

# Hope, Gratitude and *Solidarity*



**THE BOARD OF THE DUTCHESS COUNTY INTERFAITH COUNCIL STANDS SHOULDER TO SHOULDER** with so many religious and non-religious organizations in denouncing the murder of George Floyd. We support peaceful protests that ask our nation to address the unaddressed causes of racism that sicken our society and our souls. The work ahead of us is profoundly challenging, but our faith traditions demand that we look upon each other with the eyes of compassion.

We call all people to sit in judgment upon their hearts, knowing that it is our actions and our inaction that reveal our character. Let this be the moment where the oppressed are heard, supported, and uplifted. Let this be the moment where those who have ignored the pain of racism in America awake to see the injustice suffered by too many Americans. Let this be the moment we work together to bring about justice for all.



## Feeding the Hungry

**For a significant number of people, an illness or car trouble or temporary job loss can be overwhelming, straining their meager finances to the breaking point and leaving them without enough money for food. Rising unemployment due to Covid-19 has made this situation worse. Local food pantries fill an important gap for those struggling with food insecurity.**

[St. Thomas Episcopal Church](#) in Amenia Union, NY proclaims their mission of radical hospitality on their web site: Standing with our Neighbors, Fighting Hunger, Loving All. For 11 years the Food of Life/Comida de Vida Pantry has been serving the “working poor” in eastern Dutchess County and northwest Litchfield County, especially the towns of Amenia, Wassaic, Millerton, Dover Plains, and Sharon. Until Covid-19, Food of Life/Comida de Vida was a “choice pantry” where recipients could choose from a list of available foods and dry goods, an experience that gave them a sense of autonomy and reduced waste. Now, to maintain social-distancing and preserve the health of all who come, food is pre-packed in bags and distributed through a “drive-thru” in the church parking lot.

Lack of access to and inability to afford fresh produce is a real issue for food pantry recipients. In the beginning, former

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The Dutchess County Interfaith Council  
is excited to welcome  
**JOHN McKENNA**  
as our new Executive Director



Recently, we conducted a virtual interview with John and asked him a few questions. Here is what he had to say....

*What three things would you like the DCIC community to know about you?*

1) I am a firm believer the largest challenges in our lives and upon the planet can hardly be solved in just the public policy arena. In the past century-plus we have been met with daunting obstacles, many separating us from our divine connection to one another. Today there is a rising tide of hope where people, especially the young, are calling out for a dive into our deeper, spiritual selves to address and tackle the "great divide" of our times. The voice of the interfaith community has a profound place at this table. I've had the profound pleasure to work side by side with interfaith leadership and the youth, a beautiful combination of

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amplified voices calling for unified changes from the shared intention of peace and love.

2) My career has opened a plethora of spiritual experiences and world travels which have opened my eyes and stirred my soul. From the narrow paths of ancient Rome to the crest of Masada by the Dead Sea, the Wailing Wall and Temple Mount to the Mesa Verde of the Navajo, the Aztec ruins of Teotihuacan to the Confucian Temple of Shanghai, I have seen the perennial beauty and ongoing pursuit of human interaction with our Creator. We can find it across the world and right outside our front door.

3) Music stirs my heart and mind. I am a Beatles fan and traced their origins in Liverpool. I find it completely appropriate and cosmically infused the last line they composed was, "The love you make is equal to the love you take." It's a spiritual calculus wrapped in beautiful melody.

*You are the twelfth of fourteen children. How did growing up in a big family affect the way you deal with people today?*

