The Gathering this year was dedicated to Vice President and former President of RMEC, Wendy Barraco who was diagnosed with cancer earlier this year. Wendy had hoped to be with us in Buffalo, but is taking time to be with her family as she begins another process of surrender. Her message to the Gathering: “God bless you all for the work you are continuing to do.”

The theme of the Gathering was **Addiction and the Role of the Church in Recovery**, focusing on the ways the church can and should perform as part of the healing journey from addiction to recovery. This year’s Gathering was hosted by the Diocese of Western New York at Trinity Episcopal Church in Buffalo. What wonderful hosts they were – both Diocese and Church! The Rev. Deacon Steven Lane, a member of our Board and on Staff at Trinity, chaired the local committee ably assisted by parishioners and others from the Diocese.

We gathered on Thursday at 9 am for Morning Prayer in the Chapel led by Board member Rev. Deacon Angie Robidoux, then moved to the Parish Hall where we were welcomed by The Rt. Rev. R. William Franklin, Bishop of Western New York. His enthusiasm for the Gathering was infectious and his deep understanding of the devastation of addictions as well as the struggles for recovery was evident. He spoke to us about the unique programs the diocese has developed in supporting the recovery community of Buffalo, some of which we got to experience as part of our time there.

Following Bishop Franklin was the Rev. Canon Barbara Price, Spiritual Director in the Diocese and a self professed codependent who gave helpful direction on her topic of Discernment and Choice Making Through the Lens of 12 Step Spirituality.

After a delicious lunch, we had the Annual Meeting. Our outgoing President, The Rev. Kevin Cross, could not be with us due to commitments at his parish, so President-elect Shannon Tucker chaired. Shannon gave a brief overview of activities of the past year. Grants have been received from the North Conway Institute to be used for additional Spanish publications and training. RMEC will have a booth at General Convention in 2015 and next year’s Gathering will be in Seattle, WA in October. Our new officers of the Board are Shannon as President, Lisa Kirby, Vice President, Rev. Angie Robidoux, Secretary and Rev. Deacon Steven Lane, Treasurer.

The afternoon session Keynote Address “Spiritual Aspects of Recovery” was given by The Rev. Dr. John MacDougall, Methodist Pastor and for many years Director of Spiritual Guidance at Hazeldon. John’s message, beginning with childhood beatings and abuse, through years of struggle with his own addictions (now 25 years sober), was powerful, presented with great humor. We were blessed with his insights that being sober is only a piece of the puzzle – the goal is to get better and be both happy ourselves and of service to others: this is true sobriety and achieved through attention to our spiritual journeys.
Thursday evening, following another excellent meal we were invited to participate in an innovative service “Thursday 12-Steps @ 7” sponsored by the Diocese, and begun and shepherded by Deacon Steve since 2009. Held in the candle lit sanctuary of Trinity Church, this service of prayer, music, reflections and readings draws anywhere from 50 to 150 persons in various 12 Step programs and stages of recovery. Near the end of the service “you are invited to come forward and symbolically offer your prayer for the reconciliation of a fractured relationship, the release of a resentment, or the reclamation of lost hopes and dreams.” Each service bulletin has a post-it for your offering, going forward you place it in a fire. The service concludes with the full version of the Serenity Prayer and the Peace, followed by coffee, doughnuts and fellowship.

Friday morning began with RMEC member from Austin, TX the Rev. Bill Wigmore leading us through a form of prayer and meditation used by the Oxford Group on a daily basis. We wrote down a need or thought which was bothering us in the form of a question to God, then listened for the still, quiet voice, then wrote the words which came. After a time some of us shared our question and the response. Fr. Bill suggested we try this each day for thirty days as a way to deepen our relationship with our higher power. Detailed information is at www.TwoWayPrayer.org.

The rest of the morning we focused on Training the Trainers, beginning with Board Member the Rev. Dr. Stuart Hoke sharing with us in an abbreviated form the essentials of the course he has developed and taught at General Theological Seminary for the past six years. Stuart’s energy and passion was contagious as he informed us ways to use our own painful pasts to assist in increasing parish and family awareness, recognition of signs of addiction, and identifying resources for treatment.

Rev. Hoke’s presentation was followed by Board Member the Rev. Dr. Robert Hughes and his wife, Barbara giving a presentation on codependency in individuals and institutions and the role of AlAnon in family recovery. This included volunteers from among us taking part in a role play scene of the alcoholic father and family when Dad finally arrives late and drunk for a child’s birthday party. We have some excellent “actors” in our midst! We then had a debriefing on the effects on each family member.

Friday afternoon was “play time” – we all packed onto a bus, complete with tour guide, and headed off to learn about and experience Niagara Falls. Our guide regaled us with both facts and stories of the history and legends of the Falls. On arrival we had the opportunity to get “up close” and have great picture ops.

Back on the bus we were taken to The Hope Center, a deconsecrated church which is a new diocesan sponsored center serving as a safe place for recovery in the Buffalo community. We had a tour of the facility, then – what else – WINGS, pizza (no beer), and real biscuit strawberry shortcake. Several of the musicians in recovery who had played and sung at
12-Steps @ 7 the previous evening had come out to entertain us during supper. We closed with evening prayer led by Jan Brown, a consultant coach specializing in addiction and brain injury recovery.

The final segment of the Gathering on Saturday morning we participated in a training workshop for clergy of the Diocese of Western NY, led by Rev. Hoke, Rev. and Barbara Hughes. Rev. Hoke emphasized our church’s complicity in essentially encouraging the consumption of alcohol and our “turning a blind eye” to problem use by clergy as well as parishioners. The Hughes’ presented another “role play” situation followed by discussion. The morning gave us a model, to take back to our own parishes or diocese, which we can use as an overview half day workshop to raise awareness or be the seed for future programs.

The Gathering closed with Eucharist in a beautiful setting, the congregation seated around a large stone Celtic cross in the middle of the courtyard between Chapel and Church. We parted company refreshed, invigorated, and committed to carrying the message to our respective church communities.

Heartfelt thanks to the legions of volunteers who came forward to assist Deacon Steve, to Steve himself for the enormous amount of time and energy he put in for this event to run like clockwork, to our Board behind the scenes, and to all the presenters who gave so much of themselves and shared so deeply with us.