio

Describe a moment in your worshipping community's recent ministry that you recognize as one of success and fulfillment.

Holy Comforter (HC) is proud to be a unique worshipping community dedicated to being a loving and inclusive community. A majority of the members of HC are marginalized by poverty and mental illness and reside in personal care homes.

Every service is a fulfillment of our mission but our acknowledgement of the hope of Advent this year is a prime example. A beloved congregant who cheerfully greets everyone had been excitedly telling everyone about his birthday for weeks. Our senior warden announced the birthday immediately before the service and the congregation enthusiastically sang Happy Birthday. Another member, our card maker, gave him a card which she had labored over, carefully choosing colors he would like and making sure of her spelling. Then the priest who was covering the service deftly oversaw the birthday boy as he painstakingly read the Advent liturgy and attempted to light the advent candle. Two lighters failed. Another member, a recovering crack addict, offered help and a third lighter; the candle was lit. The ineffable joy of the moment was shared by all – love, acceptance, cooperation and success.

Describe your liturgical style and practice for all types of worship services provided by your community.

HC has two services weekly – on Sunday morning and Wednesday evening. HC provides transportation to and from church and provides a meal after each service. Our worship is warm, open, sometimes loud, and always interesting.

On one hand we use much of the formal liturgical style of the Episcopal Church, yet we are flexible to encourage active participation by all in the service. It is common for there to be applause, and many “amens” after a particularly soulful sermon and rhythmic clapping as we sing spirituals. Every moment in worship is an opportunity to share hugs and affection and the sharing of the peace is a highlight of our services. HC coordinates with volunteers to provide a meal for 40 individuals twice weekly after every service. Providing food is an important part of our ministry. HC strives to be radically inclusive and treat all congregants with acceptance, warmth, and respect. We are seeking a Vicar who will join us to demonstrate God's love in action.

How do you practice incorporating others in ministry?

Given the unique diversity of our congregation, we encourage active participation in our services based on their individual capabilities. We have one member who warmly welcomes everyone to HC and who robustly calls out the hymn number during each service. We have congregants who do not fit the traditional mold of lay leaders serving as acolytes and readers. We welcome anyone who wants to make a joyful noise to participate in the choir. We involve members in taking up the offering and assisting with other sacraments. And every now and then there may be an outburst from a congregant but the service continues. We readily welcome every voice, and these “voices” are often unique and spirited. Applause is not discouraged, and we encourage full congregational participation in every aspect of worship. HC offers what many of its members have long lacked, love and acceptance in a community of faith.

As a worshipping community, how do you care for your spiritual, emotional and physical well-being?

A critical mission HC is supporting is The Friendship Center (FC), a two-day a week program dedicated to fostering an inclusive community for adults living with severe mental illness and in poverty. Many FC participants lack family or a caregiver, which presents challenges for their access to essentials like food, healthcare, and community.

At FC, staff and volunteers support a belief in the power of belonging. At FC individuals find acceptance, support, and a shared experience of unconditional love. The Vicar of HC provides leadership and support for FC and will need to dedicate one third of their time engaged in this effort.

HC and FC rely on the support of the churches of the Diocese to continue our mission. We are mindful of our need to meet the spiritual, emotional and physical needs of our more able-bodied parishioners; yet we sometimes fall short in this area as we focus with intensity on the obvious needs of our differently abled members.

Describe your worshipping community’s involvement in either the wider Church or geographical region.

HC and FC are missions of the Episcopal Diocese, and the financial support received from the Diocese is vital to their existence. In addition, HC and FC rely on volunteers and financial support from the community and other Episcopal congregations to carry out its important mission. HC and FC are fortunate to have volunteers from outside of our church to support many critical activities including:

- Planning, preparing and providing six meals a week. (Note: Breakfast and lunch are provided on Tuesdays and Thursdays at FC)

- Driving vans to bring individuals to HC services and FC
- Donating clothes for the clothing closet
- Contributing prizes for Bingo; and,
- Supporting the art and gardening programs.

HC and FC provide a wealth of opportunities to members of the community to directly support individuals who are needy – whether it is financial support or by volunteering their talent and time.

How do you engage in pastoral care for those beyond your worshipping community?