I have given this considerable thought, especially since we lost our dear and sweet Mom in 2018, fittingly on Mother's Day weekend which brings a resonance each spring as never before. Our parents taught by example, exposed and invited us to a spiritual existence, and laid the foundation of this larger love by sacrificing and giving all they had in the raising of a large clan. In many ways this was their own experiment, hardly discussed but simply presented as a model. They were public servants to the core, my father a fireman who was always active in helping others in the community, well after hours - my mother a nurse and schoolteacher who dedicated the same heart, commitment and drive toward her patients and students as she did her fourteen offspring. She said I came into the world in a labored delivery, a doctor constantly at her side through a difficult few days. She and my father relied heavily on their personal and private faith, and showed us there was much more to this world than the unique, mini army of solidarity we had amongst ourselves. They instilled the notion that this foundation was a preparation to bond with God and one another, but also pursue our lives with independence and creativity. Freedom and self-expression were inherently solidified in our foundation. They had instinctive gifts. I was the seventh son, the twelfth in the group. For many years it was simply three bedrooms, the boys, the girls and Mom and Dad's. I live each day with the memory of their efforts attached in my movements, actions and decisions. I don't know what I did to deserve this introduction into the world, but I thank God daily for it, and wouldn't have changed it for any other number ... 14 plus 2 will always add up to a magic number for me. I like to believe this experience brought the intangible gifts of empathy, team work and selflessness to my life and

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pantry administrator Robin Capers was concerned about offering healthy food and a balanced diet to those who came to the pantry. Part of the solution came about with the establishment of the Giving Garden, an on-site garden staffed by a professional Master Gardener and volunteers. The garden contains 16 oversized raised beds and 28 new box beds that produced over 2,300 pounds of fresh vegetables in 2019.

The congregation of [First Presbyterian Church](#) in Wappingers Falls is passionate about feeding people. For over thirty years, the all-volunteer staff at their Food Pantry has welcomed those in Wappingers Falls who need to stretch their food dollar budget. On the first and 3rd Saturday of every month, the Food Pantry is open from 11am to noon. Eligible clients who have registered simply sign in and receive a 3-day supply of food for every member of their family.

A few years ago, First Presbyterian participated in a church renewal program that experimented with new ways to serve the community. That program sparked the idea of Free Community Dinners. Since September 2015 on the third Saturday of each month, all are invited to share a meal and companionship at the church. In March when Covid-19 hit, First Presbyterian responded to the needs of the community by making "Meals-to-Go" and expanding the free dinners to first and 3rd Saturdays. They are currently serving 100 meals at each dinner.

Food pantries rely on collaboration and community support. St. Thomas works with the congregations of Congregation Beth David, Amenia, Grace Episcopal Church, Millbrook, St. Peter's Episcopal Church, Lithgow, and Sharon Congregational Church, Sharon, CT. Business contributors include Paley's Farm Market, Freshtown Market, Long Table Harvest, Maitri Farm, Wakefern (Shoprite Markets); Big Y Market. Community Groups include Sundays in the Country and the Millbrook School.

First Presbyterian is a member of the Regional Food Bank of Northeastern New York. The Food Pantry is also supported by Boy Scout Troop 26, the Wappingers Falls Rotary Club, and Commonground Farm. and generous members of the congregation and community. The Free Community Dinners also receive generous donations from Hannaford's Supermarket.

None of the good work accomplished by these local food pantries would be possible with the support of an amazing team of dedicated volunteers.

### **In memory of all those who have lost their lives due to Covid-19 . . .**

The number of confirmed deaths due to Covid-19 has surpassed 100,000. Those who have died were mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, friends, beloved members of their community. In remembrance of those in our communities who have passed away from the virus, Dutchess Interfaith Council has established a "In Memoriam" page on our web site listing the names, ages, and a one sentence tribute of those who have died. [Dutchesscountyinterfaith.org](http://Dutchesscountyinterfaith.org)

[CLICK HERE](#) to leave the name, age and a one sentence tribute to be added to our websites "In Memoriam" page.



career. When you are naturally on a team, you develop instincts with a "coalition" mind. The greatest satisfaction and joy I get in my work remains the shared efforts, challenges and accomplishments. So much of our day is steered in individual pursuit, but I maintain we are social and communal in our natural state, and I am forever grateful my parents raised a family to be part of the world, not sheltered from it.

