

## Pastor's Report- Annual Report 2018

Dear Old First,

So we are finishing another year of being Old First. That in and of itself -- our 291st year -- is something to give thanks for, particularly in light of a political season that's positing walls of protection, physical as well as figurative, and turning people away -- or even on -- each other. As coarseness, disregard and despoilment are on the march, Old First's welcome, respect and love stay put, standing strong... even more poignant, powerful and important. I hope you add to how we are a community of trust, faithfulness and hope... committed to justice, valuing all God's children and working for a world with room for all. No Exceptions!

#LoveFirst

Besides the day in and day out work of being the church, loving one another and growing in faith and practice (that's a lot of work!), perhaps our biggest accomplishment this year has been the movement ahead with the project to build permanent, supportive housing along 4th Street. The project is now in the planning and development stage, and, Lord, there are so many moving parts.

But Old First is accomplishing what needs to be done as our first contributions to this process:

- ❖ fielding a joint venture ministry team to work with Community Ventures and DePaul USA
- ❖ hiring a development attorney
- ❖ working out and approving a joint venture agreement
- ❖ beginning research on the property vis a vis possible development, and
- ❖ participating in the planning and design process.

As I said, this is a very complicated project that truthfully is way out of our institutional skill set and the experiences of any of us here now. That's why we have partners! But even Community Ventures and the City's Homeless Services staff in a recent meeting reflected how these development projects do not offer clear-cut, step by step processes. Instead, they end up being about running here and there, on various, conflicting timelines with multiple requirements that rarely sync in order to cobble together the resources needed.

But a group of leaders at Old First is covering the territory and on the learning curve. Some of us now can actually explain low income tax credits and the different zoning codes in Old City and the ones that we could use.

What has concerned me is that beyond the Old Firsters most involved, I'm not sure the congregation at large has a clear enough understanding of the project we are trying to accomplish or even the barest outlines of how we will need to go about this, the basic steps forward. I will admit a bit of frustration, besides concern. Leadership really has tried to explain the big picture (at least!) all along the way.

But even at the last congregational meeting (to approve the Joint Venture Agreement) on Dec. 16, when Larry very carefully went over the whole project and all that we had already done, it worried me that people were asking “square one” questions. I’m glad they asked! I just wished they had come to their questions or gotten the answers earlier.

I am hopeful -- the conversation we are initiating at this Annual Meeting, about the future of the shelter in light of the creation of permanent, supportive housing, might be an occasion to broaden and deepen people’s understanding and involvement.

I used the January Midday Meeting as a guinea pig to test our plans for initiating this important conversation. And people asked really pointed and on-point questions about many aspects of the project. There was a time when one person in the conversation surprised me, that she didn’t know anything about our service camps! See there’s another example of how our ability to share information with our community is not as effective as we sometimes think! But I did get the feeling from that conversation around the Midday Meeting table that people had rolled up their sleeves and gotten more invested in this project. I hope the same happens when we undertake the conversation with the whole congregation next Sunday.

Of course, I don’t really have experience against which to compare how we are doing with broad congregational engagement around the project. Is relative obliviousness or lack of concern just a reality for a congregation undertaking a huge project beyond the immediate scope of its experience? Perhaps it’s a sign of trust in leadership? Or maybe it’s just a fact, like the small number of leaders who end up handling most of the detailed affairs of the church? If the majority trusts things are moving ahead smoothly, maybe that’s all you can hope for? Or maybe we need to redouble our efforts broadly to school more people in the details? (The Joint Venture Ministry Team is working on creating a timeline, a graphic representation of how far we have come and what lies ahead. Maybe that will help?) I’m just not sure. But I would feel better if it seemed that more people were more versed and vested in the whys and hows of this joint venture.

One of my interests in this question about how people have or have not acquired information and understanding is much broader. If you think about it, a congregation is meant to be a learning community. We are supposed to be about learning, and then passing on the Gospel in real practical ways that we can live out in our own lives and pass on to others. I wonder, are we better at sharing the Gospel message and engendering understanding of the faith than we have been with this development project? If I sound worried, maybe I am overthinking this a bit!

The other big development this year was, that after all the trouble occasioned by Stormy the Cow’s double escape last year, the Elders decided that we were going to take a year-off from the live animal Crèche. That occasioned some agita, but the replacement Refugee Nativity filled the bill a bit. And, Mary and Joseph still led people through the neighborhood

with a donkey on Christmas Eve. Plus, they were confronted by (mock) ICE agents. The Elders or the congregation have not decided about the live animal crèche going forward, and I know there are some people already organizing to bring it back.

My point is different: we didn't have the animals, and we were still Old First. In fact, we found a new way to make the Christmas story come alive. And the world -- or at least some of the media outlets -- noticed. Plus, we shared a Christmas message that, in some ways, better reflected the values of our faith and Christian practice.

But my simple point, what I really want to leave you with is this: we changed, let go of a holy tradition, did something new, and learned along the way. One of those learnings, I hope, is that we can change and be new and still remain Old First. There's some good news in that folks!

Finally, as I have written every year so far for the last 10 years for this report, I continue to be honored to serve among you and beside you. Great leaders, even if we could use a few more. Great people, even though we would welcome more. But it's a blessed place this community, and think how much richer it makes our lives, thanks be to God.

Love,

Michael