

## **Senior Pastor's Report June 2010**

Not long after I arrived here last fall a smattering of friends stopped by on Sunday mornings to join us for worship. One of my friends commented later in the week about her experience.

When the notes of the postlude sounded we got up to leave and someone said, "Oh, we sit for the postlude here, to listen to our musician." She was somewhat dumbfounded, and though looking for a new community has decided this isn't it.

In the last year that has, for me, become a symbol of the dynamics of this church. Some of the people who remain seated for the postlude look askance at the people who do not. Some of the people who leave during the postlude look askance at the people who do not. Some people don't care one way or the other. I like to think God doesn't care either. Sit, stand, do back flips it really doesn't matter. What matters is that there are judgments passed when people think differently than we do. And it is an example that has many counterparts. And it's time for us to take a look at that.

There are challenges before us. We all know that. There are challenges among us and those are harder to face.

Clergy are a lot like doctors, some people swear by us and some people swear at us. That's been true forever. Some people thought John Zehring was great, others did not. Some thought Sam Fogle was great, others did not. Some thought John Vincze was great, others did not.

The divisions in the congregation were here before I arrived. It is my hope that by working together they will be diminished if not healed by the time I leave.

We are divided over our history. I was here just 11 days when I was part of a conversation that made that abundantly clear. Just recently I had a conversation with a congregant who stated with deep sadness, that long term friendships were forever changed by being on opposite sides of issues related to John Vincze's misconduct. You may not want to hear this, but you are still divided over that history.

It creates divisions in the community even today. The leadership of that time did the very best they knew how to do in the very worst of circumstances. They had access to knowledge that most of the congregation did not. And it created a division between those who knew and those who did not. And that is the root of residual mistrust in church leadership to this day. Some of those leaders still feel the wounds of that time; some have left never to return. The damage is not a thing of the past. And we haven't even touched on the betrayals of Steve Yale and Ken Wenzel.

There is division about the outcome of John Vincze's ministry, some think it was just and some think it was not. There is division about his overall ministry; for some he brought help and comfort to those in the midst of loss, he brought vitality to the community; some think he was insincere and conceited. And yes, I have had all these conversations.

You will never agree. And agreeing is not the goal. Let me repeat agreeing is not the goal. What is needed is a common narrative about history that honors everyone's truth. As Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 12: 26, "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it, if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it".

If you have been married for more than five minutes you know that you could pick a fight with your partner over an issue of the past and do it in a heart beat. Most couples fight just one fight over and over throughout their lives. There comes a point when you decide not to fight that fight because of compassion for your partner and because you value the relationship more than you value being right.

The same is true here in the church. Until we can honor everyone's truth and make a decision to not fight the fight, not judge those who think differently than we do because we value the future, the ministry, the community and the call of Christ in our lives more than we value having the winning history this church will not move forward.

In the world, history is written by the winners. In the church of Jesus Christ history is written by the gathered body out of a shared vision for the future that is centered in community and organized for mission.

It is time for us to talk to each other directly and honestly, speaking the truth in love. It is time for us to listen to each other honestly and openly, seeking the truth in love. There is no other way. The time has come for this congregation to stop triangulating, whispering about others and criticizing from the sidelines. It is time for us to embrace our gospel tradition as recorded in Matthew 18. "If another member of the church sins against you; go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word maybe confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church." Direct communication about issues of concern is the only way to resolve differences and work together.

The time has come for us to pray together about the future of this congregation. The time has come for us to recognize that the way we have always done things is not the way to move into the future.

Interim time is challenging and there is bad news and good news. The bad news is if you happen to like me, I'm only here for a little while. The good news is if you happen not to like me, I'm only here for a little while.

I was asked here by the Board of Deacons help the church get ready for new leadership. They outlined what needed to be done quite accurately. In the year I have been here I have seen and experienced just about everything they identified as work that was ours to do during this time.

When I arrived last fall some noted an inconsistency in the bylaws; in one place it says the deacons hire the interim. In another place it says the congregation votes. Some of the congregation was upset that the opportunity to vote as a body was not given. You will have that opportunity when my contract comes up for renewal in September.

I became aware this week of a suggestion that I resign of my own accord in order to avoid the conflict of letting me go because there are some who like me and some who don't. Let me be very clear, I have no intention of resigning. I was asked here to do a job and I have every intention of continuing to do it until the gathered body says differently.

Is there some disagreement about how things are going? Yes. Is there angst about what may happen in the next few months? Yes. Is there concern about money and how we will face our budget shortfall? And yes, there is division about history.

The time has come for us to commit to constructing a common narrative about the painful history of the last 15 years and to heal relationships that are strained to this day. The time has come for us to set aside our personal agendas and seek God's leading for the future. The time has come for us to trust that God is at work in our midst calling us beyond these moments to a renewed mission

I believe we can do this work together and I am committed to seeing it through with you. Let's work together.