

Fall 2021 Council Report
The Rev. Amy Gopp, Senior Pastor

A New Era

We have entered a new era of Church. The Church is a web more than an entity now. The church building is less and less relevant; the church as a community of people in many different places and spaces—both physical and virtual—is now the norm. It is so challenging to wrap my arms around our congregation currently. I see some people in worship, but not others. There are some I haven't seen since before the lock-down. Others I know are not coming because of young children who are yet unvaccinated. Still others are now only worshipping online because they are waiting out the pandemic. But then there are those who have ever so subtly shifted their engagement—whether in worship or on a committee or otherwise—their engagement, generally, has decreased. I am certain there are those among us who have decided not to return to church. But I do not know the reason(s) why. With this changing Church, I have many burning questions:

How might we, as a congregation, open ourselves even more widely to the movement of the Holy Spirit in our midst, in these ongoing, unsettling, uncertain pandemic times? How do we best position ourselves for this new era?

Who is my congregation now? And how do I relate to them? How do they relate to one another? How do I embrace my congregation when I don't see them? Or even when I do, we cannot yet greet/embrace one another, catch up even briefly, or have a longer conversation?

What does it now mean to “attend” church? Attending is not “watching” church. How are you worshipping? engaging? Might there be a way to track attendance of online worshippers? How do I/we pastor them, especially if they are not engaging in other ways? How do we avoid passive absorption?

Is asynchronous community possible?

What does it mean to be a “member” of our congregation? Membership is no longer the barometer of someone's commitment or level of engagement. It is not nearly as important as our mission. The changing Church is not based on membership, but on mission. What are the metrics for church involvement now?

It also seems important to define what we mean when we use terms new to many of us. We speak of “church online” now—which is really referring to taking church as we have known it and broadcasting (live-streaming) it. “Online church” takes church, worship, and reinvents it. The visual liturgies that I crafted during the lock-down were an example of “online church” reinvented and repackaged. But what we are now doing, having returned to the sanctuary and “doing church” in the way we did before is simply live-streaming, broadcasting “church online” and is quite different for those watching. The service is not crafted visually in the same way. One cannot participate in the same way. I have deep concerns about the passive absorption of worshipping in this manner. Furthermore, how do we avoid creating “second-class citizens” among our congregation? Are we privileging those coming in person to worship? This feels like a very slippery slope to me.

As senior minister, how do I now know who my flock is? And again, I ask, how do I/we best engage *everyone* in our community of faith, regardless of how or when or even if they are worshiping/participating?

Additionally, there are ethical principles that are critical for us now in ways that they were not previously. For example, the duty of honoring privacy. Our worship services are not only in our sanctuary, but online, on YouTube, and will be accessible and available to anyone at any time. Thus, praying for those by name, in worship, is not something I feel I can do unless I have had extensive conversations with those people beforehand. Since that is not always possible to obtain permission, and many with whom I have spoken have indicated that they are not comfortable with that, the way I craft our pastoral prayer or prayers of the people is quite different. Moving forward, we will have to discern the ethical practices and principles of our changing Church.

I pose these questions to myself constantly, and I now share them with you as our lay leadership on Council. I am eager to engage in conversation with you and to hear your ideas, hopes, and questions.

Budgeting Process

How might our changing Church impact the way we form our FY22 budget? Have we left enough room for the Holy Spirit to move through our midst as we think about how to meet the needs of a congregation that is very different from our pre-pandemic one? How are we praying about this?

How are you, as Chairs of the standing ministries of the church, thinking aspirationally about next year's budget? I encourage us all to keep in mind that a church budget, a faith-based budget, is a theological document. It is a spiritual statement. When we look at it, it clearly tells us what we value.

I would strongly exhort us to increase our allocations for outreach in all forms so that we as a congregation and pillar in the Kent community and Portage County are tithing back to the God who has blessed us with all we need and so much more.

