

Pastor's Annual Report 2019-2020

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"The Festivals of Light"

It is a rare moment that a pastor would be writing an annual report in a 10 month long 'lockdown', in Advent, in the midst of a congregational conflict such as ours has experienced.

Yet, I begin my report by acknowledging that we are in the midst of a festival of light! The rebirth of the life generating and life-sustaining sun at the darkest moments of the season is celebrated this month in the upcoming winter solstice. The oil of an ancient Temple lamp burning beyond its limit is remembered in the celebration of Hanukkah this month. Seven beautiful principles arising from the heart of the African continent guide the lights of Kwanzaa. And our own Christmas is all about candles, a shining star in the dark sky guiding shepherds and royals, and the light of Jesus illuminating the way. Despite the darkness of that which surrounds us, Sanctuary UCC is - as well - a shining light!

The Leadership Circle and Discernment Team have provided a thorough picture of the many ministries and mission successes that Sanctuary has led over the last 18 months; including the fantastic opportunities to which we have arisen in the midst of the pandemic. These were presented in a [detailed report](#) given as part of the Annual Visioning process on October 25. When I see what we have accomplished as a brand new church, paving a brand new way of being Sanctuary - while pivoting in response to Covid-19 - I could not be more proud of the work that we have done and the impact that we have had in the City of Medford. And I thank God for all of you as you have helped to make it all happen.

Yet, there is darkness within our congregation that I believe reflects a disagreement about Sanctuary's vision, mission, and purpose. Until that conflict is brought into the light and released - we will not be all that God needs for us to be. This disagreement coupled with the unknowing of the pandemic is the reason the Discernment Team recommended a slow and prayerful process of listening to the will of God for our congregation through this spring. If we are not in agreement about what God has called us to be, if we cannot find inspiration and purpose in a shared understanding of why we do what we do - we will not succeed.

So I will not review our ministries or defend the vision and mission that we cast when we left the building to follow Jesus into the street. It will be the congregation's job over the next little while to determine if and how that vision will get translated, post-pandemic.

But, as your pastor and spiritual leader - I will speak into the light of this season - in truth and love – the place from whence this congregational darkness arises. I seek in this report to bring into the light of Christ - where we are as a congregation, and what needs to happen for us to find God's Way for our church.

For the past three years we have been in conflict about our vision, our ministry model, and our leadership. Both my leadership and that of the Leadership Circle have been called into question by some members of the congregation. In my case, my conduct and stewardship of the congregation's resources have been challenged as inappropriate or harmful. We have formally and deliberately sought to resolve and reconcile that conflict in three separate efforts: first, internally with a staff person whose skill set included conflict resolution; next, through a Situational Support intervention via our denomination's Committee on Ministerial Standing; and then, with the guidance of an outside consultant to hold Restorative Circles with the entire congregation. Each of

these efforts was costly in time as well as emotional, physical, and financial capital for all who were involved. But each of these process were left unfinished by the departure of those who were aggrieved.

In all of these interventions, I heard the grievances leveled. I have done my own spiritual work to take responsibility for my part in the grievances. I made direct amends to those who expressed grievances or stated that they experienced hurt or harm. While these processes were left incomplete, and there has been no reconciliation - I amended my behaviors to the best of my ability. I turned my attention to the call that God has placed on my heart to lead this congregation and serve our community in the hopes that we might find common ground, and even reconciliation, in the work of and in the mission and vision of Sanctuary. That has not been the case. Those who expressed grievance are mostly disengaged from our ministries; and the resentments and tension have increased. Our work, our capacity to be Sanctuary, and our leadership team and faith community has been further harmed by the unresolved and somewhat unremitting conflict.

So in the interest of ensuring that my amends is received by all - I beg your attention as I offer these amends again, to each of you and to the congregation as a whole.

Please know that I regret any harm caused by any of my actions; by my strong personality and leadership style; by my preference to act prophetically over pastorally; by any shortsightedness that may have arisen from my passion for our mission; by moments of impatience when I have been frustrated; by tension you experienced when I expressed my stress rather than a non-anxious presence; and by any lack of safety you experienced from my words, the power of my voice, or any written or verbal tone I have used that triggered you.

