

2024 Annual Pastor's Report

Once again this annual pastor's report is in large part what I shared with SaLT as my own self-evaluation for 2024. And once again, I am delighted to say that I think we are thriving in just about every conceivable way!

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 as a church. I am now beginning my 7th year as your pastor. Hard to believe! Thank you all for making it so easy and so enjoyable to serve in this capacity.

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

- 1. Worship:** In general I'm feeling great about our worship services. Our average in-person attendance has continued to increase, and I'm delighted that quite a few people join us regularly on zoom as well and that zoom participation in all aspects of our church's life has been normalized. It's always a delight to have the choir sing and grow under Tom Ludwig's wonderful leadership, and I've been thrilled that more people from the congregation have come forward to share their gifts artistically. I am grateful to Patrick Broderick for gifting our church with a drum set and for his willingness to play drums in worship from time to time. I am hoping to bring some more contemporary music to our worship services in 2025, as we also continue to enjoy the hymns and piano and organ music that Diane Smeaton so faithfully provides. The challenge as we all know is for worship not to go too long! I know I playfully mention this often, and it's my way of consistently letting people know that I'm always aware of the reality of time and the historic expectation in mainline Protestant churches that worship should not last more than "the hour." At the same time, increasing numbers of people have said to me that they are always bummed when I leave things out of my message because of time and that they come to church to be spiritually fed and that we shouldn't worry about time at all. So I'll keep doing my best to honor both sides of this.
- 2. Community:** Once again 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, and through our committee work and Outreach Ministries. Our 8:00 a.m. morning devotion group Mondays through Fridays consistently has between 12 and 20 attendees and that has evolved into a wonderful small group of prayer and support. Our Solstice/Equinox fire ceremonies (which have grown extensively and have brought quite a few new people to our congregation. I'm hoping that we can host a number of benefit concerts in 2025 that will feature some well-known artists who write and sing about issues of faith and social justice that will be of interest to the wider McFarland and Madison area. Several folks from beyond our normal Sunday morning community joined us the Sunday when artist Willy Porter was with us. Willy will be the first on our list for an evening concert this year.

- 3. Pastoral Care, Counseling, and Spiritual Growth:** I feel very good about my pastoral presence and work. I've done my very best to be available and responsive to anyone who has been in particular need. There are quite a few newer people around, many who have officially joined our congregation, and most of whom have found their way to us because they have felt a need and desire to grow spiritually. This has been absolutely wonderful, and I enjoy being available to anyone who wants or needs pastoral care and counseling. I will also be deliberate about making sure that I take a day off each week (Monday), and that I practice good self-care.

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'm going to reiterate here what I wrote the last 2 years. I've done my best to speak to various issues and current events, and 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 and I think the vast majority of people in our congregation trust my commitment to being balanced and grounded in our faith when I speak into any issues of social justice. I think 2025 is likely to be a very contentious year in our country as we experience the transition in the U.S. presidency and all that may involve. I would love to see our congregation provide some opportunities for conversation about controversial issues (beyond Sunday mornings, say on a Wednesday evening) that would be framed around the desire to understand the positions of those with whom we disagree.

One very significant thing that also happened in our congregation during 2024 was continuation of the Befrienders Ministry Team training and commissioning, and the development of our Care Team. We can't thank Jean Duchrow and Levon Geasland enough for making these things happen.

- 4. Outreach:** Once again, 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 that our primary Outreach Ministries--Racial Justice and Green Team in particular--have done some great work. Each of these has their own report so I won't go into detail here.

I also continue to think it's been great to have our third Sunday of the month Outreach Celebration moments in worship, and the Outreach Funds Group has continued to work beautifully and is on target with its schedule of disbursements.

- 5. Administrative Assistance:** Our Office Administrator Ginger Hummer continues to be a huge blessing to me and to our congregation. She and I have a very nice working relationship and I

so much appreciate her attention to details and administrative nuances. 2025 will be full year for us administratively as we continue to move more of our data base to the Icon Church Software and get our new directory fully updated and familiar to everyone. Thanks so much to Colleen Kraittiger for all her hard work on the church directory especially.

6. **Self-Care:** I'm grateful that I'm healthy and have great energy even now that I'm in the medicare zone! I take good care of myself physically and emotionally and spiritually. One thing I need to be careful of is not having too many evening meetings, but I'm not worried about it. I'll be vigilant about keeping things in balance and everyone is always very respectful of my time.
7. **Sabbatical:** Instead of taking 2 months of Sabbatical leave in 2024, I took one month (May) and will likely take another Sabbatical month in 2025 (looks like August at this point, but that is not yet in stone).

Areas for Improvement & Primary Goals for 2025

1. **Increased Presence in the McFarland Community:** This was one of the expressed priorities coming out of our church retreat two years ago. As mentioned before in this report, I think our Mark Charles event in 2023 and our Solstice fire ceremonies are examples of the kind of community outreach I'd like to see us do more of. The village board was thrilled with the Mark Charles event and has encouraged us to bring more nationally known authors and speakers like this for meaningful events that would deal with social issues. Our Racial Justice and Creation Care teams are considering the possibility of hosting events featuring well-known authors or speakers, and that could be open to the wider community. Also in the works is a benefit concert featuring artists such as Willy Porter and Spencer LaJoye.
2. **Teen Youth, Outdoor Ministry, and Mission Trip(s):** I think few things are more powerful and impactful for youth than trips of service and education (and fun). I'm really hoping we can get one together for the summer of 2025. We are hoping to take a "racial justice pilgrimage & service trip" in late July with Memorial UCC from Fitchburg. This would involve a road trip to the deep south with stops in Memphis, TN and Montgomery, AL and a possible work experience in New Orleans. I'm also hoping we can get some of our kids involved in church camp experiences this summer.
3. **A Possible Adult Mission Trip:** As I wrote last year, I would love to see a group of adults from our congregation take a trip together on some kind of mission experience as well. Unfortunately Haiti is still too volatile for me to feel good about, but eventually I'd love to see more from our congregation have that experience. I have continued to sow seeds of connection with pastors in Arizona and a trip to the borderlands there could be very powerful if there's enough interest in our congregation to make it happen.

4. Closing

I really like the way I ended my self-evaluation the past few years and there's no need to change much at all. So here's what I said both last year and the year before...

To be honest, there are no other areas where I feel I have been particularly ineffective as your pastor. By all means feel free to let me know if there are things you'd like to see me do better, or things you'd like to see happening in our congregation's life that haven't happened yet. I know I am diligent and committed and hardworking, but of course I'm just another imperfect person with plenty of shortcomings and areas in which I hope to continue to evolve and grow. You all make it easy and joyful to be your pastor, and as I tell my colleagues, I totally lucked out with McFarland UCC. To state that more meaningfully, I truly feel that I was and am blessed to be called to serve this congregation. Thank you God, and thanks to all of you.

It's hard to believe it's been SIX years!!

Grace and Peace,

Pastor Bryan