

## Final Report: Ministry Reflections

I am grateful for having the opportunity to serve you as your interim pastor and teacher. I have thoroughly enjoyed my time with you. The congregation received me warmly and has been gracious to me. I have received a lot of support for my ministry with you.

This report contains my reflections upon the time we have had together and what I believe lies ahead for this congregation.

### Assessment

We approached this ministry with a six-month time frame. Reading your profile and meeting with you, it was clear that TCC was struggling with issues common to many congregations today, regardless of denomination. The congregation was aging with a declining membership and stressed finances.

A specific six-month interim period is atypical. Normally, interim periods are at least a year, typically 18 – 24 months. During a typical interim, the congregation would discern its future and then call a settled pastor to lead them. Sometimes the interim must address a congregation's systemic problems, such as recovery for pastoral misconduct, schisms among various factions within a congregation, or other trauma. Here, however, there was no indication or sign of anything beyond the struggles many congregations face today. I also noted that TCC had been hearing a message urging changes to its ministry over the past few years. What changing meant, however, was unclear.

I felt that with general support among members of the congregation and the congregation's leadership, I could help TCC gain a clearer sense of the changes it should undertake for its future. The outcome of our work would be clarity in today's context of church and its relationship to the wider community. It would also respond to the type of pastoral leadership for TCC after the six-month period.<sup>1</sup> That understanding would help TCC shape its ministry and prepare it for its future.

The six-month tenure gave the process urgency. Though a lot of work, it kept the congregation focused on its tasks.

The primary discernment tasks were monthly community discernment meetings, a book study of **Beyond Resistance**, a Bible study of the first 15 chapters of Acts, and weekly readings of articles about churches. Together, they helped to move many people in the congregation to a new understanding of the church in a post-modern age.

The overarching message to the congregation during this interim period was to have a missional identity. Missional identity is the way people in the community see the ministry and

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<sup>1</sup> While a settled pastor at the conclusion of the six-month period would not have been possible, TCC's options were: 1) Continued discernment with another interim pastor, 2) Clarity of purpose guided by a designated term pastor, or 3) Seek a shared pastor.

mission of TCC. I believe the congregation has a much better understanding now about missional identity than when we began.

During these months we also revised the bylaws extensively as the congregation cannot abide by its current bylaws as the number of active members cannot fulfill the various offices and boards. The revised bylaws acknowledge a smaller congregation and allow for changes in the membership to accommodate a younger generation who is less apt to become formal members as formally understood in an earlier generation.

We also began a lay caregivers training using the UCC's program Called to Care. This is a resource the church already owns. Training laity to embrace an expanded role in congregational care will foster stronger relationships within the congregation, particularly as TCC's clergy from now on will probably serve part-time.

Overall, I believe TCC has arrived at a new understanding of what it means to be a church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. While TCC will most likely not become a 3.0 church (Dorhauer), changes could bring about a church that adopts different post-modern characteristics such as a more fluid understanding of membership, a willingness to accept uncertainty, shifting away from Christianity defined by belief to Christianity defined by practice. Understanding post-modernism opens TCC to a new direction for its ministry, and thus, new possibilities and potential: new hope and energy for the congregation's future, more meaningful integration of TCC with the wider community, and a better understanding and acceptance to make changes in order to respond to the changes afoot in the wider community.

Though we have traveled on what seems to be a long road already, there is more road to travel. Here's what lies ahead.

### **Missional Identity**

In our first discernment session, we identified three Jesus stories that described TCC: Parable of the Good Samaritan, Feeding the 5000, Mary and Martha. Out of those stories we identified the following themes:

- Food
- Healing
- Acceptance and not prone to hierarchy
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- Caring
- Supportive
- Love as an organizing principal for what we do
- Work hard.

We also assessed who we are. Our values include: Acceptance, Quality worship leadership, especially music, and Equality and parity. We have strong spiritual values and self-identify as a community institution where people can find spiritual comfort across generations, engage in missions, a place of refuge, and doing things in our community. Though

self-identified, these would be typical of most churches, and thus, does not set TCC apart from other congregations and would not be perceived as its missional identity.

