

## How's It Going as Minister of Church Community Life?

Fall 2016

At this moment in my nearly 9 years of serving at First Mennonite Church of Iowa City as Minister of Church Community Life, I am feeling GRATEFUL and STRETCHED.

I am grateful to God and to this congregation for inviting me to serve here. It has been a place where I have been wisely mentored both by faith-filled pastor colleagues and congregation members; where I've been able to test ideas, ask questions, and grow gifts for ministry; where my family and I have been generously supported; where God's goodness abounds!

I have felt stretched, especially in the past year, as I have felt the scope of my responsibilities grow both in the congregation and at home. The following are some reflections on my ministering role: what brings me joy; what has been challenging; and how my pastoral identity has changed in the past year.

### **JOY**

One of the things I love about pastoral ministry is the variety of tasks it involves. Here (in no particular order) are some of the tasks that give me joy, that renew my energy even as I expend my energy:

- **Weddings, Funerals, Baby Dedications**—Walking with couples, families and individuals at these milestones is a privilege. We tread holy ground together as we seek God's blessing in times of celebration and grief.
- **Christian Education/Spiritual Formation**—I often come away from Christian Education Commission meetings with excitement for ministry with children, youth, young adults, and adults of all ages. I enjoy digging into the Bible and exploring faith questions with our youth in the annual/semi-annual Baptism Exploration Class. I find myself hungering for more opportunities to study the Bible and discuss questions of faith with people of all ages in the community.
- **Worship**—I never tire of helping to shape meaningful worship services that are grounded in scripture and that celebrate the hope, the peace, the love we share in Christ.
- **Miscellaneous**- Various tasks that I enjoy:
  - staying in touch with Gloria Villatoro and collaborating with the Torre Fuerte congregation in planning VBS and occasional worship services
  - Interacting with Home Ties Staff

- Caring for Young Adults through our annual picnic and monthly lunches
- Hosting various groups for meals and meetings in our home
- Supporting various mission efforts
- Visiting with and praying for people of all ages
- Writing worship and study resources for the broader church

## **Challenges**

Here's what's been challenging and what has pushed me to grow, especially in the past year:

- **Transitions**—We've had so much change in the configurations of our pastoral staff and administrative assistants! With each change in personnel, considerable time and energy is needed to discern one another's strengths/weaknesses, personalities, and how, all those things considered, we can best serve the congregation and one another.
- **Catch-all--** As the staff member with the longest tenure (since Bob and Mag left) I have been the one to answer questions about many aspects of congregational life. Only some of the time do I have the answers!

I have also tended to accumulate many small tasks that were not part of my job previously. Here are a few examples:

- Attending to more details related to worship and administration
  - Editing the bulletin and insert each week
  - Processing ideas with commissions that I previously did not relate to closely
  - Assisting with pastoral care to people of all ages (in addition to youth/young adults/young families), including providing leadership for funerals
- **Balancing Office time and Childcare/Family time-** Trying to fit all my previous duties plus many new ones into a 50% time position is, well, IMPOSSIBLE! Before God gifted Nathan and me with Isaiah and Mahala, I had a lot more flexibility with my time, and often took time at home to complete preparations for worship, meetings, etc.

The presence of our children now keeps me more vigilant of my boundaries. I want to be available to them when we are home together. Discerning how much I can say "yes" to in ministry and still be able to say "yes" to my children and husband is an ongoing challenge.

## **Pastoral Identity and Spiritual Care**

In the past year I have experienced a significant shift in my perception of my role at First Mennonite Church. Looking back on my first 8 years at FMC, I saw myself primarily as a SERVANT-LEADER, with emphasis on the SERVANT part of that phrase. I often felt like a worker bee for the congregation, and a companion on the journey.

In this past year, I've come to understand more the importance of the LEADER part of that phrase. While I still understand myself as a servant and companion, I recognize in a new way the influence or power I hold as a pastor. I am more conscious of how the spirit I bring to a conversation, commission meeting, or worship service can influence the whole system. If I am anxious or desperate, that can stoke anxiety or desperation in the congregation. If I am calm and hopeful, that can nurture peaceful trust and hope in the congregation.

I have also begun to hold the congregation differently in my awareness over the past year. I find myself thinking and praying more about the big picture: how we see ourselves as a congregation; how God sees us and the vision God is calling us to embody; how we relate to one another on a systems level—how Commissions interact with one another and steer the direction of the congregation; how our congregation fits into the larger picture of our Conference and Denomination. I want to help FMC listen for God's leading, so that we are prayerfully propelled by God's Spirit in our ministries and mission within and beyond the congregation.

This awareness of my power and this sense of responsibility for the larger vision of the congregation is humbling. I realize that "to whom much is given, much is required." I am newly convicted of the importance of prayer, study, and consulting with other wise guides on this journey.

I find getting away for quiet reflection (prayer, journaling, hiking, reading) is so important. My goal is to spend one quiet day per month at Crooked Creek Christian Camp. I find that, no matter how much clamor there is in my spirit, when I get to that still place, God shows up. (Or, more accurately, my awareness of God's grace-filled, wise and loving presence is heightened.) I come away more centered, less anxious, more joyful. I am grateful to my mother-in-law who has provided childcare for these much-needed retreat days in the past year!

Just as important as quiet days are intentional times of seeking the wise guidance and support of spiritual mentors or colleagues. I am grateful for weekly staff meetings and informal times of praying and vetting ideas with my pastor colleagues (whoever they happen to be at the time!). Monthly meetings with my spiritual director, who has walked with me for 8 years and knows me well, are imperative to my spiritual health. She regularly expands my awareness of how God is present in my life and in the congregation and helps to renew my trust in God's steadfast, sure love for me and all of us. I also appreciate the support and insight of our Conference Ministers, and of other pastors in our cluster of Mennonite Churches.

### **Looking Ahead**

In seminary, we were told that at about the 7/8 year mark in ministry, we should be asking ourselves, "Why should I stay here?" or "Are both the congregation and I growing as we continue to walk together?"

I look forward to hearing from the congregation in this review process. I look forward to hearing how others view me and my role—points of strength and growth edges.

*If the congregation agrees*, I can imagine continuing to serve here for another stretch of time. I feel reinvigorated for ministry, especially in the realm of spiritual formation across generations. With the input of the Elders and the congregation, I look forward to possibly tweaking my job description to include more of the things I've name in the "Joy" section above, and to reflect the new sense of responsibility I feel in my role.

### **Conclusion**

In eight years of ministry, and particularly in the past year, I have learned a LOT about who I am as a ministering person. I have also learned much about who God is, who First Mennonite Church is, and how God is calling us to share Christ's way of peace in the world. And I have much MORE to learn in all these areas! But God is good. God is gracious. And so is this congregation. I am grateful to be on the journey of seeking and serving the God revealed in Jesus Christ with First Mennonite Church. May we continue to be open to God's wise and gentle guidance as we seek new leadership and enter a new phase of the journey together.