

Pastor's Report

December 15, 2020

Can anyone remember January 2020 at this point?

We began this long, chaotic, difficult, and yet hopeful year with a focus on growing, inviting, and deepening relationships. These values set the tone for our first ever annual pledged giving campaign in February where nearly 40 families made a commitment to Spirit in the Hills and the work God is doing in and through our congregation, inspired by the Spirit to center people in Christ and share God's love in the world.

In March, it became clear that the world had turned, the coronavirus pandemic meant all of us across this planet had to make significant changes in our life for the sake of honoring and promoting the life of one another. Our congregation came to the conclusion at a council meeting on March 12 that one of the best ways we could love our neighbors was to forego large, in-person gatherings, including worship. Our Lenten season of wilderness stretched out into Easter and beyond as we at times cried out for a return to Egypt and the way things were, and at other times wanted to skip 40 years ahead to the time when we would enter God's promised place for us.

And yet, our waiting continued, and in many ways continues still. What was true then is just as true now, God chooses to dwell amongst God's people along the way. In the very midst of the wilderness, when God's people feel like they are not at home, God makes God's own home right there among them.

It is also true that your generosity and support of our congregation helped us continue to go about doing God's work with our hands, moving quickly to partner with Interfaith Ambassadors of Lake Travis in feeding more than 80 families in the Hudson Bend area when Mobile Loaves and Fishes and Central Texas Food Bank had to stop delivering to the area in order to meet emergency needs elsewhere.

In June, you moved our congregation from 3001 R O Drive to 2106 Bee Creek Road. With new pandemic protocols to keep one another healthy and so many volunteers your hard work helped us say farewell to a space where we had met for nearly a decade and move to this new space where God will surely plant us and help us grow in faith and in love for God and neighbor for many years to come. With a drive-in worship service we said farewell to a space where we encountered God, where many were baptized (including my own two kids) and shared in Holy Communion, where tears were shed as we mourned in hope and hugs were offered alongside the surpassing peace of Christ.

Throughout this year we have uncovered new ways to connect to our faith and to one another. I continue to hear from some members who say that this is the most connected to Spirit in the Hills they have ever felt, we've had dozens of first-time visitors online for worship and a handful of folks who have expressed interest in making a deeper commitment to Spirit in the Hills who have yet to worship with us in-person. Your phone calls and notes of support to one another have shared God's love in ways more meaningful than words can express. Two beloved children of God were welcomed into the body of Christ in the waters of baptism. Communion and care packages were delivered to congregation members, ELCA Good Gifts purchased, and Bible Study, Worship, Women's Share & Care, Book Studies, and more all happened in new formats with the same presence of Christ, neighborly love, and bold welcome.

As the year ends, I am aware of the ways we have grown, the invitations we have offered (and received), and the relationships with God and one another that were deepened.

We grew in ways we connect and care for one another. We learned new technology, new vocabulary words like "social distancing," more trust was required and offered as we walked alongside one another in uncharted territory.

We invited new people to connect in new ways as we stretched our evangelical muscles and shared God's Word online, by phone, in prayer.

We deepened relationships with God. So many are continuing to spend 7 minutes in prayer at 7 o'clock (AM and/or PM) each day, a spiritual practice we invited one another into back in March so that you know you are praying alongside your

siblings in Christ. We heard and saw and read God's Word in ways familiar and new. We had opportunities to worship alongside other congregations on Sundays and all throughout the week thanks to the gifts of technology.

We deepened relationships with our neighbors and with one another. I remember stories in April and May of how some of you who took me up on the challenge to meet the neighbors who live closest to you (which I offered up during our How to be a Neighbor series in November 2019) were so glad you could check back in with them and offer support to one another. I heard stories of all of you who went out and safely met your neighbors for the first time, offering concrete ways to love and serve them in the midst of all of this. And I still get emails, texts, and phone calls almost weekly from members who are so grateful to have been receiving calls from a church member on a regular basis to connect and listen and share.

In early December, my three-year-old daughter Lily said, "Let me tell you my plan for Christmas Eve."

"Please do! I'd love to hear it." I replied.

"Let's get together at the new church and sing all the Christmas songs we sang at the old church." Lily spouted off.

"I love that plan. But I think we're going to have to ask people to stay in their cars." I said.

"That's not my plan! Why?!?" She asked and the emotions began to rise.

"I know its not. It wasn't my plan either. But there are more people getting sick and right now, as sad as it is, things are getting worse instead of better, so we have to be extra careful. This is one way we can do that. One way we can love each other and keep everyone safe. And we'll still be together and sing," I shared.

"And Omi and Grandad and Emily and her parents and Lucas and Audrey and all our church friends will be there!!!!!!!!!" Lily screamed in excitement.

"Exactly," I affirmed.

"And Jesus will be there, too." The wise little one answered.

Christmas Eve drive-in worship is not what we had planned, but it is how we'll gather and be together, and remember we aren't alone, and see how God comes into the dark of night, the sorrow of pandemic, the valley of grief, and is born in the midst of the chaos, outdoors, under the stars, amid the pain of labor, to bring love abundant from which nothing can separate us, and life everlasting for you, for us, for all.

So don't worry, because where you are in worship, by Spirit and Truth, Jesus will be there, too!

Amid the incredible amounts of grief, loneliness, anger, anxiety, and trouble of this year, it continues to be a joy to serve among you as pastor. Your faith in God's promise of new and abundant life for all and your hope in God's steadfast, unfailing love radiate the good news of God's kingdom come near as you live together as the body of Christ given for the sake of the world God so loves.