Though defined by the congregation, missional identity is that which is perceived by the wider community. In other words, how does Northfield see TCC? When the community thinks of TCC, what mission comes to mind?

TCC has a wealth of talent and wisdom to put towards identifying its mission. This is important work and is the foundation for everything else the congregation chooses to do in its future.

Finances and membership are two pressing issues facing TCC. Without having a missional identity, they will persist. A missional identity invites people who share a similar mission interest to become part of TCC. A clear missional identity can also attract money from outside of the congregation in terms of wider community support<sup>2</sup> and grants.

## **Building**

Over these months, I have observed a noticeable shift in the congregation's approach to its facility. The congregation seems open to finding ways to raise income from this facility by having outside organizations become renters or partners in order to share its costs.

TCC should organize a small working group to explore various options to gain revenue from the building by renting or leasing portions of it. This working group should meet with people in town to listen to their needs or desires for this building, identify ways to broaden the building's use by the wider community, and learn from other congregations how they have been creative in finding new uses for its buildings. Ideally, which outside groups and how they use this building will align with TCC's missional identity. Doing so will generate synergy to support and enhance the respective missions of TCC and the outside organization or organizations.<sup>3</sup>

The working group should also engage the congregation in the process by keeping it informed. This task will also include helping the congregation make the transition to sharing the building with other organizations. This might include reorganizing storage and access to affected rooms and spaces, learning to schedule and share common space, and re-imagining the sanctuary to enable more use by the wider community.

## **Administration**

During the bylaws revision process, we became aware that TCC's policies and procedures will need revision as well. Should the congregation approve the restructured bylaws,

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<sup>2</sup> Recently, South Congregational Church in Pittsfield raised over \$100,000 from community support for solar panels to offset the electricity costs the incur to operate its walk-in refrigerator and freezer. The congregation serves between 500-600 families every week as a food pantry. It received 22 gifts in excess of \$1000, including two gifts of \$10,000 or more from foundations

<sup>3</sup> Two resources to consult regarding the building is UCC Building and Loan (<https://cblfund.org/>) and Partners for Sacred Places (<https://sacredplaces.org/>)

it will change the way the congregation operates. For instance, how will funeral receptions change for people who are covenanted members of the congregation and what will happen to funeral receptions as this congregation ages and fewer people are available to prepare it. Additional pressures to change may be forced upon the congregation by factors external to the church.

In addition to revising the church's policies and procedures, a review of the endowment and gift policies would be appropriate in order to ensure they can support the new direction the congregation adopts.

### **Changing and the Future**

Congregations are ever-changing. Internally, people come and go. People age. Basically, people change, and a congregation is its people. A congregation's capacity to carry out its ministry is not infinite or indefinite. For example, most churches had choirs. Recently, however, as choir participation has declined, fewer congregations have choirs. Those who have choirs typically don't have enough people to do large four-part choral works. A couple of generations ago, the organist might have been a seminary trained church musician. Today, many congregations have a church musician who plays piano well, and maybe can play the organ.

Externally, the community around a church change too. Overall religious participation has declined, and it has especially declined among young adults. Family life has changed so that Sunday morning may not be the best time for a family to attend church. Technology has dramatically changed the lives of almost everyone, and we cannot ignore its impact on the church. Yet, many of our churches seem to operate oblivious to these changes.

Ironically, my tenure at TCC coincided with the tag sale and my tenure ends close to the Hollyberry Fair. Two major fundraisers and then two more in between. That's a lot of fundraising. Without a question the fundraisers generate necessary income for the congregation and offer an event to enhance congregational relationships. Yet, I've also heard many comments stating that "we're getting tired." This raises a question, "How much longer can the congregation sustain these fundraisers?"

