

Pastor's Annual Report for Sunday, January 29, 2023

Dear Old First,

It's a weird time in the church. It's a WEIRD time in the church!

As I write that, I am reminded of the urban myth that "weird" comes from the German verb "werden" – "to become." It's definitely not etymological fact, but it's illustrative nonetheless. Weird times often feel uncomfortable, but they may also become something quite incredible. We will see: we are in the middle of so many transitions right now.

There's all the world around us in flux. It seems as if cultural change and political tension just keep ramping up.

But there is also so much change right here and now at Old First. As we move into hybrid ministry. As we figure our way out of pandemic church. As we learn how to use the redesigned Sanctuary for our own purposes and also for the wider community. As we continue to live into the programmatic and physical changes that our redevelopment of the property is necessitating.

A couple of months ago, I found myself trying to shield the congregation from some hurt, explaining to someone, "Maybe I'm being too protective. But they have been through so much in these last years, and they are doing incredibly well. But we are still facing a huge amount of change in our congregational life in these next couple of years. It's all a bit much, and I don't want them to get overwhelmed."

Or as one of you asked last week, "Where are we headed?" I laughed in response, "Well, that isn't so clear to me right now." I hope it doesn't make you nervous. Despite 30+ years of experience in ministry, I'm not claiming a mountaintop vantage point or perspective. I don't have a roadmap. We have gotten through so much, and shown ourselves how strong we really are.

So much is up in the air right now; who can foresee where it's all going to come down. Time and faithfulness will figure this all out. But there's no crisis. God has not forsaken us. Even if we've got some wilderness wanderings ahead, God provides. There's just more moving parts than we can make sense of right now.

Beloved, the effects of transitions can never fully be foreseen, but they are often felt. Periods like this can be fearful and anxiety-producing. They remind us how we are not really in the driver's seat.

Not sure if it's the domino effect or chaos theory, but we are involved in something so much bigger than ourselves and beyond our ability to comprehend or control. There's a bit of church wisdom that warns, "70% of what happens to a congregation is completely out of its control because it's about what's going on in the world around it." It feels like that percentage in the world has climbed, just as we are geometrically increasing the changes right in our midst.

In all this, I want to ask you to be even more intentional about being in touch with one another. Perhaps, you might make it a spiritual discipline to reach out to one or two church people deliberately each week.

Hybrid ministry makes keeping up with one another unquestionably harder – now it's not just that people have different schedules for participating in church (and everyone seems a bit more infrequent nowadays). Also, there are now two, different modalities that make it hard to talk across the mediums: people in the Sanctuary and those online can't easily "converse" back and forth).

Beloved, be patient and kind to one another and with yourself. Understanding and communication are harder to come by when we are missing one another – literally, figuratively, emotionally. Care, concern, reaching out, staying in touch can all go a long way in times and situations like these.

Remember we are the church, even if in completely new territory:

Forgive freely and quickly.

Let love bridge the gaps that might otherwise waylay us.

Go the second mile or the additional effort it takes to stay together.

Hold on to one another like we hold on to God (and like God holds on to us).

Each of us is among the many moving parts. We may not always agree, but we will do better when our issues are shared on the common table Jesus has built for us.

We are trying to find our way into the brave new world of 'hybrid ministry.' Our tech team is staying calm and making progress with the new cameras, screen, sound board, amplifiers added to the Sanctuary. Someone reported recently that "it gets better and better each week." I agree, even with the occasional blips we still encounter. Thanks to Adam, Tony and Woody. Once they get this down, we need to build out that team to make sure we have people to help us broadcast every service.

We are also asking what hybrid ministries will look like for people at home. How do we support people who are mostly online? Or even more so, those who are at home and on the phone!

Does the pastor need to greatly increase his home visits? Do others need to begin visiting in some sort of intentional program? What does 'visiting' – in a hybrid context – even mean? Will online, hybrid ministries be enough to sustain people in their church participation over the long haul, or do we need to find other ways of relating? How can we field a team of people who can take worship online to people who are in the hospitals, rehab, other settings?

I have to admit that I do not yet feel like I am aware enough or present to people in worship with us online while I am leading worship in the Sanctuary. I get to see you in passing, but don't feel

like I have figured out how to make you equally in my heart as part of the congregation. I am open to ideas and suggestions. This is a serious concern for me.

We are also feeling our way forward as our people are coming out of ‘pandemic church’ in all different sorts of ways. To be honest, we do not even know exactly how everyone is feeling, or how they are making their decisions and choosing to engage and interact with church. While we are committed to offering equal attention to people and ministries online, we have also been coming up with reasons people might come to church – to help those who need to re-establish that habit.