Stewardship

As we embark on our stewardship season this fall, I wonder how we are now understanding stewardship? Has the concept of stewardship been framed in spiritual terms in a way that has shifted our thinking? Is it clear, from our recent stewardship efforts, that stewardship refers to more than money? And is it clear that stewardship is also about money? How are members of Council sensing a call to tithing? Is more education needed on tithing? giving? stewardship? How can we encourage one another to increase our giving, annually, incrementally? Do we see a connection between stewardship of financial resources and our nominating process (the stewardship of our gifts, time, talent, and passions)? How might we make a more explicit connection to nominating people to serve on ministries and committees and stewardship?

What other information do folks need to make a meaningful investment in our congregation?

Nominating

To pose the same question as above, do we see the connection between our nominating process and stewardship? How might we emphasize the nominating process more explicitly during our stewardship season? How might the Council help articulate the giving of gifts—time and talent—alongside the giving of financial resources? Do people generally understand that the giving of energy, time, prayers, and creativity is part of their stewardship overall? In whom are you, as leaders, seeing gifts in others you might encourage to serve on a committee or ministry, or as an officer, next year?

Personnel

There have been some important changes among our staff. As of January 1, Kim will work only part-time (25 hours per week). She will focus on children and youth. I will need to pick up adult education among other responsibilities, including special programming for Lent, Advent, etc. To assist me with my own responsibilities, I would like to explore options for another part-time position, particularly in pastoral care.

Leah has also added some of the financial administrator tasks to her portfolio. After extensive research, a lot of prayer, and lessons learned from three young financial administrators leaving our part-time position for a full-time job, it seemed time to look at a new way of structuring this position. Leah has some financial experience and is eager to learn what she doesn't already know. She will add 10 hours a week to her schedule, moving from 30 hours to 40. She will devote much of Mondays to financial tasks and will work closely with Sally, our treasurer, to get up to speed. She will explore this new position for 90 days and if all goes well will continue to serve. Her title will also change from Administrative Assistant to Office Administrator. As of now, she has been doing very well and I am quite pleased with this new arrangement.

Wider Church Engagement

I have been invited to serve on the Human Resources Committee for the LWA. At the upcoming Annual Meeting for our LWA this Saturday, I will be on the slate to be elected.

I continue to serve on the Commission on the Ministry and the Discernment Working Group (DWG). These meetings are every other week on Thursdays. While a big commitment, it is a wonderful use of my gifts and skills and I am truly honored to serve the wider church in this capacity.

2021 Objectives

As a reminder, I have set my intentions on five key objectives, aligned with our Strategic Plan:

1. **Spiritual development and growth** (Caring for Our Congregation and Faith Formation and Spiritual Growth mission priorities; Spiritual Care of Our Members and Expand Bible Study Opportunities ministries)
2. **Keeping us all connected** (Caring for Our Congregation mission priority; Small Groups ministry)
3. **Becoming a WISE congregation** (Community Outreach and Care mission priority; Mental Health and Addiction Recovery ministry)
4. **Becoming an Anti-Racist congregation** (Social Justice and Global Engagement mission priority; Racial Justice and Reconciliation ministry)
5. **Participatory, elicitive and visionary leadership and governance** (living fully into our mission and claiming our vision to "Be the Church" in beloved community)

Future Dates

October 30 – Fritz Barker Memorial Service

October 31 – All Saints Day

November 7 – New Members Received in worship; CCAF offering received

November 14 – Dedication Sunday to bless our stewardship pledges for FY22

November 21-24 Pastor Amy off (Thanksgiving week)

November 28 – First Sunday in Advent; service of Baptism

December 3 – Lighting of Outdoor Tree

December 19 – Lessons & Carols (virtual)

December 21 – Blue Christmas service

We are guided and inspired by our congregational vision of a beloved community where everyone is celebrated just as God made us, and where all of creation flourishes in the compassion, healing, justice and love of Christ. Our mission is to love and transform lives by the grace and guidance of Jesus Christ as we do justice, embrace faithful love, and walk humbly with God.

Let us commit fully to our mission and vision as we navigate the uncharted waters of a changing Church.

Respectfully submitted,

Rev. Amy Gopp