

## Minister's Report, December 2021

### **REFLECTIONS ON FALL 2021:**

How is it already December? I still have distinct memories of hoping that 2021 would be the year that we not just Northwoods, but Northwoods too) might begin to imagine a "new normal" together. Buoyed by the return of an adult to the White House, things were looking up on the nation's moral compass.

In reality, it's been a mixed bag. I shared an article from *The Atlantic* with Northwoods staff in a recent meeting, which I have excerpted at the end of this report, that sums up a lot of what I am feeling: "Last year was hard, but at least the answers were straightforward." There are ways that 2021 has been even harder than 2020, not just withing church communities, but in the world as a whole. We've seen this struggle playing out in our own congregation, although I am extremely grateful for the more-or-less unified position of church leadership on questions of reopening, masking, vaccination wisdom, seriousness of the pandemic, etc. Many of my colleagues are burnt to a crisp; nationally, over 1/3 of pastors have seriously considered leaving the ministry. You may be wondering if I have found myself among that company. I have not.

While I take some credit for my continued sense of joy in this strange and challenging vocation, some credit is due to you as well. You have allowed me to rest when I've needed it, including a six-week mini-sabbatical this summer, and you have stepped up as leaders to figure out some of the biggest challenges we have faced, from the logistics of reopening safely to the technical labyrinth that is our hybrid worship setup. You have reached out, you have lifted each other up, you have shared the burden of a hard season of ministry with me. We have done good work together.

And yet, this is still a mixed bag. We have added members during our time online, but we have also seen members drift away over the same period. We eagerly anticipated a return to in-person worship and religious education, but on Sundays, our building holds less people than it could, even with our reduced capacity. Last year at the holidays, your staff and I came up with multiple creative ways to engage the congregation, and many cheerfully stepped up to the plat and participated; this year, we have returned to many of the traditions we grieved missing last year, but enthusiasm has waned as the complexity of life and decision-making have demanded more and more of everyone's time and energy. I suspect that vaccines, boosters, reopenings, and lifted restrictions have made every aspect of our lives more complex and ambiguous, just as they have done here at Northwoods.

Everything feels harder right now, even making small commitments. The trauma of disruption is part of us now, and part of our institutions. But that is certainly not the only part of the story. There is also a great narrative of resilience buried withing this pandemic chapter of our lives as well. For many in this community, their connection to Northwoods is part of that resilience story, and I hope it will be for years to come.

We are poised on the cusp of a major transition here at Northwoods, leaving transitional ministry and preparing to call a settled minister for the first time since 2008! This is the perfect opportunity to encourage participation and engagement from the many folks at Northwoods who may be newer, may be struggling to find their place, may be struggling to connect through technology. A successful call process is one in which ownership of the congregation grows, not just among those leading the work on the board and search team, but in a broad swath of its members. I hope that those leading the search process will remember that building ownership and enthusiasm for Northwoods' future are the seeds you can plant now for Northwoods' next settled ministry to thrive.

### **ACTION ITEMS:**

- Request: Allow Rev. Sarah to carry over 10 days of professional leave into 2022 from 2021 (If Jamie has any leave to carry over, allow her to carry it over as well.)
- Request: Replace Canon office printer/copier/scanner
  - A business-class 3-in-1 laser printer would be better suited for our print load
  - This type of printer is more user-friendly, takes up less space, and does not require a service contract
  - Estimated cost would be \$800 or less for replacement printer

### ***COMING UP: Rev. Sarah's Spring Priorities***

**Membership push/ new member integration plans:** The last 2-3 Pathways classes have had no takers. We had added 15 new members since going online, but none in the last 6 months. I'm not sure why this is, other than the transition to hybrid worship has people in wait and see mode. (It is also not uncommon for folks to enter this mode in advance on a ministerial search, waiting to see where the chips land before deciding to commit.) This January, I'm going to sit down with some Membership team folks to formulate a plan to directly reach out to visitors who might be ready to consider membership as well as do some checking in with members who've joined us since the start of 2020.

**Lay ministry and pastoral care infrastructure:** One thing that the last (nearly) two years of pandemic church has taught me is the value and fragility of informal connections, and nowhere is this more apparent than in how our church approached lay ministry and pastoral care. I am lucky to have a lay leader helping coordinate in both of these areas, but other than that, there is little formal structure being utilized. Most of this ministry is informal, which works—until it doesn't. Who are we missing? How can we help more people feel connected to this ministry and cared for by it? These are the kinds of questions I think we need to be asking ourselves. I also think this area of ministry would benefit from a regular gathering, to check in with some of the key folks who do the good work of helping me stay up to date with their various groups and friend connections and have more allies in the work of connection, which will continue to be crucial as we all adjust to our "new normal" that is anything but.

