

Many churches around Massachusetts asked us, “How did other churches participate in the Take Back Your Time/ Take Four Windows of Time project?” Here is a more detailed report on what happened. It comes with appreciation to all you who led the way in this initiative!

THE TAKE BACK YOUR TIME/TAKE FOUR WINDOWS OF TIME INITIATIVE IN MASSACHUSETTS IN 2004

During September and October 2004, at least one hundred churches across Massachusetts, perhaps more—of all denominations, in small towns, big cities, and suburbs—participated in the “Take Back Your Time/Take Four Windows of Time” initiative, sponsored by the Massachusetts Council of Churches in collaboration with the national “Take Back Your Time” movement.

In addition to MCC’s mailings to the approximately 1700-plus churches in its network, the initiative also was publicized through denominational and council of churches communications, such as from the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts; the Episcopal Diocese of Western Massachusetts; the New England Synod, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America; the New England Conference, United Methodist Church; and the Worcester County Ecumenical Council. His Eminence Metropolitan Methodios of Boston, the Greek Orthodox Metropolis of Boston, sent a letter to all Massachusetts clergy in his jurisdiction. In addition, feature stories, Op.Eds., and news articles about the project appeared in major regional newspapers throughout the state, including the *Boston Globe*, *Boston Herald*, *Patriot Ledger*, *Berkshire Eagle*, and many local papers, thanks to the efforts of the Mass. Council of Churches, working cooperatively with a public relations firm and local church staff.

RELEVANCE OF THE TOPIC

Clergy and church staff noted the relevance and timeliness of the topic, and commented on the high quality of the materials developed and sent out by MCC. They expressed appreciation for the helpfulness of the resources, such as the bibliography and websites.

Not only did clergy find a variety of creative ways to incorporate the topic and MCC materials into services and other church activities. Many reported that the opportunity to focus on how we can take time out from our rushed, hurried, overscheduled lives affected them personally, and in some cases led to changes in ongoing church activities.

“It really helps people with busy, hectic lives take space to think about how our lives are being taken over by commercialism and work.” **Judy Atkins, Administrator, Second Church, UCC, Greenfield.**

“Self-care is really important. This project helps us give people spiritual permission to do this.” **Pastor Debbie Blanchard, First Baptist Church, Littleton.**

“This issue is really close to my heart. We need time for personal development and relationships. I’m also concerned about the impact of this culture of constant rushing on our kids and teens.” **Rev. John Lombard, Trinitarian Congregational Church, Concord.**

“This issue is very relevant to our members. We’re all overworked.” **Church administrator, North Prospect Church, UCC, Cambridge.**

“People’s hunger [for this issue] is so deep.” **Rev. Peg Stearn, First Congregational Church of Amherst.**

“I don’t often get unsolicited calls from local clergy, but I’ve received a lot of them expressing appreciation for what the Council is doing with Take Back Your Time, because it touches the lives of so many individuals.” **Massachusetts Council of Churches Executive Director Rev. Dr. Diane Kessler.**

DISTRIBUTING AND DISPLAYING PROJECT MATERIALS

During the period between Labor Day weekend (early September) and Take Back Your Time Day (Oct. 24), dozens of churches from Boston to the Berkshires posted the Take Back Your Time/Take Four Windows of Time poster on their bulletin boards, copied the materials and left them in the narthex or parish hall for members to pick up, or actively distributed them to all their members. Some churches also did brief pulpit announcements or included the topic in their newsletters.

(Some churches changed the timing of the project; for example, some promoted it after October, and some did it during Advent.)

