

SARATOGA SPRINGS, N.Y. >> The 11th step of a 12-step recovery program requests a relationship with a higher power through prayer and meditation. The Saratoga Springs United Methodist Church created a program allowing people in long-term recovery to practice the 11th step. It began as a worship-based service but eventually turned into a sacred-sharing environment.

Pastors Heather Williams and Drew Sperry lead the program. It's been an adjustment from the regular Sunday services.

"Fortunately Heather nor I have suffered from any strong addiction. We've had our own things that we needed to recover from in our lives, I would say but in terms of addiction we've been lucky not to have that disease in our life, so we've had to learn how to adapt. One of the things that we realized was that, especially with people who are not from the church who might be coming, they have no idea when we start singing something like 'Amazing Grace,'" Sperry said. "To us that has great meaning and depth but for somebody whose never heard it [before] it just sounds like a bunch of weird words to an old fashion tune, so we had to adapt and find something that would be meaningful because what's most important I think about any kind of worship, whether it's a Sunday morning worship in our church sanctuary, or a gathering with a bunch of people around a meal, what makes it worship is when the community is together, sharing something meaningful, and if what we were providing was meaningful than there wasn't really worship occurring, so we've had to adapt to find that meaning."

Almost a year ago, the pastors hosted its first Fresh Start service. It was Sperry's 30th birthday, and he expected a large crowd at the 175 Fifth Ave sanctuary that seats 400. Eight people showed up that Sunday night. Months later Sperry and Williams, who began their fourth years as pastors this summer, decided to change locations to a smaller space within the same facility.

"You could feel it was hard to connect with people in such a large space that was so open and to have the intimacy that would foster sacred conversations," said Williams.

Friday, however, Fresh Start moves again--this time to the West Side of Saratoga Springs at 70 Beekman St.

A couple years ago the United Methodist Church wanted to serve more of Saratoga Springs, in particular the West Side.

During Holy Week 2017, Williams received a phone call from a clergy member, asking to pray with her at her place on Beekman.

Once together, Williams asked the woman what she was praying for today. The woman responded, "a tenant to rent this space."

The United Methodist Church then signed the lease for the 600-square foot secondary space in May.

Saratoga Springs United Methodist Church West will host various events like book studies, yoga/mindfulness classes, open mic nights and the Fresh Start program.

"[It's] perfect to just be a little outreach house," said Sperry.

Fresh Start isn't just for recovering alcoholics.

"Everybody can go. We define recovery loosely. We believe that everybody has some sort of something in their lives that creates brokenness that might need to be in recovery from," said Sperry. "We invite them to come to the space to learn from other people more than from any kind of expert how they can incorporate spiritual tools and spiritual ideas, particular from

the Christian faith as we are in the Methodist church, how to do that and live in a way that helps them with their recovery.”

Every Friday Fresh Start begins at 6:30 p.m. At its previous location anywhere from 10 to 20 would show up. The program usually lasts an hour, and it always begins with coffee and cookies.

The 12-step program originated from the Bible. Each step was derived from various scriptures.

“We read those 12 steps together just to remind ourselves how to live in a recovery-based way and the comparisons from the bible of where they came from, so that’s the opening liturgy that we do,” said Sperry.

Sacred sharing, the most important aspect of the night, happens next.

“You have to experience it to know what it’s like. It’s deep,” said Sperry. “It’s deep water that people are walking through. There’s a lot of pain, there’s a lot of grief, depression. That’s all part of this disease of addiction.”

Either pastor then offers a prayer to sum up the evening. People then mingle and talk over coffee and cookies before leaving.

“I think those who come find spiritual support in the community gathering and in the conversation that’s hosted here, and how they feel free to share what’s weighing on their heart and receive affirmation from the rest of the group,” said Williams. “I think that’s a valuable experience.”