

Remember?

“State of Our Church” reflection, January 2, 2022

John Hershey, Moderator, Faith Mennonite Church

When I discovered we needed a fill-in speaker for today’s service, I put my name in the hat as a last resort. And here I am. I’m your last resort. I think you know I’m uncomfortable in the pulpit, so to speak, even if in this case, the pulpit is in my home. I didn’t volunteer because I felt I could share an insightful biblically-based message. As I’ve said a couple of times, even though I possess a Masters of Divinity degree from Princeton Theological Seminary, I am theologically naïve and will not presume to preach to a congregation full of trained ministers. But I thought I could use this time—the first service in 2022—to give you an update on the state of the church, as I see it from the moderator’s seat. I want you to know what our church is doing. I think you should know. And I think it’s part of my responsibility to keep you informed. But to do that, I need about 15-to-20 minutes of your time. I hope what follows makes sense to you and that you don’t “Zoom Out.”

When I agreed to speak, I didn’t worry too much about what to say. I did had a basic idea in mind. Then I had my first surprise. This past Wednesday, I discovered I needed to select the scriptures for the day, an idea that initially daunted me. Precisely what scripture goes along with a state-of-the-church

address given in lieu of a homily? I'm sure some of you might know (and maybe you can tell me afterward) but I sure don't!

My second surprise was my selections fell together pretty quickly. My mind went to Psalm 139 and to that part where God knows what I'm going to say before I say it. Or, as it was read today. "Even before a word is on my tongue, you, Lord, know it altogether." Since I wasn't exactly sure of what I was going to say, I figured if God already knew, maybe I'd get some hints...I'm not sure that happened but it seemed a good idea at the time. And the Psalm stands on its own regardless.

The second selection came to me pretty quickly, too. I considered my insecurity about preaching to a bunch of preachers. Despite three years of theological training and a double major in both English and Religion in college, my faith is pretty simple. If you add that popular verse on our Sunday bulletin cover, from Micah, a guy who prophesied in the Southern Kingdom maybe about 720 BCE—something about doing justice and loving kindness and walking humbly with your God—to the Colossians verses I read this morning about clothing "yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience" and forgiving "as the Lord forgave you," I basically have a creed. So I won't get more theological than that. What I want to do here is fulfill my rightful obligation to report to you: to rehash where we've been as a church, and as a people of God, beginning with

last May when we installed new officers, commissioners, committee members, deacons, returning ones—and me, your moderator.

As our officers attended to their assigned tasks in June, I knew I needed leadership advice. I began to rely on our trustees and moderator-elect: a group of wise advisors I could trust, and needed to trust. Beth Richardson and Darrell Martin and Glenn Geissinger and Donna Minter all have deep roots in the life of this church—as well as deep roots in the Mennonite tradition—and that's a valuable asset. They have done an enormous amount of work for us, essentially serving not only as trustees but as church elders. And Rev. Thom Bower has kept tabs on us and has provided sage advice. He's kept us on track and asked tough questions. But he's also been kind of a nuisance. And I say this in a loving way.

Because Thom is our Transitional Pastor, he points out the positives and negatives but then leaves the final decisions to us. I must confess there have been a few times this year when I've felt frustrated or unsure of what to do—and I just wanted someone else to make decisions for us. Like a pastor. But learning to decide is a part of our transitional work so we proceed and trust God to guide us.

And Thom? Thank you for the work you are doing with us. I don't think we say that enough. And I extend that thanks to our trustees and Donna Minter. I can't do the work of moderator without you. I have truly come to depend on your wisdom and appreciate the team-approach to leadership that we have

established, a relationship based both on frankness and trust. The work we are doing—clarifying and streamlining our administrative policies and procedures; thinking and planning for our future as a church; overseeing financial and payroll and insurance matters; and addressing physical plant needs—will ultimately put us, I think, in a better place when a new pastor arrives in our midst. In the meantime, we keep meeting monthly (and more often if necessary) and depend absolutely on Church Council to ask clarifying questions and to modify the recommendations we bring forward to them. And let me be clear. It is our Church Council that makes the final decisions.

As these tasks began to unfold, remember we conducted a series of church-wide summer conversations? Nine separate opportunities for church members to talk about our strengths and weaknesses and hopes for the future. I thank all of you who took the time to invest in those valuable and strategic conversations that lent momentum to our transitional process. That project took time—three months—but it was time worth spending.