I love you. I love our church. I love our vision and the opportunity you have given me to lead this amazing little powerhouse of a purpose. I can only say that while the impact of my very being as a pastor and spiritual leader may have hurt you individually, my intentions were only to do the most with and the best for our church's purpose and my call to lead us in Jesus' way. Nonetheless, I am deeply sorry - particularly to those of you have become disappointed in me and the way I have led us on this journey. I ask that if there is anything else I can do to amend the situation or if there is anything else that you would like me to know - I will make myself available in a supported context to hear your grievance and seek to meet you in your need.

While some members of our congregation believe that it is now time to end the Sanctuary experiment; and some members of our congregation believe that it is now time for a change in pastoral leadership - I am certain that neither of those outcomes is what God wants from Sanctuary. God wants this beautiful thing to be and God needs each of us to do our own spiritual work to move through this conflict. We cannot resolve conflict if all the parties are not invested in that end. I am confident that God would have us seek either reconciliation or an alternative resolution such as separation so that those who remain might be released to be Sanctuary and do Jesus' work in Medford.

I am more inspired in this pandemic, by the model of ministry into which we have been led **than ever**. Our outward facing, open and affirming mission is exactly what the community needs. You sent a big bold mission of love and justice, led by a big bold pastor - into the world in 2014 to change things. And we are and have been changing things in Medford ever since. We literally feed thousands of people every month. Our worship and faith formation efforts are transforming hundreds every month. The chaplaincy and moral leadership you offer through your pastor is far reaching and deeply felt by many non-members and strangers. And hundreds of people (who do not come to worship on Sunday) are able to love and serve their neighbors through everything

from our micro pantry mission, to rallies for anti racism, to the Mayor's Big Table, and more. Our impact is wide and faithful, because you serve, because you send Sanctuary into the streets, and you kept our staff working and giving through it all. Ray is feeding people and kindness every week. Charmaine is efficiently advising and managing money for community groups like Mobilize Medford and Safe Medford. And, Bailey is quietly and creatively marketing and sharing our theology and values through social media, while she insures our safety on zoom.

The sustainability goals we set in 2014 have not been met. They were unrealistic when we fantasized about the future back then, but more importantly, because we have been in conflict for three years we have not made the progress we had hoped for or been able to be Sanctuary in all the ways that we had envisioned. Yet, our model of ministry is aligned with everything the experts say about how churches should engage seekers today; especially in New England - the least religious region of the country. There is much affirmation of what and how we are doing faith in the wisdom of the experts.

We have attracted many people because of our values, our theology, our creative worship and formation, our warmth, service and justice-oriented presence. But they join us, sign-up to serve, find unhealthy communication patterns and a divided faith community and decide not to stay because - who wants that in their lives?

We raised 12,000 dollars last year for our food mission and inspired the installation of nine new micro pantries in Medford without even breaking a sweat. But we have not been able to attend to our church's stewardship because we have been fighting about our vision and purpose and leadership for three years.

We have gone out to meet people where they are, teaching, serving, and sharing Jesus' message of love of God and neighbor with unique, intimate worship; art, film, study; and in-the-street-action - but most of us are exhausted by the struggle and disinclined to invite anyone to join us for fear that they will suffer the same experience as the others who found their way to Sanctuary.

Beloved - this is it. We cannot grow, invite people to become a part of us, ask people to support our mission, vision, and financial health until we resolve this conflict.

I believe, with God's help - that we can. We can be all that we envisioned Sanctuary to be when we cast this experiment out of the building into the storefront. We can be more than we envisioned, but first we must be freed from the division and divide that damages our chance to be all that God needs for us to be. Let us all invest in that outcome. Let us love and see each other with compassion. Let us be Sanctuary. Let us pray:

In the darkness of this Winter during these terror-filled and challenging times;
may we all find the light in darkness, faith amidst struggle,
rebirth following change and loss,
and virtue and devotion in the face of great challenge.

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May our congregation find light in the dark  
in this beautiful Season of Light  
and may the light of Love guide our way.