Churches must draw people into the church who will support it with their spiritual gifts and their financial resources if it is to have longevity. Ideally, this should create an ongoing churn, people enter the church as people exit the church. While having a missional identity will help to draw people into the church., a church's culture must be led by the Holy Spirit. A congregation cannot flourish for long if it holds too tightly to its present culture. The Holy Spirit must be able to move and flow in and through a congregation. While traditions are good and help to define a congregation, they also can stifle change and render a congregation inflexible.

### **Summary**

These six months were a time for TCC to re-evaluate its ministry. By taking a thorough look at congregation as it is today, the wider community of Northfield, and looking ahead to anticipate what might come, TCC is better positioned to step forward into its future. The

congregation understands that habits can be heavy baggage which limits its options and hampers its growth. The congregation acknowledges that it probably will not return to its glory of a full church with a full-time pastor and that it must reset its ministry and expectations to accommodate an older, smaller congregation with a part-time pastor. While not generally accepted, some members of the congregation have started to face the reality that a local church does not last forever.

Over the past year and a half, I have come to advocate that all congregations should re-evaluate their ministry every three to five years. Such an evaluation would entail its organization, its missions, its demographics, its facility, its worship, and its finances. This evaluation doesn't mean that everything must change, however, the evaluation should reveal areas within the life of the congregation that should be addressed. It helps congregations plan and anticipate so that changes and accommodations can be done before situations become a crisis. This would be an accurate characterization of these six months.

Based upon the work we've accomplished, the following are steps I see for TCC to address over the next several months:

- Claim a missional identity. Externally, a missional identity will present TCC to Northfield in a way that resonates with the community. Internally, a missional identity will help to allocate the congregation's resources, both the financial and human resources, more effectively. Spend time listening to your neighbors and their needs in order to learn how TCC can respond to them.
- Develop a plan to utilize the church building. Particularly following upon the webinar<sup>4</sup> on November 12 presented by Church Building and Loan, the church can be more than it is presently, a site for worship. It can be a locus for ministry. Ideally, how the congregation uses the building should support and align with its missional identity.
- Live into the new organization and its bylaws. Assuming the restructured bylaws pass, the first year will be getting used to a different way to operate. Policies and procedures should be revised to reflect the new structure. Evaluate the present endowment and gift policies as well. Should the bylaws not pass, the congregation must develop new ones.
- Use the Called to Care program to develop lay ministry. TCC has two people trained in the Called to Care program, Patter Field and Michele Lawlor. First, their gifts should be part of the ministry team for Congregational Life and Care. Second, a second cohort should be trained in the spring to increase the number of trained caregivers in the congregation. Particularly, as TCC will have a part-time pastor and due to an aging congregation, it will likely need more trained caregivers. Called to Care training should be an ongoing ministry in TCC.
- Evaluate fundraising. We began an evaluation of fundraising on Oct 27. Though it brings in the community, it also raises money for church operations. These are two competing objectives. If the objective is to foster community engagement, there are activities requiring far less effort. If the objective is to raise money, then a serious reflection on the sustainability of these fundraising efforts is necessary. The congregation's capacity to run

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<sup>4</sup> As participants you will receive notes from the webinar and the book "Facing Your Church's Uncertain Future."  
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these fundraising events indefinitely is unrealistic. It takes energy, which should be used towards building missional identity and finding new ways to use the building. Also, the congregation needs to plan how to cover the revenue which will be lost when the fundraiser ends.

- Utilize denominational resources. Congregations in the UCC are covenanted with each other and the denomination. We are fortunate that we have a wealth of resources among other churches in the Franklin Association. We also have resources at the Conference and national settings. Use them. Take advantage of Super Saturday (next one is March 14). Refer to the Conference and the national UCC websites. In my personal experiences, I have found resource people more than happy to help and answer questions.

We believe in resurrection. Resurrection, life after death, is fundamental to our identity as Christians. We should not think of Resurrection as solely an Easter event. Resurrection is a promise. Resurrection cannot happen, though, without death. We must allow things to die if we want them to live. For TCC to live, it must allow things to die. Hold this in prayer as you embark on your ministry for your future.

Respectfully submitted,

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November 20, 2019