

PASTOR'S REPORT

ANNUAL MEETING, 2020

The following in large part is the same “annual self-evaluation pastoral report” I submitted to SaLT in late November, 2020. I want all of you to have a sense of how I see my own strengths and weaknesses as I look back on 2020. But I also want to say that beyond my own work, my sense of our congregation from a pastor’s perspective is that we are thriving and growing in just about every way and that I am grateful beyond words for the people who ARE our church. I think we are astonishingly healthy given this wild pandemic year of not being able to be together in person, and I anticipate continued growth and enthusiasm as we lean into 2021 together.

Pastoral Self-Evaluation

It’s hard to know where to begin as I try to review 2020. Let’s face it, very little about this year has been the least bit normal. We’ve all been doing our best to figure out how to deal with the events of 2020, and the simple truth is that none of us have ever before done our jobs or our lives in the way that this year has required. That being said, I’ll do my best to outline what I consider to be some of the highlights and challenges of my ministry this year.

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

1. **Worship:** Obviously I had no idea that we were going to suddenly have to do worship virtually. It was a stiff and urgent learning curve regarding the technology, and how to encourage people to buy into doing worship virtually. Without going into all the details, I think I handled this pretty well and that our worship services have been vital and meaningful. We’ve actually drawn a number of new people and our attendance has been strong. Quite a few churches I know are not actually doing anything live and in the moment together on Sundays. The worship is prerecorded, including the sermons. I think our way of coming together and being together in the moment and having a chance to see each other and pray together and experience the worship service together at one time has been extremely important. We actually have the good challenge now of figuring out what “zoom church membership” will mean once we’re meeting in the sanctuary together again. I have already assured many of our long distance zoom church attendees that we will continue to welcome them and make our worship available even when we are able to be in our own physical sanctuary again.

- 2. Community:** I certainly can't take credit for all of this, but I think I and all of us have done a good job of keeping our church alive and connected as a community through worship, the weekly Pulse messages, the phone pairings early on, and all of the weekly programs on zoom. I have done my best to nurture a sense of us being in this together and present to each other. I actually think this experience of being church together without the use of our building has deepened our sense of community.

- 3. Pastoral Care, Counseling, and Spiritual Growth:** It has been a challenge of course to not be able to visit with people physically. There have been some exceptions, but for the most part I have had to figure out ways to offer pastoral care over the phone, on private zoom meetings, and through the weekly programs. The morning devotions from Monday through Friday have drawn a regular group of about 10-15 persons, and the sense of community among that group has grown. The same core of persons tends to be part of the Wednesday evening Midweek Inhale, and that has been powerful and sustaining spiritually for those who have attended. Given all the limitations, I feel as though I have been a vital pastoral presence to many. The Bible Studies on Sunday mornings and Tuesday evenings have also been rich and meaningful. To be blunt, I don't know of any other church anywhere near our size or solo pastorate that is offering as many opportunities programmatically as we are, and I feel good and grateful for this.

In addition to these programs, 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 presence throughout the pandemic so far and also to respond to some of the things that have been going on in our country. Given the racial injustice in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder and the political turmoil in this presidential year, I have done my best to speak and preach faithfully into these realities and offer leadership both in terms of the content of my messages, the worship services, and programmatic responses such as our involvement in establishing a presence in the McFarland Area Racial Equity and Justice group and also beginning our own congregation's commitment to decentralizing whiteness in all aspects of our life together.

- 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, have taken the lead in our conference regarding immigration justice and our NION campaign. We've also been taking specific steps

regarding our response to racial injustice, and our Green Team has been active even with all the limitations because of COVID-19. I think it's been good to have our third Sunday of the month Outreach Celebration moments in worship, and I feel glad and grateful that we are now moving forward with our process of distributing the outreach funds that have been entrusted to us.

- 5. Youth Programming:** I'm going to count this as both a success and a shortcoming for this year. On the positive side, we're finally up and running again with a program for our 12 and under youth, and somehow by the grace of God we actually have MORE kids interested in youth programs than before the pandemic hit us. We're just getting going again, but we're on our way and we have a solid nucleus of younger children that I am excited to work with. This is a great sign for the next several years to come as these kids get older, and we have some parents who are committed to helping us out as well.
- 6. Reduced Administrative Assistance:** My only point here is that in addition to dealing with the pandemic, we lost Melissa in her regular ongoing capacity. This led to my needing to cover more things administratively, and all I'll say is that I feel good about the fact that very few things fell through the cracks and not having Melissa in the office did not stress me out. As I've said before however, Joan Jacobsen's presence and extra time and administrative skills really filled in many gaps that would otherwise have been more evident. So while I think I did a good job administratively in light of this transition, I give a good deal of the credit and gratitude to Joan.
- 7. Balance:** All I mean here is that 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:** I am grateful to God that I am healthy and not stressed out and feeling grounded and centered spiritually. Mostly of course this is just God's grace, but I feel good that I have taken care of myself during a very stressful time for clergy.

You all have also made it much easier for me than many of my colleagues, and I'm so grateful for that! The maturity of our membership and leadership and the fact that we have no ongoing undercurrent of negativity is such a gift to me. But 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 know a lot of clergy who are pretty frazzled as a result of 2020's challenges, and I'm glad and grateful to be feeling great physically, spiritually, and emotionally. I've got plenty of energy and enthusiasm and creative juice flowing. Mostly I'm just grateful for that, but for the extent to which any of this is attributable to my own commitment to self-care I'll give myself a bit of a pat on the back in this regard.

Things I Think I Need To Improve

- 1. Ministry With Teens:** Providing some kind of programming for teens during the pandemic and staying in contact with them feels like the one obvious "missing piece" in our congregational life at this point, and one thing that I simply was not about to help make happen during 2020. That has weighed heavily on me because I really love this age group and I'm a huge believer in the power of youth ministry, youth camping, etc. I think this age group has been more "zoomed out" than most, and so it's been a challenge to try to come up with a way of interacting virtually that would be of interest to our teenagers. I decided to wait until after the 2020 holiday season to try to get something going for this age group, and I will be reaching out to them in early January 2021 to see what kind of virtual meeting we can establish that would be fun and meaningful to them. I'm really looking forward to putting some time and energy into this.
- 2. Being In Touch With Those Not On The Internet:** Whether it is the very small number of older folks who do not want to have to mess with computers, or some of the families with teens we haven't seen much since we stopped worshiping in the building, or the handful of members and friends who don't join us virtually on Sunday mornings, I always am thinking of ways to try to be in touch with these people. I really need to just call them all and talk to them individually and see how they are, etc. I've spoken to many of these members and friends, but it never feels often enough when we can't see each other weekly in worship.
- 3. No Continuing Education:** It was primarily because of the pandemic of course, but I did not take any continuing education time this year, and last year I only took half

of the allotted time for this. I'm going to name this as a shortcoming simply to underscore that I greatly value that this is in my contract and our budget and I think it's very important for me to take this time away for growth and reflection and learning. As with vacation time, these breaks and/or change of pace are there for a reason and once we are past the pandemic I will make it a priority to make sure I am renewing myself through continuing education.