And we are bringing back some of the ministry standards of “gathered together physically” church – Sunday School, Hospitality Teams, Midday Meeting, Dinners for the Hungry. While other ministries seem to be remaining exclusively online: Lunch with the Pastor, Bible Study, Prayer Group. Meetings of governance boards seem also to be staying almost exclusively online for now. It is our commitment to do hybrid ministry, but it turns out that not everything will be offered “both ways.” For example, the early service on Christmas Eve was not online; and much of Outreach is only in the building.

All this on top of tectonic shifts we’ve begun in the moves involved in the redevelopment of the property. We are successfully out of the Fox and CE buildings (although there is still some stuff in each that yet needs to be moved). And the temporary office is working well at the east end of the Social Hall. Though we had a mini-shelter (12 guys for about a month) when Bethesda had an emergency, we are without the Shelter for the first time in 38 winters. We have successfully added a Sunday night dinner for the hungry as a way to involve our “shelter dinner teams” and maintain our commitment to homeless ministry. We are feeling our “temporary lack of space” and we have boxes stored under all the pews in the balcony and the closets that used to be filled with mats and bins for the Shelter now packed with church materials.

Our redesigned Sanctuary is a new space for us. And we can’t say anything else before thanking all who worked on and contributed to its redesign. Janice Smith has to be singled out, but she was not alone on SEAC (the Sanctuary Enhancement and Accessibility Committee.) There are still things to be finished (shelves to be built and artwork to be installed), but it is at a point where we are in it comfortably and using it completely.

We are slowly figuring out how to use the Sanctuary for our worship life. We have tried a few different configurations, though we were slowed down by our needing to learn how to work the new sound system. (For most of the fall, we only had the mic at the pulpit!) We’re trying to figure out how to clean the space properly. And the easiest, quickest and most efficient ways to set up the chairs, and in time as it is used more, how to come up with a Sanctuary Set-up Staff are both goals before us.

We haven’t yet begun to think how to use, market and manage the Sanctuary with outside groups and the wider community. But we had two concerts – Singing City’s Fall Concert and Center City Chamber Orchestra Christmas Concert. There is a committee being called into being with this Annual Meeting that will work on “Sanctuary Use.” And we have already had a lot of different inquiries: a drama series, candlelight yoga, ecstatic dancing, wedding receptions,

meeting retreats. We need to work on this as it was one of the major goals of the Sanctuary redesign and a potential source for space sharing income.

We have had such great leadership this last year and through the pandemic. Thanks to Julie and Bobbie who Co-moderated but have now reached their term limits. Also to Adam who is finishing his term limit as Financial Secretary. Jonathan V. is also finishing his term limit as Treasurer but the congregation is being asked to approve a one-year extension, to make our financial ministries transitions easier.

A whole host of folks are going off the Elders – besides Bobbie and Julie, Winston and Corlis (our new parents), Tony M. (whose work has kept him unable to make meetings). So Elders gets a new influx of people; it's almost a completely new board.

A special thanks to Tony P. who puts in weekly, early volunteer duty helping get set up for Sunday. And John U. who has become a regular additional helper.

To all our leaders in Elders, Admin., Outreach, Community Engagement, Community Life, Christian Ed, and our Directors of Stewardship and the Endowment... To our Choir and our Outreach Volunteers. To my colleagues Devan, Holly, Bill and Pamela.

...I am sure I have forgotten some, but it takes a village!

Two closing insights:

1. Writing this report, I realized that we began hybrid ministry with hybrid Co-Moderators: Julie in the building and Bobbie from home. And it worked well. ... Maybe we need to think about peopling roles for online folks – like a chaplain who can serve the onliners during worship?
2. Visitors in the Sanctuary have just started to show up again in the last month or so. New people each week. And we have two new folks online. I have to figure out all the details for a process of following up with these newcomers in our new hybrid world. But there appearance is for me almost like when one sees the first birds show up in spring.

We have the signs updated out front. And the banners have been replaced. We are using the bulletin board again. We mean to appear open for business, even though about half the property is soon to become a construction site.

But we need to look open because we are – at 4th and Race and on the worldwide web. Certainly a good sign of our health and vitality is how outward looking we can be (when in the face of all this change it would be easy to focus inward on our challenges).

I am honored to be on this journey with you, as we work faithfully to figure out and wait faithfully to see,

Love you all, Michael