“We had a display at church. We printed the handouts onto colored paper. We also announced it in our September newsletter.” **Rev. Kenneth Landall, Pilgrim Congregational Church of Duxbury.**

“We copied the materials and left them in the narthex so people could pick them up throughout the nine weeks. We also posted flyers around the church.” **Rev. Richard Aubin-Fischer, First Congregational Church in Brockton.**

“We set up a big display in the parish hall, with copies of all the materials for our parishioners to take throughout September and October. We also did a newsletter and pulpit announcements. We tied it into the theme of ‘After the summer, let’s slow down instead of rushing around now that it’s fall.’” **Rev. John Lombard, Trinitarian Congregational Church, Concord.**

“Each successive week, we discussed these issues during the ‘Community Lifeline’ part of our service.” **Rev. Dean Peterson, First Church in Swampscott, Congregational.**

“We went to the Take Back Your Time website (www.timeday.org) and printed out some of the posters, which we posted around the church. I especially liked the poster about ‘Medieval peasants worked less than you do!’” **Administrator, Grace Episcopal Church, Amherst.**

The Spring 2004 edition of *Sunday Magazine* featured an “Editor’s Journal” article by Tim Norton titled “*Time Keeps on Slippin’ Slippin’ Slippin’ Into the Future,*” in which he drew attention to the MCC’s Take Back Your Time initiative, which the Lord’s Day Alliance endorsed. The back cover featured a Take Back Your Time spiritual fact sheet, listing the LDA’s website (www.ldausa.org), along with the MCC and the timeday web sites, for further information.

SERMONS

In many churches, clergy gave sermons about the issue, most frequently on Sunday, October 24 in observance of Take Back Your Time Day, but also on other Sundays during September, October, and beyond. Sermons explored themes such as “stewardship—how we use the gifts of time, talent, and treasure”; work; materialism; self-care; and Sabbath.

“I did a Labor Day kick-off sermon and service on the theme of stewardship—our time is God’s gift.” **Rev. Richard Aubin-Fischer, First Congregational Church in Brockton.**

“We did three sermons—a sermon on Labor Day, a sermon on October 10, and a sermon on October 24 which was followed that afternoon by walking a giant labyrinth, which is a traditional Christian form of meditation.” **Rev. Jill Wiley, Central United Methodist Church, Brockton.**

“I preached on the theme for three Sundays. My first sermon was ‘Work and Vocation: Is there life after work?’ The second was ‘Slowing and Growing (making it more personal)’; the third was ‘What is Essential? What are your priorities?’” **Rev. David Horst, First Parish (UU) in Malden.**

*“I did six sermons. On Labor Day I introduced the program. On each Sunday from Sept. 19 to October 24 I also preached, using Dr. Kirk Byron Jones’ book *Addicted to Hurry: Spiritual Strategies for Slowing Down* for each theme. On October 24 the theme was ‘A Place for our Stuff.’ Each church member brought in some excess material possession that they did not really need.”* **Pastor Debbie Blanchard, First Baptist Church of Littleton.**

The Rev. Martin Copenhaver, Wellesley (Village) Congregational Church (UCC) preached a sermon titled *Remember the Sabbath*, followed by a sermon talk-back.

His Eminence Metropolitan Methodios of Boston (Greek Orthodox) thought that this issue was so important that he sent a letter to clergy throughout Massachusetts, requesting that on October 24 they address these problems in their homilies. In his letter he said *“Our parishioners are working extremely long hours, taking shorter vacations and suffering stress and burnout in the workplace. This reality has had a negative impact on family life and participation in parish life and activities.”*

SPECIAL ACTIVITIES

Several churches sponsored special events related to the theme. Some had post-service discussion groups. Some churches invited guest speakers to address the topic, either during or after the service. Some had book study or discussion groups during the week. Rev. Peg Stearn of the First Congregational Church of Amherst offered a weekly meditation group. The Central United Methodist Church in Brockton brought in a giant labyrinth for people to walk. The Wellesley Congregational (Village) Church had a book study based on *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal and Delight in Our Busy Lives* by Wayne Mueller.

CONGREGATIONAL RESPONSE

Clergy got much good response to the theme.

