

Pastor's Annual Report

Submitted by: Rev. Michael Caine

I often think, there's a better chance of folks reading these reports in the distant future when someone is interested in long past history of the church. I mean, I'm not sure how many church members read the reports before our Annual Meeting. But I hope you all somehow get to hear and think about what I am going to say.

In the weeks leading up to Christmas 2021, there was no way to know how we would organize worship for the holy day. Still feeling the effects of the Delta variant of COVID and waiting for the on-coming, more infectious Omicron variant to surge, we could not guess what our situation was going to be like in just a few weeks.

Such situations can cause tension among church staff. Way back in September, our Administrator Devan was already asking what we were going to do for Christmas! (That's because last year's Advent Candle holders were a project we began in August...)

But we have also learned from COVID: one sometimes has to make plans before one can know what a situation is going to be like. If we don't make some decisions and get working well before we can be sure, we won't have time to do anything. In shorter time than we would have liked, we pulled off really lovely Christmas Eve Services, at 5 pm outside in the courtyard and at 8 pm online. It is also a lesson for the church to learn – that we can pivot more quickly to respond to the world around us.

In the midst of that December runup, uncertainty and tension, I had a revelation. I have come to appreciate and count on even more over these last two years how resilient a community Old First is. Actually, way back in 2009, when we were undertaking the intentional evolution of Covenant Ministry, didn't we discover quickly that the culture of this church is strong enough and elastic enough? We could change aspects of our communal life that felt integral, and still we were unquestionably Old First.

Our resilience has been tried in these last two years. In the pandemic, when we had to figure out online worship without any warning> Neither the congregation nor the worship leaders had much experience or knew the ins and outs of the technology we were depending on.

I know pastors (at least those of us who got it good!) count on their church's forgiveness. It's a precondition of a successful pastorate. But back in March 2020, Holly and I discussed, "we will try our best; some of it will work; some will not; they will roll their eyes at the latter and hopefully find enough in the former, and we will go on being church."

Our community has shown itself understanding, forgiving, appreciative, willing, resilient. None of that's particularly surprising if you know this church. But it's all good news. That's what one hopes to see. An it's very promising in light of the changes ahead.

But my revelation back in December? Resilience is a great skill. Something we who have raised children hope to see in our kids. In a dynamic world of unexpected ups and downs, it's great to see someone you love be able to weather difficulties well; even to spring back into shape after some experience that could have left the person or their life marred. There is even something called "psychological resilience," which speaks of a capacity to cope with a crisis and quickly rebound to one's pre-crisis equilibrium. Those are abilities that a pastor likes seeing in a church the same way a parent hopes for them in their child.

But what did I realize in December? Old First has shown itself not just resilient, but creative. What I mean is that we have surpassed the standard of resilience, and we seem to have attained the higher level of creativity.

Yes, COVID health precautions that have precluded our gathering are a negative situation. Likewise, the delays in the Sanctuary renovation leaving us without that space for our assembly in no way help. But rather than simply mourning our difficulties – or complaining – people have leaned in spiritually to making the best of it. To finding the silver lining. To push into new territory we might not have willingly wandered into were it a choice.

I guess it remains to be seen (one often needs more time and distance to get good focus), but I think that the pandemic will turn out to have changed our community in significant and positive ways. I know we pray a lot more together now. And people are sharing more about "the rest of their lives." We're getting better at relating our faith to our lives outside of the specific church context and worship service.

What I am saying is that we seem to be creatively finding the opportunities that situations well beyond our control have served us up. And doing so with good cheer, even hopefulness. And a burst of spiritual creativity. God not only works in mysterious ways. God can also show up, even in the worst situations, and make something great out of it. (We are, after all, a faith of crucifixion and resurrection.)

Spiritual creativity is important for us, I believe, for the next stretch of road ahead of us. We might wonder if God has been preparing us? The last two years of COVID changed us in ways we could not have expected. But the next two years – as we move back into the redesigned Sanctuary and undertake hybrid worship AND redevelop the property and the consequent rearrangements of so much of our ministry – are going to ask much more of us. We need not only resilience, but creativity if we hope to find all the opportunity God offers.

I am honored to be figuring all this out with you. Or just letting the Spirit keep leading us on.

Faithfully yours,

Michael