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## Sudbury Clergy Association

# Press Release

## Sudbury Clergy to Explore Town Civility

### Local Clergy Group to Engage in Town-wide Listening Project

**Sudbury, MA: December 15, 2014:** In recent months, members of the Sudbury Clergy Association (SCA) have shared concerns about the apparent decline of respect and civility in much of the public discourse in town. In order to assess the validity of this perception, the group is seeking advice from the [Harvard Negotiation and Mediation Clinical Program](#) (HNMCP) to develop and implement a process of inquiry to better understand how citizens and officials communicate with one another.

Sudbury has a very active and engaged clergy association. For many years, the clergy and religious professionals from Sudbury's houses of worship have gathered for prayer, fellowship and conversation about the common good. Each month is devoted to a specific topic such as care for the poor, the well-being of the children and youth or seniors of Sudbury and outreach programs for those suffering from addictions. Participants also plan and lead town-wide Interfaith Thanksgiving and Ecumenical Good Friday Services annually.

The clergy's partnership is also evident in the combined work of the town's congregations. The visit of Roman Catholic Cardinal Sean O'Malley to the Sudbury United Methodist Church in January, 2014 was the result of the good work of the association as was the recent event at the Memorial Congregational Church where seven congregations came together to package over 40,000 meals for those in need.

Given that the Clergy Association is founded on respect for one another and promoting civility in the community, members were concerned about the appearance of disrespect in the town's public forums and wondered if there was a way to test the accuracy of that perception.

Karen LaCure, of St. John Evangelical Lutheran Church and the moderator of the SCA reports, "Two participants of the group, Rev. Barbara Williamson of St. Elizabeth's Episcopal Church and Rev.

For Release on December 15, 2014

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Richard Erikson of Our Lady of Fatima Catholic Parish had each worked separately with HNMCP on previous projects. They saw first-hand the resources, approach, and expertise of the program's faculty and students. At their suggestion, we invited representatives from HNMCP to a meeting to share their experience assisting other communities with similar concerns." That meeting led to the Clergy Association inviting leaders and students of HNMCP to assist in creating and applying a process of inquiry into the nature of public discourse in the town. Relying on their expertise, the SCA plans to reach out to a representative cross-section of citizens using listening sessions and focus groups. The project is expected to run from the end of January through early May.

"The goal," says Rev. Williamson, "is simply to test our perceptions by asking citizens, town officials and committee members along with other representative stakeholders how we are doing as a town as we seek together to secure the well-being of the community we all love."

Rev. Erikson says, "It is so encouraging to gather with my colleagues in Sudbury to work toward the common good. Even though we come from diverse religious perspectives, I have been inspired by the unity we have in love and care for our community. I am hopeful that our collaboration with HNMCP, and especially our listening sessions, will be helpful to our association and to our community. Respect for one another is at the foundation of our clergy association and at the heart of this project."

"HNMCP is deeply honored to have been invited by the Sudbury Clergy Association to provide counsel and advice based on our experience in negotiation and conflict management," notes Prof. Robert Bordone, Director of the Harvard Negotiation & Mediation Clinical Program. "Whenever communities of care seek our assistance, we approach the work with humility, curiosity, listening, and deep empathy for all stakeholders. We hope our engagement will identify ways that community members can better engage their differences with respect and civility."

The members of the Sudbury Clergy Association care deeply for the town they serve. They look forward to meeting with and listening to their congregations, town leaders, and citizens from all walks of life to continue working towards the common good.