What else happened? You may not remember that we bought a bunch of new electronic gadgets—that's as specific as I, hardly a technological expert, can get—when, in July, we returned to in-person worship in hybrid form? What an effort that was (and continues to be) by a committed group of people—our minister, the Worship Commission, the technology group, the deacons, musicians,

ushers, worship and music leaders—who have managed to create a dual platform worship experience that appears to seamlessly fall into place each week. Bottom line? It was, and is, no easy task and sometimes we let the behind-the-scenes work go unappreciated.

I feel compelled here to give special thanks to John Ratigan (mi tokayo). He continues to shoulder the technological load of producing and delivering the online portion of our worship services. Since we are meeting via Zoom today, I think this is his first Sunday off since mid-July. John? Thank you.

How many of you remember that in September, after years of faithful service, Aimee Weigel, our office coordinator, resigned to take a higher paying job? Her departure produced an administrative void that needed immediate filling. We've done that. Brianna Hendrickson is now doing that job on a part time basis. She is streamlining our administrative practices that the Trustees have envisioned and requested. That work also includes figuring a way to more easily edit and manage the new church website that Karla Hovde designed last year. We have plans to update the site in January. And, I'm no expert here, but I think that updating process will be easier since we bought Brianna a new office computer to replace the 15-year-old one Aimee had been using.

And remember how those summer conversations led into our fall retreat? A time when we started to identify common practices, shared values and core

beliefs? We continue to follow through on that essential activity and will pick it up in January.

Remember too, in September that we did not have a Christian Education program as we continued to balance the needs of many as we learned to return to live worship in different ways? The commission used that time to work with them to develop an Intergenerational Style for Conducting Worship and Christian Education, which we put into practice in October. Essentially, we participated in “communal activities as a community of faith” and began to understand how we are shaped by how we gather, pray, celebrate and sing together.

That experiment continued into Advent, culminating with the Christmas Pageant which was more than just a kids’ event. Even I put on a costume and paraded across the altar in an all-congregation-participation event.

Fall is also the time we started to say that two-word phrase out loud: The Split. Donna Minter has conducted three different talking circles on the hurts we’ve experienced from the event that divided our church all those years ago. The circles also served as vehicles to address various other congregational hurts and is helping with a healing process. She will continue that work in February.

Other projects also continue. We sorted and distributed all the new hymnals and returned and replaced the misprints. We struggled with how to deal with a homeless couple that literally camped in front of our door for a while this

summer—as well as with the drug-user who set up camp in our north alley. There was a church and grounds community clean-up event in November; Cynthia Miller is spearheading the downsizing of our library. Glenn Geissinger has rounded up a handful of people to build a new storage and meeting area in the Fellowship Hall. The COVID committee is a group of committed and knowledgeable people. I remain grateful to them for their thoughtful and valuable guidance.

And then? Then there's money.

Let's say this upfront: my worries about not meeting our budgetary goals were unfounded. We are very healthy financially. Church giving has been generous.

I can also tell you that we are moving away from placing the unrealistic expectation on the shoulders of one person to pay our bills, manage our finances and develop a budget and are now relying on a group of church members who effectively serve as a team to clarify policies, manage bank and investment accounts, deposit checks, pay bills, etc. Darrell Martin guides this project in a very patient and thoughtful way. And he has several willing helpers to share the load. Among them are Bob Mack, Gregg Richardson, Rachel Geissinger and Thaine Dirks. Many hands make light work. We will have a 2022 budget proposal to present to Church Council at our January meeting.

One project we haven't gotten to yet is a church-wide conversation about giving. And by this I name the charitable contributions we make in Faith's name to a variety of local, national and international organizations including those within the Mennonite Church. This is a conversation that started last winter when Shelly was moderator. As we looked at creating a 2021 budget, a question arose about why we give and to whom and what for.

I want to be clear here. This question wasn't posed in a critical way. There is absolutely nothing wrong with what and how we have been giving. That wasn't the issue. What we realized is that our church was giving by a rote process, effectively rubber-stamping an annual giving pattern without really discussing or understanding the whys and wherefores. So we agreed to have a church-wide conversation, or series of conversations, about whom we give to, the purpose of each organization, etc.—to try to gain a clearer understanding of the identities and missions of the organizations we support. That conversation seemed to be a natural part of our transitional process. Something we should talk about. It made sense.

But...with all the other work we have been doing, we haven't yet gotten to that "giving talk." The values and visioning work we are doing must precede that conversation since we expect that work will shed light on our giving and perhaps on our pastor search process. After all, it makes sense to me that our expressed

core values should be reflected in our giving. So we will have that conversation. It is a project that Donna Minter will lead this spring.