Our congregation believes it is important to have an outreach program beyond our worshipping community because despite the fact that the majority of our congregants live in poverty; by helping populations outside of our church, we offer our congregants the dignity of helping others. We include \$4,000 in our budget each year for outreach, and in addition, we collect Lenten and Advent Alms. Our outreach ministry has supported Doctors Without Borders and the International Rescue Committee to help citizens in South Sudan. In addition, this year we funded hurricane Helene relief with contributions to Hope Mill Inc. and the Episcopal Relief Development.

HC also hosts an Alcoholic Anonymous group, as well as a monthly foot care clinic. We also offer National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) weekly support groups and weekly chair yoga for the unhoused and others.

Tell about a ministry that your worshipping community has initiated in the past five years. Who can be contacted about this?

Within the past couple of years, HC has expanded and improved its music programming. HC began hosting a Compline Service, also known as night prayer which is held once a month. HC welcomes the local and Episcopal community to come and nourish their souls with music, candles and peace. The Compline Service at HC is a spiritual and meditative experience. Currently professional singers volunteer their time and talent and sing for this candle lit service.

In January 2024, HC brought on board a new music director. He is dedicated to ensuring the music is accessible to our unique congregation and carefully selects appropriate hymns. He also builds a repertoire of songs the congregation enjoys and has seamlessly incorporated the long-standing tradition of engaging string musicians. In addition to being a great pianist, the music director sings and plays the guitar. He also composes music and innovates to ensure music is a valued and intrinsic part of the worship service.

How are you preparing yourself for the Church of the future

During this period of transition, the Vestry is engaged in an overall review and assessment of both HC and FC. We believe the mission of HC and FC continue to be important and meets a critical need; however, the congregation needs to grapple with funding realities. How can we ensure we are meeting the spiritual needs of each person? How can we increase our membership? How can we continue to serve our population with sustainable, quality programming? What are the most important aspects of our mission, and can it be done in a less costly - but still effective way? Are we engaging volunteers in the best way possible? Are we investing our limited dollars to staff FC appropriately? What can we do to increase funding support for our mission? The Vestry is currently in the process of gathering information from a wide range of stakeholders and plans to take this information and use it as we discern various options and strategies for the future.

What is your practice of stewardship and how does it shape the life of your worshiping community?

At HC we encourage all members to give their time, talent, abilities and finances as they are able. We often have small coins contributed to our offerings and every contribution, no matter the size is valued and makes a difference. Only a portion of our congregation can make an annual pledge, and we squeeze every dollar. Many of our congregants exist on monthly disability checks for which most of the money goes to support the room and board. They have limited remaining funds for personal items.

In addition, we value our members thoughtfulness, time and talents. We have a member who routinely gets members to sign cards in recognition of birthdays, sickness, and to just brighten up someone's day. We have another member who draws pictures for others. We have members who sing in the choir. We have members who purchase, cook and prepare food. We believe in exhibiting **God's love in action**, and we encourage all members to contribute in whatever way they are able.

What is your worshiping community's experience of conflict? How have you addressed it?

HC and FC are presented regularly with decisions that have conflicting opinions. When issues are raised, concerns are prayerfully considered, and decisions are made that sometimes push against the hard edges of traditional mindsets. We attempt to focus on what we can do to respect and support the needs of our community. A recent conflict occurred regarding serving coffee. The Vestry discussed this issue and determined that having coffee available before church is more important than having to clean up spills that occur. We must often consider the precedent we are setting in terms of supporting individual congregant needs that arise. How can we support a member who was arrested for an old warrant when the individual was off their medication, but also know this situation may occur again in the future? What do we do when a member is going to be

evicted? The foundation of our decision-making is based on how we can share God's love to our members with dignity and respect.

**What is your experience leading/addressing change in the church?
When has it gone well? When has it gone poorly? And what did you learn?**

HC and FC constantly deal with change. Several years ago, our priest was removed from our church without notice. There was a profound feeling of desperation and loss; and yet it was important for the mission to continue. Lay people stepped up during this challenging time and provided the necessary leadership to carry forward.

We learn that change goes well when we are flexible and open to hearing suggestions from others. We know it is important to think outside the box and consider new approaches. We understand the need to communicate clearly and often during a time of change. We have learned that change goes poorly when peoples' own agendas/egos get in the way. The Vestry tries to prayerfully and thoughtfully provide leadership to constantly evaluate and determine the change needed for a positive future.

Please provide no more than four descriptions made up of one or two words each describing the gifts and skills essential to the future leaders of your worshiping community.

- Translate and communicate the gospel
- Joyful/Loving
- Visionary Innovator/ Passionate
- Reverent and Irreverent