

## **Pastor's Report to the Annual Meeting, January 28, 2024**

**Submitted by: the Rev. Michael Roca-Caine**

It's an unusual time in the life of the church, this season after the ending of the pandemic restrictions. It actually feels as if more people are getting COVID now than ever before, but hardly anyone is really taking any precautions or amending how we gather or go through life, and with vaccinations, thank God, most people aren't getting that sick.

However, life in church is altered in ways we can't miss, and in ways we don't yet completely understand. Let's try and list them, that more awareness might help us grapple with them more faithfully:

1) We experienced a break in our normal rate of intake of people during the pandemic, but of course, attrition never stops. So we lost members to death and to nursing homes and to moving away and wandering off. There were some people, in all the changes and the lack of physically meeting, who seem to have found that online church wasn't compelling. Still, overall, it doesn't really feel like the rate of attrition rose significantly or was different from how it usually affects our community.

But, as stated above, our intake of new people, even our welcoming of guests to worship fell through the floor. This isn't to say that we didn't see some people from a distance who suddenly could worship with us online. But as time goes on after the pandemic, they seem to join us in worship via zoom less frequently. And over all, we just are left with sort of a multi-year hiatus in new people adding to our community.

2) The experience of our time of exclusive online worship deepened relationships. Engaging a much greater percentage of the whole community face to face with greater proximity albeit on a zoom screen (despite lower attendance) – especially when the whole community heard everything anyone said – enabled more interaction, communication, sharing.

I think that back gathering in the Sanctuary again, there is for some people a sense of loss of intimacy - there's just not as much interaction overall when we are not facing one another in the Sanctuary and also separated between those in the Sanctuary and those online.

Online capabilities have however also spawned new weekly ministries – Bible Study, Prayer Group and Lunch with the Pastor. These have cemented some very close additional relationships, and some deep group loyalties, as well as strengthen biblical literacy, our

prayers and fellowship. But these groups are participated in regularly by a relatively small percentage of the whole community.

It should also be said that our governance meetings have all remained almost exclusively online. The ease of clicking in for a meeting with no commute time is just too attractive and zoom works well for our meetings.

3) People's church attendance patterns are dramatically altered after the period of the pandemic. Again, it seems mostly that many people lost their habit of more frequent church attendance, so that a significant minority, roughly  $\frac{1}{3}$  of the community report attending church (either in the Sanctuary or online) significantly less. (See the survey conducted by our Congregational Life SLG.) The results of that change are obvious in our weekly attendance. I hear clergy colleagues reflect "that during the pandemic people just lost their habit of coming to church." While it might be that simple, I worry, it might not. Sometimes, people look for an excuse to leave church when it had already somehow disappointed them?

A lower weekly attendance is making it more difficult to draft volunteers for the various tasks we count on non-staff to help with. The Community Engagement SLG is introducing greater recognition and appreciation for our volunteers as part of its response to this situation.

As well, as pastor, I assume that lower attendance also translates to less teaching / reinforcing of the faith, and ultimately, but harder to measure, less consciously living out of our Christian faith. (I know at least that the aspirations of my faith stay before me more because I am in church each week!)

4) More people than we had originally expected have maintained an exclusively or primarily online participation in church, even long after we began regathering in the Sanctuary for worship. And there are people who are still in worship most Sundays, but split how they show up – sometimes in the Sanctuary and sometimes online. Of course, for some, our online capacities, allow participation that the "house / hospital bound" never had before. And everytime someone from their hospital, rehab or nursing home bed attends worship online, I am thankful for this new option. (We are beginning to advocate Sunday morning visits, so people can help "in-patient" folks get to church.)

There have been suggestions of attempts to "push" people back into worship in the Sanctuary, for example, having a Sunday without the online broadcast. That

idea was met with resentment / hurt from the “at home congregation” as if their worshiping was somehow “second best.”

We have committed to trying as best we can to make worship equally accessible to people in the Sanctuary and online. I am rather emphasizing / encouraging people “come to worship” (no matter how) rather than showing a preference for gathering physically.

5) Our efforts towards Sunday School have been well received. It’s a deliberate commitment we have made. The situation during the pandemic restrictions for families with young children – particularly school online from home that required a parent’s presence / participation to have much use – was particularly difficult. And online church didn’t work very well for those families either. I tried a Bible story time with kids in the beginning, and maybe it’s just my ineptitude with keeping the kids’ attention via zoom. But parents had to help their kids stay focused. And they didn’t need more things to do. We did offer the pen pals ministry, and hopefully that helped the kids and the parents know church hadn’t forgotten them. But, truly, it wasn’t in any way of lightening the burden of parents going through a very difficult time.

We now have a good group of volunteer teachers putting their effort into these classes. At Old First, we have always valued the relationships that can form between the children of our church and our adults – benevolent grown-ups who are neither one’s parents nor one’s school teachers! Our young families seem to have responded, as their regular attendance is much greater than in 2022.

We also experience the joy of having babies continue to be born into this community. With baby Miles in worship every Sunday with his mom Ariel, Jillian has a new baby and Corliss, with # 2, will be the next baby, it looks like.

