

# 2021 ANNUAL PASTOR'S REPORT

Once again this annual pastor's report is in large part exactly what I shared with SaLT in November as my own self-evaluation for 2021. And once again, I am delighted to say that I think we are thriving in just about every conceivable way, especially given the unusual circumstances we've continued to face with the pandemic and all that has come with that.

I also just want to say that I continue to LOVE being the pastor of this wonderful congregation and that I feel great about who we are and who we are evolving into as a church. The members and friends of this congregation have made my role as pastor both enjoyable and easy because of your positive attitude, constant encouragement, competent leadership, mature participation, and cheerful openness to my ideas and leadership. I really can't thank you all enough!

## **Things I Feel Good About and Grateful For** (In no particular order)

- 1. Worship:** The pandemic of course continued to impact everything in 2021. I'm not going to spend time comparing ourselves to other congregations. I only know that we all did a darn good job together of staying connected and maintaining a very special sense of community. I think we handled the challenges of being exclusively on zoom well, and my sense is that worship was vital and meaningful for those who were open to being together in virtual space. As for my own work, I guess all I can say is that I worked hard to make worship joyful, substantive, and as participatory as possible. We all missed the ability to sing and pray in unison, and once again we are feeling that limitation as we move back inside. I think I did a good job of overseeing the tech challenges of combining in-person worship with a quality zoom experience. I was glad that I had some skills and even some equipment that proved to be an advantage to and for us.
- 2. Community:** Once again I certainly can't take credit for all of this, but I think I and all of us have done a wonderful job of keeping our church alive and connected as a community through worship, the weekly Pulse messages, birthday "drive-bys" and field trips (thanks in LARGE part to our amazing Martha Olsen!), and all of the weekly programs on zoom. I led the 8:00 morning devotion group Tuesdays through Fridays and attended on Mondays (my day off), and that group of about 12-17 regulars has had a wonderful experience of small group fellowship and deeper relationship building that continues. Tuesday evening Bible studies and Wednesday evening "Midweek Inhale" were also meaningful for those who participated. There have been some wonderful unexpected blessings as a result of being forced to not be in our building, and I continue to sense that our community grew in depth and numbers as a result of the way in which we relate to each other.
- 3. Pastoral Care, Counseling, and Spiritual Growth:** It was a challenge of course to not be able to visit with people physically, especially before the vaccine was possible. But I feel that I was a very responsive and present pastor anytime I sensed there was a need. Obviously I'm a flawed and imperfect person just like everyone else, but I know I went out of my way to be present to

anyone in our congregation who I thought might want or need some pastoral encouragement. I feel good about this and this really isn't "work" for me. I am a pastor by nature and by call and it is a joy for me to serve in this regard. If I ever failed to "be there" for someone, it certainly was not because I was negligent or unwilling. It would only be because I was not aware or because something simply fell through the cracks on my end.

In addition to the zoom programs I mentioned in #2 above, I think I've done a good job in terms of my weekly messages trying to help us all stay grounded in God's Love and grow spiritually. I've done my best to speak to various issues and current events, but to always do so from a biblically grounded perspective so that I am preaching and standing for what I sense the Spirit is saying to us rather than simply offering my own personal opinions. This is important to me. This way if and when there are disagreements our conversations can be based on what we sense our faith is saying to us and not just on personal opinions or personality quirks. I think we've all done a good job of truly seeking the will and leading of God together, and I am grateful beyond words for our mutual resonance in this regard.

- 4. Outreach:** I feel very good about the extent to which I have administered the pastoral discretionary fund and all the meetings, calls, and pastoral care that goes along with that. I also feel fantastic that we as a church, once we got our bearings in this virtual ministry world, continued to take a lead in our conference regarding immigration justice and the virtual workshops that we co-sponsored with the Conference Immigration Justice working group and turned into recorded resources. Our Green Team's evolution has been absolutely fantastic, especially regarding the entire process by which our solar panels came about. And all of this during the pandemic while we couldn't even meet in the building! Our Racial Justice Ministries group put together the gathering in the park and Rachel Saladis and I both serve on the McFarland Equity Project community group.

Pastorally, what I feel best about regarding our Outreach Commitment progress is that while I attend most of the meetings, I am not leading ANY of them! We have fantastic, faithful, and gifted lay leadership in every aspect of our Outreach Commitments, and nothing is dependent upon my presence, input, or leadership. That is exactly as it should be and I feel great about this.

I think it's been great to have our third Sunday of the month Outreach Celebration moments in worship, and I want to celebrate all the work that Joan Jacobsen and I and the Outreach Funds Committee did to organize and establish a wonderful process for guiding our gifts and grants and scholarships process. This was no small task and I think this was an amazing piece of work we did together. And again, regarding my own role, I feel very good that while I was intricately involved, I did not at any time make this happen or create a system or structure that was dependent upon my leadership or my "authority." We are VERY healthy as a church in this regard. One of my overall goals has been to make sure that things get done without being "pastor-centric." I could not do that without significant participation from many others. Again, I need to recognize Joan's administrative gifts and commitment regarding many of these processes—especially the Outreach Funds Committee, which had never before existed.