“I preached on the subject on October 24. I got a lot of good response to the sermon.” **Rev. Kenneth Landall, Pilgrim Congregational Church of Duxbury.**

“We held a discussion group on four Wednesday evenings, and got good reaction from the participants. Three members of the church did the Four Windows, and they found good practical value from it.” **Rev. David Horst, First Parish (UU) in Malden.**

“People told me things like ‘That afternoon (after the service) my husband and I went for a drive in the fall foliage, and we really enjoyed it. Thank you for reminding us.’ Usually people don’t respond to a sermon.” **Pastor Debbie Blanchard, First Baptist Church of Littleton.**

“Some members of our congregation took the Four Windows of Time on their own. People began thinking about the issue. Some did things like establishing regular family mealtimes. They told me ‘I need to get back to doing things like that.’ The project became a good reminder.” **Rev. Dean Peterson, First Church in Swampscott, Congregational.**

OUTREACH TO THE LARGER COMMUNITY

Several churches saw the project as an opportunity for involvement with their larger community. Some churches sent press releases about Take Back Your Time to their local papers, or collaborated with neighboring congregations around the theme. Several clergy told us about their desire to bring in other faiths, or to work with their local interfaith Clergy Association to promote the project.

“This issue supports ecumenism and interfaith collaboration.” **Rev. Jill Wiley, Central United Methodist Church, Brockton.**

“I called First Church-UCC in Malden, asked if they wanted to collaborate on the project. It gave us a good vehicle for talking to a fellow church.” **Rev. David Horst, First Parish (UU) in Malden.**

“We did a joint press release with Central United Methodist Church to the local paper.” **Rev. Richard Aubin-Fischer, First Congregational Church in Brockton.**

“We sent out the press release [provided by the Mass. Council] to our local paper, and got good coverage.” **Rev. David Horst, First Parish (UU) in Malden.**

INFLUENCE ON CLERGY AND ONGOING CHURCH ACTIVITIES

Many clergy and church staff emphasized how the opportunity to reflect on the topic affected them directly.

“Our church staff has been thinking and talking about the issue seriously in regard to Sabbath. For example, in order to free up those most plagued by lack of time—parents with young children—we now have Church School for kids before the service. During this time, the parents can relax. Then the children can attend the regular service, but instead of making their parents responsible for them during the service, we have asked the whole congregation to be responsible for watching the children, which allows the parents to be more involved in the service. We also

have the lesson at Church School be a topic that their parents can then discuss with their children.” **Judy Atkins, Administrator, Second Church, UCC, Greenfield.**

“Since our new organ arrived on Sept. 26, we decided to dedicate it by introducing a 10-minute Organ Prelude each week at 9:50 a.m. (10 minutes before the regular service begins). During these 10 minutes of music, one of the clergy lights candles and congregants are invited to take quiet time each week for reflection before the service begins. This new practice has been quite successful in getting the congregation to come in quietly, sit and reflect.” **Rev. Dean Peterson, First Church in Swampscott, Congregational.**

“I used the theme of ‘Four Windows of Time’ with my deacons to take an extra day off with my wife.” **Rev. Richard Aubin-Fischer, First Congregational Church in Brockton.**

“Our church leadership was very interested in this issue. We began talking at our deacons’ meeting about how it affects us in our lives. We began asking ‘Hey—what is all this rushing and hurrying all about?’” **Rev. Dean Peterson, First Church in Swampscott, Congregational.**

In one church, the theme helped the congregation deal with an ongoing problem. The minister encouraged the antagonistic factions to “Take back your time—relax and pray,” and this helped them release their anger and deal more constructively with the problem.

Clergy and church staff with whom we talked were pleased to learn that the Mass. Council of Churches will be promoting Take Back Your Time/Take Four Windows of Time again in 2005. Some already are making plans. Participants in this year’s project gave the Mass. Council of Churches many good suggestions for how to build on the program for next year.

Prepared by Barbara Brandt
11/17/04