6) From what I hear from colleagues, our experience around membership and participation after the pandemic is quite similar to other congregations. I have wondered if in a season like this, we need to become intentional again, institutional-wide about developing our traditions to become “more visible, meaningful, accessible and welcoming to new folks.” That was a program with which we had some success during “Covenant Ministry” when I was first here. It was another season when we were struggling with sagging participation (for internal reasons that had to do with the tensions around the end of my predecessor’s tenure).

7) Despite the changes in our levels of participation, our finances have held up fairly well. Actually, if you think of the unexpected additional \$300,000+ that came from the congregation for the Sanctuary renovation during the pandemic, the income has been quite incredible.

Still, Old First is running on a bare bones budget. We are tight always. That said, having been in a church with “way too much money,” there’s some honesty in having to watch one’s church budget. But it means, the “normal lifecycle” loss of one or two generous pledge units can be felt. And in this property / programmatic transition right now – as we transition from the Men’s Shelter to Old First House, we will be tight until we “plug the hole” in our income left by donations that used to come into the shelter and “space sharing” income for rentals and parking.

Still, let it be known, that this congregation of folks is per capita committed and generous, particularly in light of our not being a group of the deepest pocketed folks.

8) We have not gotten as far as we hoped on “marketing” the Sanctuary space for appropriate uses by outside groups. (We realized just the other day, that we have not even updated the website with the info about the redesigned space.) That hope was one of the reasons behind its more flexible redesign during renovation. And the added “space-sharing” income could help us replace some of the donations we used to receive toward the support of the shelter. Last year, we actually “plugged the Sanctuary Use Committee” into the place of the Community Engagement SLG. I think that’s right – bringing crowds into our Sanctuary space for other events is surely one of the most direct ways to get ourselves on people’s radar – helping people see and share that there is a distinctive congregation here. If they come to an event at Old First, it’s not too much of a reach for us to give them a sense of what goes on here and why they might come back.

We find ourselves in a funny moment here at Old First, with so much of our property hidden behind the construction fence. That will continue to be our situation for most of 2024, but sooner rather than later, the new building will begin to rise higher than the fence.

I heard from one member that their neighbor reported they thought Old First was closed, because they had seen the demolition / construction site. I suspect that’s a minority conclusion. Many more people seem to be aware of our new building project and are watching. I heard at lunch with the new rector at Christ Church the other day, “My people point to Old First and say, ‘see, they are putting their money where their mouth is.’” So, it’s basically good press, whether people actually hear of it in the media or notice as they pass

by. One might even say that a new 5 story building related to our church – named visibly Old First House – is a sign of life and a sense of the ministry happening here. The new building will be the most visible “advertisement” we can ever make, ironically, perhaps more of a statement than the facade of the Sanctuary (though the “Love First” sign between the entrance doors is awfully good branding. There is also talk of a Mural Arts artwork on the side of the residence that “slants” toward the church’s front doors that depicts the ministry of our church.

In the meantime, the rainbow doors and the glass doors aren’t a bad interim solution.

9.) Guests / visitors are starting to show up again. We have to get ourselves back into the hospitality mode where we have people who keep their eyes out for new faces and are not afraid to go up and introduce themselves. It is often suggested that people decide how they feel about a new church in the first few minutes after arriving. This suggests there might be some advantage in thinking of the greeting ministry as something that happens as people enter the lower narthex or the Sanctuary (even though I think we need to also make sure new folks aren’t alone in fellowship hour). It might become a sort of spiritual discipline for you – if you walk into the Sanctuary and see someone you do not know, go up to them and introduce yourself.

As I said at the beginning, it’s a weird time in church. Not just for Old First. It seems a whole range of congregations and denominations find themselves in a wait and see period. We’re just not quite sure how the lasting effects of the pandemic will shake out or how long it will take to know that.

10) So, as one might say I have tried my whole pastorate at Old First, I want to affirm the basic strength, goodness, love and faithfulness of this institution. It might sound crass, but we have a good product here. Like all church in the developed world, we need to figure out how to translate the tradition we have inherited so people outside our walls might understand how the faith they can receive could add to their lives. This is certainly not the first season that such an endeavor has been put upon the shoulders of the church.

But, of course, the immediate changes we are facing right now – fallout from the pandemic as we prepare to welcome a new building and community sharing our property – are significant. Let us count on the strong tradition we can build on – this is a congregation that has already shown its elasticity: we have survived and prospered in a number of different incarnations.

We must again be open to try new ways. To discover how the times God has given us change us, and how we need to change in order to serve successfully in these times. The Bible promises over and over that God is doing a new thing. Ours is a God, we believe, who works through history. Let's be open to God's movement, and try and keep up. Let me invoke an old hymn that might not be exactly in our UCC idiom: "Trust and obey, there is no other way." I know, we tend to talk about faithfulness more than obedience, but I did just preach on doing God's will over our own...

I am a little older, maybe more tired, but I continue to be honored to serve among and alongside you. This is my fifteenth annual meeting at Old First! Yikes! But it's a good place with so much to offer. Much more to offer, than, perhaps, we are giving?

But, wow, we've really traveled some distance together. I am hoping that, alongside all that we still need to get figured out and put into place, we can also enjoy the fruit of some of our accomplishments – as we watch Old First House rise outside the Sanctuary windows and get to enjoy the beauty of our renewed Sanctuary every Sunday.

Faithfully yours,

Michael