**Spiritual Practice spring series:** Starting in January, I'll be leading a nine-Sunday series (filling in between planned "special" services) on the general theme of "spirit in practice." The idea came from thinking about how we could best serve Northwoods' folks as we find our footing and paths to reconnecting as a spiritual community is new and different ways. One way we can do this is encouraging spiritual growth in our members by inviting them to deepen or become more intentional about spiritual practices and the many ways we connect to the spirit and bring our Unitarian Universalism into our daily lives.

We'll be changing how we approach our use of congregant reflections during this series as well. Rather than having 2-3 services this spring that are anchored solely by several reflection speakers, we will (hopefully) have a congregant reflections during each of these services, sharing a spiritual practice that is meaningful to them and inviting the members to try it out for the coming week, with one or more methods for feedback and further conversation. Still exploring how that will work (Facebook group or page? Google Jamboard? Menti worldcloud? Discussion following the next Sunday's service in a breakout room and/or in person? Something entirely different? Time will tell...)

Part of exploring what church looks like now is reimagining what adult faith development looks like. I was originally going to offer a spiritual practice group or class, but after discussion with the Worship Arts team, this low-stakes, smaller engagement that has the possibility of reaching more people seems like an exciting possibility. In keeping with my church year theme of "less prep, more presence," this seems to fit the bill. I might wind up offering a more formal ongoing group for those who'd like to dig into their practice in that way, or one-time learning opportunities of a more traditional nature, but these weekly challenges will be a central feature of the series this spring.

## **My Church Doesn't Know What to Do Anymore (excerpts)**

*Last year was hard, but at least the answers were straightforward.*

By Elizabeth Felicetti, rector of St. David's Episcopal Church in Richmond, Va.

Originally published by The Atlantic, Oct. 2021

Leading a church is harder now, in 2021, than it was in 2020, during the worst of the coronavirus pandemic. Last year, state and diocesan mandates meant I could throw up my hands and respond, "Sorry, not up to me." And anyway, the answer was, for the most part, a straightforward "no"—no, we can't gather for services, and no, we can't sing. Now it *is* up to me, the rector of St. David's Episcopal Church in Richmond, Virginia, and I am struggling to find a way forward. . .

Like so many other communities, we first closed to in-person worship in mid-March 2020. . . . During the closures, I told everyone we were still open, just in a different way. We live-streamed on Sundays. We set up times when people could come pick up factory-sealed sacraments, without ever having to get out of their car. We put on drive-through events for kids. We provided Sunday-school videos. . . .

I don't know how to make this work. After a year of trying to assure people that we were still the church even when we weren't in the same room, I don't know how to convince them now of the importance of gathering in person. I know that if they are watching from home, fancier churches all over the country offer much slicker streamed services than our suburban church with its secondhand camera and duct-taped tripod. And no matter what we do, it isn't going to work for someone. A few families have started attending larger churches with more—or less—restrictive masking policies. I also know that kids' sports, held outdoors, have fewer restrictions, and that returning to a church habit after 20 months away gets harder with each passing Sunday.

In 2020, no one could come to church. Now some of my parishioners are choosing not to. I can see on social media that many are at restaurants or parties, but I don't see them in person on Sunday mornings. The pandemic has accelerated trends I've heard about at church conferences since I was first ordained: Sunday attendance will shrink, so churches need to focus on the people outside our walls. Just before the pandemic began, a study published by Faith Communities Today, a multifaith research organization, found a 7 percent median decline in religious attendance across the country. Although membership in our church rose until 2020, attendance had declined since 2014. Our annual reports didn't ask for last year's attendance figures, but this year, we're averaging 66 people on the Sundays we've been open. Before we shut down in 2020, our average Sunday attendance was 139. . . .

Does this mean 2022 will be even harder than 2020 and 2021? Our donation pledges were down last year. I'm wincing in anticipation of this year's fundraising campaign. In 2020, we had a Paycheck Protection Program loan that helped us with payroll. But after last year's campaign, I had to cut my hours. We don't have an endowment.

Of course, this is about more than the finances of our parish: These people who are not coming to church aren't clients or subscribers or colleagues. They are my parishioners. I have held their hands as they cried after telling me secrets or while grieving—but not lately, because we cannot touch. I have pressed home-baked bread into their hands—but not lately, because we use factory-sealed sacraments. I have hugged their children and drenched adults and kids with waters of baptism—but the last time I baptized someone was in January 2020. . . .

St. David's, the church I have served for 10 years, is a genuinely diverse congregation in terms of belief, socioeconomic class, and political views. We've weathered the controversy over gay marriage and the political divisions wrought by the 2016 election, but I worry that we won't be able to make it through the rest of the pandemic with our differing risk tolerances and approaches to masks. I can't find a middle way in these times.