*You were born in New York, raised in Los Angeles, and recently moved to the Hudson Valley. What are some of the unexpected joys and challenges you have experienced?*

I have come to greater appreciate the boldness, courage and strength of people in motion, such as my parents, and of course the migrant workers, immigrants and refugees. My father was born on a dirt floor in rural Ireland, my mother spent her formative years in a small hamlet in the Catskills. They found each other on the streets of Brooklyn in the post war years, embarking on this trek which started our large family in one great city, traversed to the other, and managed cross-country expeditions from time to time as well. We always had a sense of home and belonging, security and a keen sense of place, but we also learned by experience and lineage how life can provide unique and unexpected turns. Resilience must be nurtured and remaining open to the opportunities in the journey is essential. The Hudson Valley called me as we laid our mother to rest in the Catskills. I heeded the whisper and how immediate and right it felt to be here in beautiful Dutchess County. My California friends always said I seemed to be East Coast at heart, and they were right. The seasons flow in natural melody and the scenic changes are stirring. I embrace nature in ways I never expected, from the weather to the wildlife. Getting on a recent train at Penn Station heading to Rhinecliff I was met with the deep sense of going home. Indeed, I keep a definition of home in the heart to parallel my place here by the river. The blessings, and affirmation, keep coming.

*You have worked with musicians and artists to develop programs for at-risk children. How do you see the creative arts as a way to help in interfaith work?*

Our spiritual selves are complex and beautiful. Clearly the written and spoken word continue to dominate our expression, but what would the sites I have visited be without the art, the architecture, the drawings, paintings, pottery and songs? Tapping into the creativity which exists in many manifestations in every human soul, we reveal and unleash the mysterious and moving sentiments which connect us profoundly, deeply and spiritually. After the tragedy in Parkland, we were invited to bring the channel of musical expression to the youth. Many, too traumatized to talk or lead themselves out of the pain, resorted to art and music. The result is timeless expression, music and lyrics uniquely theirs and resonating everywhere. One of the great gifts the Creator bestows is our capacity to embrace creativity, too. Substantial and measurable change can transpire in the wake as well. As the late Honorable John Lewis said, "Without music, the Civil Rights Movement would have been like a bird without wings."

## Bio...

**John A. McKenna** is a public affairs specialist in the mass media and nonprofit space. He is founder of KENNASCOPE, a consulting company operating at the intersection of creative content and positive social impact for nonprofit organizations, special events and campaigns. He has served the Southern California Ecumenical Council's Interfaith Hunger Coalition and Interfaith Communities United for Justice. As Executive Director of Operation Respect, he led innovative efforts to promote peace building and conflict resolution through creative and positive forms of expression, including music. He has served as Executive Director of Playing For Change Foundation where he secured a multi-year agreement with UNICEF announced at the United Nations on International Day of Peace, directed media relations for the annual Justice on Trial Film Festival led by CNN Top Ten Hero Susan Burton, and steered social-impact campaigns for several film and television projects including Cesar's Last Fast, the compelling, spiritual account of Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers. For a decade he built the base and raised the profile of global mass media trade associations, the National Association of Television Program Executives and the Independent Film & Television Alliance, participating at the major film and television markets, festivals and conferences around the world. He served as adviser for the Institute on Violence, Abuse and Trauma and Sanctuary of Hope, a groundbreaking project providing essential programs for youth emancipated from foster care. He leads volunteer efforts in support of Divine Mercy Orphanage in the border region of Mexico. A graduate of UCLA with a degree in international relations, he was a member of the Political Science Honor Society and reported on current affairs for the Daily Bruin.

### DUTCHESS RESPONDS FOOD CONNECTION

Dutchess Responds Food Connection provides assistance to Dutchess County families in need of food or other critical necessities. To sign up for the program [CLICK HERE](#), fill out the online form or call 845-486-3555 and select Option 5.

### THE ROLLING GROCER

The Rolling Grover provides groceries to families in need using an income-based tiered pricing system. To learn more [CLICK HERE](#).

### AN IMPORTANT MESSAGE to our CONGREGATIONS

Congregations and their members have an incredible opportunity to help the environment and local green innovation economy while also producing much-needed income, by participating in DCIC's partnership with Nexamp Community Solar. For more information [CLICK HERE](#).

**SPECIAL INCENTIVE AVAILABLE TILL SEPT. 30**



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