April 30, 2020

Dear Supporters of the Westborough ASP 2020 Youth Team:

As you may already have heard, our Westborough Appalachia Service Project trip has been cancelled for this summer, due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. (For more information, see the announcement on our WestboroughASP Facebook page or westboroughasp.org/volunteers.) ASP is very much an organization that brings people (volunteers, family members being served, local community and staff) together, and that just is not what is called for at this time. ASP Headquarters in Johnson City made the official announcement that their summer volunteer program would be cancelled on April 7, but our steering committee was already wrestling with what to do, and I believe would have cancelled our trip even if ASP remained open. That means that we have 154 very disappointed volunteers, who were looking forward to bringing God's love to people in need in Central Appalachia through much-needed home repair.

Of course, we're not the only ones disappointed. I don't know exactly how many volunteers were scheduled for this summer, but ASP brings something on the order of 15,000 volunteers into the region each summer, all of whom are now in the same boat as we are. More to the point, there are roughly 500 families who would have been served this summer who now will not have ASP volunteers coming to their door. These families and their communities are economically stressed under the best of circumstances, which these are not.

The ASP organization has been wrestling with the question of how they can continue to fulfill their mission under these circumstances. While they await the opportunity to bring volunteers in again, they plan to do home repair and construction where they safely can, using local staff and contractors. They are, however, limited in capacity by the resources they have available. Not only do they not have the volunteer labor, the lack of volunteers also means a lack of volunteer-provided funds, which provide the lion's share of ASP's budget.

With your help, the Westborough ASP group has raised approximately $63,900 to date. Coincidentally, our budget for 2020 included $63,900 in payments through Johnson City, which were intended to pay for materials, room and board for our volunteers, and staff salaries/expenses during the week. About half of this has already been sent to ASP in the form of pre-trip deposits. With no trip, our group doesn't have anything else in the way of expenses for this year – no van rentals, gas, or travel meals. The Westborough ASP Steering Committee proposes that the way we can best fulfill our group's mission without being able to travel is to send them the remaining funds, so that they can be used as intended – to address home repair needs. It will also help ensure the health of the ASP organization until we can get back.

Is it the same as being there and doing the work with our own 2 (or rather, 308) hands, and being able to meet and hug the families that live there? No, it's sadly not. But we believe it is the best we can do under the circumstances. We can still make families warmer, safer, and drier. We'll have to take it on faith that they will also feel the love that we usually provide in person when we do that.

ASP has asked all volunteer groups to indicate their plans by May 15, so that they can budget and plan for the summer. Accordingly, we are looking to make a commitment by that date. If you have concerns about this planned use of the funds you have provided, please contact us by email at asp@firstumchurch.com or by mail at First UMC Westborough ASP, 120 W. Main St, Westborough MA 01581 by that date.

We currently expect to start up planning for ASP 2021 in the fall as usual, though of course it's hard to make long-term plans at present. I pray the 2021 team will respond with the same energy and enthusiasm as the 2020 team, and that we will once again be loading up vans come July. The need will only grow in that time. Thank you for your support of our ASP teams and our ongoing mission to address housing issues in Appalachia.

Jonathan

For the Westborough ASP Steering Committee