



First Congregational Church (UCC) of Ashfield
429 Main Street - Ashfield MA 01330
Creating Community, Welcoming All

1,000 Cranes Fly From Ashfield to Kentucky

The First Congregational Church and members of several other hilltown churches made 1,000 cranes to mail to Letcher County in eastern Kentucky, the home of the group that is part of the “[Hands Across the Hills](#)” project. “The impetus for this undertaking was born in the hearts of two young people in our congregation, Abby and Katie Osterman,” said Rev. David Jones, minister. “And because of our long relationship with Sarah Pirtle, former staff member of our church, and member of the Hands Across the Hills initiative, this project provided a chance for the Osterman girls and other young people and adults to reach out during Holy Week with prayers of connection and love. In Japanese heritage, folding a thousand paper cranes grants powerful good wishes.”

Hands Across the Hills formed in response to the 2016 election with the goal of face to face meetings between people who voted differently. Two small groups, progressives in rural Western Massachusetts and conservative voters in Eastern Kentucky, met for three immersive weekends of dialogue and cultural exchange in each other’s towns, in fall 2017, spring 2018 and fall 2019. This dialogue continues today. Watch last month’s segment on CBS. <https://www.handsacrossthehills.org/single-post/cbs-evening-news-will-feature-hands-across-the-hills-feb-17>

“When Abby and Katie said they wanted to make 1,000 cranes, Sarah suggested we send them to the owner of [Black Sheep Bakery](#) in Kentucky,” said Rochelle Nahmias, a member of the First Church’s Mission and Social Justice Committee. “They loved that idea. They also made it easy for others to participate. Free origami paper was available on the porch of the Ashfield Hardware Store. And we circulated a YouTube video that explained how to fold the paper.”

Finished cranes were returned to the porch of the Ashfield Hardware Store, and they were mailed to Kentucky on March 27, 2021 in time for Holy Week and Easter. “What better way to celebrate Holy Week,” said Rev. Jones. “I’m very excited by Abby and Katie’s leadership in walking the talk of love and justice. The Church is always talking about unity, about transcending left and right and searching out right from wrong. We won’t get very far in that task without a bedrock of friendship which is a shared commitment to caring for one another unconditionally. And to have that, someone has to take the first courageous steps. Our youth are doing that for us with this creative project.”

This is the latest initiative from an emerging Youth Service Group. “Katie and Abby began their service with “Totes of Love,” a joint project of Ashfield Churches Together last November,” continued Nahmias. “Together with St. John’s members, we gave 100 Totes (filled with winter clothing and personal items) to recipients of Community Meals at Sts. James/Andrew Episcopal Church in Greenfield. In February they invited members of our congregation to make Valentines which they then gave to everybody who came for a meal. They are going to return to the Community Meal on Easter Sunday to give a crane and an Easter chocolate to each person.”

“I think this youthful instinct to put ideas and hopes into the practical actions of relationship building both locally and nationally is a sacred sign of the world still ahead of us,” concluded Rev. Jones. “Our sense of ourselves is much larger and more inclusive when we reach out like Abby and Katie are asking us to do. And I think there is a lesson here for the church as well. Often congregations are scratching their heads trying to

figure out how to draw young people into the worship life of the church. Maybe we need to invert the question, and figure out, as the church, how we can join young people in the worship life they already have outside the walls of our buildings.”

By Annie Cheatham