

Pastor's Report to Annual Meeting, January 28, 2018.

The Year Past -- 2017

It was a hard year. I say that, having spent June, July, August and the first third of September away on sabbatical! Let me begin then by thanking the church for the time of refreshment and renewal. Working with the West African Unaccompanied Minors and the Syrian Refugees was and continues to be a challenge to my spirit and an enrichment to my life -- in mysterious ways I don't quite understand. That opportunity was much appreciated. And, I think, it made a difference in my ministry back at Old First too.. Thank you: it's a rare opportunity, and a lovely way to honor your minister. I thank Bob and everyone else who pitched in to cover the things I usually do while I was away.

Still it was a hard year! That began early with the situation in Washington. And has continued to become more of a burden as people struggle to stay hopeful and figure out how to maintain the energy and courage to endure and resist Trumpism. Interestingly, it seems to me that church has had to take on a new function -- supporting people in these difficult times. that with the help of communities like Old First, we might not despair.

It was also a difficult year because we lost to death a number of beloved members of this community. Bernie and Carolyn, Lois, Marie. It's hard to have to keep saying goodbye, even when you remember that Christian funerals are celebrations of the lives lived and the blessings those now gone brought to us.

Otherwise, our main accomplishments were all the work on the Sanctuary building through the Capital Campaign and even the new carpeting that was funded out of our annual budget. Things are looking better around here. Thanks for the generosity of so many -- it's really incredible to consider that for a congregation of people who are not wealthy, we kept up our annual stewardship and then contributed another half-million dollars. Well-done, good and faithful servants. Gratitude is also needed to those leaders who worked hard making sure the building work got done and done right. We're catching up and looking good.

The Live Nativity is always some extra work, and we often wonder if it sufficiently interprets the Christmas story for those who visit it... interprets it in a way that tells people something about the distinctive faith we hold at Old First? This year, that question was overshadowed by Stormy the runaway cow.

While the news treated us kindly (we seemed a delightful seasonal bit of good news from all the bad news out of Washington, and we got notice as far away as England and India), that much notice also put us on the radar of the animal rights activists. The office was overwhelmed by protest calls, and more than 50K signatures were gathered worldwide on a petition for Old First and all other churches to end using animals in our Nativities.

Old First is going to have to -- amidst all the other conversations and decision before us and everything else we got going on -- to have a conversation about what happened and what it means for the future of our Live Nativity Ministry. And we are eternally grateful to Scott the Farmer, Sheep Sue and all the other 4-H folks from Saul Agricultural High School...

Finally, we continue to welcome new people to this community, even as we are aware of others who leave us. In the flux, working on welcoming and building relationships (with one another and with God) continues to be a major goal and challenge at Old First. Interestingly, in this last

year, we seem to be welcoming more new people with less church experience. While that has been a goal of ours since the Covenant Ministry during my first 3 years at Old First, it does present new issues about 'assimilation.' I am excited that we have gotten a Community Life SLG up and helping with these goals.

Our governance system, and volunteers in general, they are stretched these days. People seem to have less available time. They have an interest and make themselves available to us. But follow through is increasingly a difficulty. I don't mind doing follow-up, but sometimes I'm not sure how to help and encourage without becoming a drag or a nag or over-stepping my role? One of our leaders suggested recently that what has happened is simply that instead of being a primary commitment in people's lives, church in contemporary North America is more like a secondary commitment. It's an interesting insight that I have thought a lot about.

In other news, pointing apparently, but incredibly in the other direction, our financial support continues to grow. We suffered a slight dip in giving over the last couple years as some generous givers moved away. But we are catching up, with a significant climb in stewardship pledges this year. Remember, one of the limiting factors for how much service we can provide is the financial resources we have available. It's good to see this form of support going in a positive direction.

Looking Ahead -- 2020... 2025...

Rereading Freidman's "A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix," in preparation for the NJ UCC pastors' retreat I led last week, I came across this line: "You have to get up before your people and give an 'I Have a Dream' speech."

So here it is, not nearly as eloquent, and more local, but still something that will take us years to realize. And it won't go as we expect, but there may well be serendipities in the path before us right alongside of disappointment. It's risky, but life with God is always an adventure.

It's a dream deeply rooted in the history and ministry of this church since we've been back at 4th and Race. A dream coming out of our commitment to be "a church for the whole city," (I think that's Daehler's phrase); a dream growing from our years of service to the urban poor who have had such an impact on who we are and how we see God.

It's a dream, that working with a partner, we get through all the hoops and approvals, the funding and design needed for the construction of a new building on the corner of 4th and Race. A building that offers permanent housing to 30+ homeless people after over 30 years when what we could offer was the floor in our Social Hall for the winter months. And a building that offers us modern and accessible administrative and program space (instead of little rooms stacked high on narrow stairways) with much less cost to us than the space it replaces.

It's a dream of special people living in this new residence. People that Old First counts in its ministry and as part of our community. Imagine if a handful of the neighbors from this residence found their way into our church. I can imagine a day when our congregation is informed and enriched by the presence and ministry to and of these residents.

This corner would look different, be different. Old First would be different. Old City would be different too. And Philadelphia would have more shelter for some of its most vulnerable citizens. Most importantly, different could be the lives of 30+ people who have found permanent housing

with the support they need to have fuller and more secure lives. All God's children... finding a home (with some material and spiritual help from us).

And this commitment and reality -- namely, Old First having found out how to create permanent supportive housing -- they would make us look different too. In part, physically, as one passes the new residence and comes upon Old First tucked back a bit, but with a more welcoming front courtyard -- a yard for our neighbors, both those in the new building and from the streets around. A more open and inviting approach, at the entrance and the public space of the courtyard and at the front doors of our building... and how the courtyard and the building are landscaped and lit.

And the difference continues inside, where the Sanctuary could become less about how it was at the end of the 19th century. Of course, it needs to hold its historical feel and the integrity of its architecture. But what if it were not just renovated, but redesigned for the multiple purposes a congregation like Old First could dedicate space for these days? Relax, the pews are staying! But what if we could get the chancel area and front of the sanctuary more accessible and usable? What if the children's pageant did not have to work around the raised pulpit platform? And what if, when we were not using the sacred space for worship, an arts organization was filling it with beautiful music? And what if, we could find some more storage. ...And new ways to integrate our children into our sacred space and worship life?

Going further forward in possibility as well as in time, what if all these changes, physical and figurative... what if they helped unstuck us in other ways. Maybe in ways we aren't even aware now that we are stuck.

The more parts move, the more moveable the parts. What if, in all this change, we didn't experience regret and loss so much as a growing dynamism and new vision and possibilities? Imagine how our church life evolving could become a celebration and an enthusiasm. One of the aspects of this congregation that attracts people to church and to God.

Not tomorrow. Or maybe even next year. But could this be where God is leading us? Isn't an integral part of church some deep faith that God has much more to do with us, and that we can do much more with God?

This is my faith and its vision as we take on more, getting through these first decisions and steps of a new undertaking. Only one person's vision, but one shared honestly and humbly, knowing that what will come will be of our shared visions playing off on another. ...That we can take the best of this great church -- its ability to fashion communion and community out of an eclectic and diverse people -- and build on that *charism*, becoming ever more a sign of what God's reign must look like.

I continue to be honored to serve you and serve alongside you,

Michael