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FAITH COMMUNITY CELEBRATES THE HOUSING SABBATH

WHITE RIVER JUNCTION— Four months ago, Upper Valley Housing Coalition launched a new initiative: the Housing Sabbath. The Housing Sabbath culminated this month with the united effort of local faith communities to raise awareness about the need for workforce housing. It also created new partnerships between the faith community and organizations in the Upper Valley at work addressing the many issues relating to the severe housing crunch we are facing. Over 20 faith organizations throughout the Upper Valley celebrated the event in the last weeks of October and more are planning their participation in November. Lebanon United Methodist Church kicked off the Housing Sabbath on October 11 by partnering with COVER, incorporating the importance and need for housing into their service on Sunday, and providing information on how to become more informed and active on the issues of housing.

The organizations participating in the Housing Sabbath represent a wide variety of faiths, denominations, and communities, highlighting the wide-ranging impacts of the housing problem and the desire to address them. The initiative garnered strong support due to the fact that most leaders had experienced the problem of the extreme lack of available and affordable housing in their own communities.

“Our reason for initially becoming involved was a problem in the congregation,” explained Rev. Joe Scarbo of Olivet Baptist Church in West Lebanon. “There were people who were renting homes in the area who wanted to buy but just couldn’t afford it. The only option was to move far away and commute to church.”

Rev. Susan Grant-Rosen of West Lebanon Congregational Church sees those on the edge of homelessness frequently at the church’s food bin. She explained that they use the source of food to stretch their dollars in order to pay rent. “Most churches are experiencing these kinds of things,” she added.

Faith communities involved in the Housing Sabbath chose to participate in a variety of ways. Many incorporated messages about the need for safe, affordable housing into their service and distributed information in their bulletins or at follow-up events. Some also reached out to the community and volunteered with local housing organizations such as COVER, Twin Pines, Habitat for Humanity, Listen, and The Haven. Others chose to make financial contributions to local housing organizations.

Pat Wallace of the Twin Pines Housing Trust, who spoke at West Lebanon Congregational, found the response to the Housing Sabbath very encouraging. “I talked to a lot of people who are interested or already committed to finding ways to provide affordable housing in the Upper Valley and they are ready to do what they can to address the problem.”

Rev. Carla Bailey of the Church of Christ at Dartmouth said the inclusion of the housing message in their service generated talk that will lead to future action. As a part of their recent capital campaign, the Church of Christ donated \$15,000 to Twin Pines Housing Trust, COVER and The Haven. “We as a church have a high commitment to finding just, equitable resources for people, which in the Upper Valley means addressing housing.”

Dan French, a housing specialist at the Upper Valley Housing Coalition, praised local faith communities for their participation. “Finding housing that is affordable is such a big issue in the Upper Valley and participating groups should be commended for taking action and doing whatever is in their means to address the issue.”

The Housing Coalition helped faith communities plan their participation by providing informational speakers and printed materials, as well as by assisting them in creating partnerships with organizations in the Upper Valley that are involved with housing.

“We appreciate what the Housing Coalition and associated organizations are doing,” commented Rev. Scarbo. “Someone needs to make some impact so action will be taken. We appreciate that the Housing Coalition is the voice of working families.”

The Housing Sabbath has been an exciting opportunity to continue and extend the dialogue concerning housing that is affordable in the Upper Valley. If you would like more information on the housing issue, please contact Dan French at the Housing Coalition at (802) 291-9100 x-109.

The Upper Valley Housing Coalition was organized following the Workforce Housing Summit in November of 2001. Its mission is to work to increase the supply of housing for the workforce of our region. The Coalition is an organization comprised of a broad membership with representation from municipalities, government, environmental groups, employers, planners, finance, nonprofits, faith organizations, and citizens. A Steering Committee and four action groups coordinate and implement the work of the Housing Coalition. For more information contact Dan French at (802) 291-9100 x-109 or email DFrench@UVHC.org.