Because we planned to have that giving conversation in 2021, we left a lot of blanks in approving our 2021 giving budget. Instead of apportioning out specific donations to specific groups as we had done in previous budget years, we merely allocated two lump sums for annual giving: one for gifts to our larger Mennonite Church USA and one meant to be used at the behest of the Missions & Service Commission.

So when October 2021 arrived and we hadn't yet conducted our giving conversations, we realized we still wanted to make our annual gifts which we do each December—and we were delighted that we were in a position to do so!

Basically we had allocated \$19,000 in the 2021 budget for gifts to Mennonite Church USA-related groups. So, with the lack of new guidance, Church Council approved a basic “Mennonite Church Giving Package” that mirrored the 2020 budget. Those groups include: the Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, the Brethren Mennonite Council, the Central Plains Mennonite Conference, the Mennonite Central Committee, Mennonite Church USA, the Mennonite Disaster Service and the Mennonite Mission Network.

Then there's the Missions & Service Commission. All year long we told Missions & Service to be prepared “not to give this year” but rather to do other

work, to make local connections and to do local outreach, which they did. Then in October we reversed course on them. When we realized that we were financially stable and had the capacity to give, our Church Council commissioned Missions & Service to use its budget line of \$6,500. And oh, by the way, please get that work done and submit it to Council by the November meeting.

So thanks to that intrepid group—Melissa Hochstetler, Andi Kuenning and Roberta Malles—for doing that work. Accordingly, we as a church parceled out the \$6,500 budgeted for commission use in the 2021 budget to: Community Emergency Services; the St. Stephens Ending Homelessness Project; Soup for You; Agape Peace Center; Christian Peacemaker Teams; the Council on American-Islamic Relations, Minnesota; the Dismantling of the Doctrine of Discovery Coalition; the Fellowship of Reconciliation; the *Makoce Ikikcupi* (Dakota Land Recovery) Project; Minnesota Peacebuilding Leadership Institute; *Pueblos de Lucha y Esperanza* (Peoples of Struggle and Hope); the Seward-Longfellow Restorative Justice Project; the Central States Chapter of the Mennonite Central Committee; and Minnesota Interfaith Power & Light. That's great and generous work and thanks to Missions & Service for doing it so thoughtfully.

I'll also add here two notes about that commission's work. First, in case you don't know it, the *Pueblos* group, which addresses issues of immigrant rights, is now officed in our church basement. Second, Missions & Service is engaged in an

effort of trying to find more direct ways to involve our church and church members with the local Native American land restoration effort. You should be hearing more about that from Kristie Zabriskie via Missions & Service in the near future.

For your information, I have written a summary of all the giving I have just described. It includes names and addresses of the organizations, brief statements of purpose and amounts given. I plan to make that document available for our annual financial business meeting, held online after church on February 6, 2022. But if you'd like a copy, just ask. I think you'll find it instructive.

Before we leave the financial piece of this address, you should also know that the Migrant Fund exists as a separate entity from our budget. It remains healthy and stable and we are able to support the two families to whom we have made that commitment. I think that is truly an extraordinary effort.

Okay. One more thing. And it's important. I am absolutely delighted and pleased to report that Church Council has approved the formation of a new pastor search team. The Search Team is an independent group, an *ad hoc* committee of the Church Council to which it will report at least monthly; it is also expected to report at least monthly, in writing via the Midweek Update, and in person via worship announcements, to the congregation. I am grateful that Rachel Geissinger, Matthew Hendricks, Melissa Hochstetler, Andy Martinson and Minke

Sundseth have accepted that charge. Theirs is important work. You should be hearing from them soon.

The Search Team's work begins under the guidance and supervision of Rev. Susan Janzen, Conference Minister for Ministerial Leadership of the Central Plains Mennonite Conference, and then will proceed with identifying potential candidates. Once the initial work with Central Plains is completed, it is estimated that a search could last anywhere from 8-to-12 months.

I hope you hear this as good news. If you're like me, you're ready to be done with transition and wish to hire a sitting pastor. I have had to learn to be patient with our transitional chores but I believe we are doing valuable work together. I believe we will be a stronger church as a result of it. And I thank Rev. Thom Bower for leading us in that communal work.

Finally, I hope you understand that I'm doing my very best in a sincere effort to serve this church and its people. I absolutely value a host of relationships I have formed as a result of being a member of this church. I also respect you for your commitments to social justice and racial equality. You keep me humble. But I think I have found a way to best serve you which, from a guy who's told you the basics of his faith in a couple of sentences, just goes to show that a person with the faith life of a flea can find a way to serve. Thank you for that opportunity. Amen.