- 5. Youth Programming:** I'm feeling great about our progress in youth ministry. I don't really know exactly how it happened, but our younger youth group in particular grew in 2021, even when we could only meet via zoom. The kids and parents and I really enjoyed our twice monthly zoom Bible story and craft times. We now have close to 20 kids under the age of 12 who are at least potentially active. We just met again and decided to embrace a Friday evening Family night meeting the second Friday of each month. It was the parents decision to limit it to one meeting a month for now. They're all busy and involved in lots of things, but we have some committed parents who I think we can count on to stay involved and start sharing the work. So I feel as though we have finally turned the corner this year for this age group and that we've got a great nucleus of kids again. We may not see them in large numbers on Sunday mornings, but that's more a matter of family scheduling and the fact that some parents are still understandably protective regarding COVID. Hopefully that changes for the 5-11 year olds who can get vaccinated now, but it may be a while for some of the parents to feel ready to be inside the building for worship, and as I revise this report now during the last week of 2021, the COVID realities are not looking promising at all.

The teen group has been tougher to galvanize, but we're getting there. We have about 5 youth in this age group who are enthused about getting together, but they are busy and active in school and it's hard to find times to meet that work for them. We're getting there. Meeting with other area churches has helped and we'll continue that. We particularly enjoyed having some joint meetings with Lake Edge UCC in late 2021 and we will continue to do things together in 2022 as long as the pandemic does not get in the way. I am very eager to organize some retreats and service trips for this age group and am hoping we will be able to do something along these lines in 2022.

- 6. Reduced Administrative Assistance:** My only point here is that we went the entire year with our Office Manager Melissa Dockum on staff remotely. That simply meant that I wound up doing a lot of the things that she would have done if she'd been here and in the building. I'm relatively computer and tech savvy and this kind of thing does not stress me out, so we're doing fine all in all. Once again, Joan Jacobsen deserves a good deal of credit for sharing her time and "administrative eyes" and gifts so generously and keeping a good eye on the office and various administrative tasks that an in-person Office Manager would normally be doing. We are currently interviewing applicants for the Office Manager position and are trusting the right person will find his/her/their way to the position soon.
- 7. Balance:** I mentioned this in my report last year and I think it's worth restating this year. I can't put it any better than I did last year when I wrote, "I think I've done a good job of both encouraging our congregation to know that God is with us during this tough time, and also challenging us to keep looking beyond ourselves, responding to the needs of the world, and encouraging us to work for justice and to stand for Truth and Love. This is the balance of the pastoral and the prophetic sides of ministry—the softer more loving side of faith and the firmer, edgier call to take a stand against falsehood and evil. I feel good about the ways in which I

have tried to hold this together, and to speak the truth in love while also reminding us of the importance of being respectful of those who see things differently.”

- 8. Self-Care:** Again, as I wrote last year, I am grateful to God that I am healthy and not stressed out and that I feel grounded and centered spiritually. This is all a gift from God, but I also feel good that I have taken care of myself during a very stressful time for clergy and for churches in general. Navigating the return to in-person worship was not easy for any of us, and I think we’ve done a great job of working together, making difficult decisions, and working through the details. As I said to you last year, you all have made these things so much easier for me than many of my colleagues have experienced with their congregations. The maturity of our membership and leadership and the fact that we have no ongoing undercurrent of negativity is such a gift to me. I also make it a point to eat well, exercise, take time off, get enough sleep, feed myself spiritually, spend time with friends one way or another, take walks in the woods, etc. Again, I won’t take too much credit for this, but I think I’ve done my part to keep myself in a healthy place both physically and spiritually.

### **Areas for Improvement**

**Reaching Out To Some Who Have Dropped Off During The Pandemic:** At this point this is the primary area in which I wonder if there’s something I might be able to do better, and I welcome suggestions. There are a few people who simply have not been very present since the pandemic began, and I know we all miss their presence and participation. That being said, I also think it’s important to be respectful when people need a break from more active participation for one reason or another. I’ve reached out periodically to those who come to mind, and will continue to do so. Again, I’m just so grateful that the vast majority of our members and friends stayed active during the pandemic and that we’ve actually grown both numerically and spiritually.

The only other thing I’d mention as a bit of a concern is that our financial giving trends were in the “negative” in 2021. In other words, we consistently took in less than we spent. We had reserves and the discrepancy was not huge enough to cause problems, but obviously we need to keep a faithful and responsible eye on this, and SaLT has been doing just that. I am not concerned about it from a pastoral perspective because there were extenuating circumstances in certain regards and also because I trust that as long as we are clear about our finances, and even more importantly, as long as we are growing spiritually and feeling inspired to serve God in this world, the money will be there as needed to do what we’re called to do.

It’s hard to believe we are now in our fourth year together as pastor and congregation! I’m delighted to say that to me it feels like we’re just getting started. I hope you feel the same way.

Thanks for a challenging, fruitful, and fun year together!

Pastor Bryan