Grace and peace and mercy and joy and love from God are yours through Jesus Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit,

Pastor Drew

Some numbers from 2020:

- 2 baptisms
 - Maren Youngdahl, Kinsley Harberts
- 2 new households as members – comprising 5 people
 - Hortons, Harberts
- 9 households who were already members becoming more deeply engaged in the life of the congregation – taking on leadership roles and responsibilities beyond Sunday mornings
- 6 visits to members in the hospital, 46 visits to homes (mostly distanced visits)
- 3 one-on-one conversations with key community leaders
- 52 online worship services since March 15th
- 7,000 hours on Zoom *****This one is made up ☺

Pastoral Goal Evaluation:

Here are my reflections on the goals I had for my ministry with Spirit in the Hills this year.

Leading the congregation through a 5-year visioning process

In 2019 we laid much of the groundwork for beginning this effort, and it was in fact one of the goals that our council came up with for our Annual Roadmap and one we are committed to engaging in, although we have yet to truly begin the process. I worked with Steve Rohn to better define what the process might look like at Spirit in the Hills and offered several resources and potential partners and guides for the process, though together with council we decided not to take any big steps forward because of the immense amount of change and anxiety brought on by this year.

I have had several conversations with members who might serve on a steering committee for this process and hope to move us forward, devoting at least 4 hours per week to getting this effort rolling at the beginning of the year.

Successfully celebrate our ministry at 3001 R O Drive and our move to 2106 Bee Creek Road.

Despite several changes in plans and having to gather in very different ways or not at all, I do feel like we were able to find creative ways to celebrate the things God had done in, among, and through us as we gathered and were sent from 3001 R O Drive. We had a drive-in worship service as well as an online service of blessing and leavetaking as we had packed everything up and begun to move.

Many members of the congregation helped out with the moving effort.

We were able to share video updates along the way and invite members of the congregation to come see our new space and pray for what God will do in, among, and through Spirit in the Hills in this new location in a way that was safe and meaningful.

Increase average worship attendance to 85

Our average worship attendance through the beginning of March was trending upward, but this is a metric that does not make sense and is not of much use while we are worshiping online as many people choose to engage with worship differently or at different times. By some of the measures the ELCA Churchwide office is using to estimate “worship attendance” online, we have been averaging 200+ people. What is helpful to know is that people across the city, country, and world have engaged in worship with us throughout the year, some more than others, and there are now three households asking how they can become more involved with Spirit in the Hills who have never had a chance to worship with us in person.

Two thirds of the congregation tries a new spiritual practice (daily, weekly, or monthly)

Perhaps out of necessity, I think we all engaged in several new spiritual practices this year. I know many members of the congregation tried for a time and some still are spending 7 minutes in prayer at 7 o'clock each day, knowing that others from the church are praying along with them. Many of us took on the habit of worshipping together online, sharing gratitude, adding prayer requests more regularly, or leading worship in new ways.

The pandemic moved us out of our comfort zone, but also created opportunities to use resources shared by the congregation and by others to engage our faith and spirituality in new ways.

We spend at least as much time living our faith out in the community as we do engaging in our ministries on site

Another goal spurred on toward success by us needing to pause on-site ministry activities. While there were times throughout the year that some ministry activities were paused, stopped, or cancelled because we could not gather on-site, there were many more that were adapted to be done at home or among neighbors. We collaborated with other local congregations to serve neighbors through Lake Travis One. We have been feeding hungry people locally through Helping Hand and Interfaith Ambassadors of Lake Travis. Members have been caring for neighbors in new ways and being present in community conversations throughout the year.

Other Year End Reflections

Staff

- We are celebrating the end of over a decade of service by Sharon French as our volunteer Choir Director. January will be an occasion to continue to celebrate as well as have some conversations to help us determine the path forward in terms of our choir and what we might be looking for in a choir director.
 - One of the big unfinished things of this year is celebrating Sharon and the incredible ministry she cultivated as choir director. I hope to find a way to celebrate her and what God has done through her at Spirit in the Hills early in January as we're now at a year since she announced her retirement.
- We continue to give thanks for the ways that Lynette Lawson and Jacquie Tom have share their gifts as members of our staff. This was a difficult year as we had to transition to being a staff that works remotely, had several tasks fall away and at times struggle with not feeling useful while we had to learn a lot of new ways of engaging our ministry and work. Lynette adapted quickly and maintained an openness to learning even amid some frustrations and difficulty. Jacquie had a more difficult time finding a way to fit in amid many changes. They are both passionate about helping us live into our mission and share God's love as we seek to involve all the members of Spirit in the Hills in this mission and ministry. We have begun editing and rewriting job descriptions as part of our annual evaluation process since there have been so many changes this year, and because the job descriptions have not been updated since either of them were hired (Jacquie 2008, Lynette 2017).

Organizational Structure

- We were not able to give much attention and energy toward this throughout the year, and I think many of our Ministry Teams struggled to adapt amid the changes brought on by the pandemic. We will need to spend more time and care with these groups, helping spark their imagination of new ways to do ministry, and reminding them that the work of the church continues.
- Two bright spots that have come up with regard to organizational structure and growing vitality are the Mental Health Ministry Team and the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Ministry Team. Unlike our other ministry teams, these were not dreamt up on paper in 2016 and then tried to put into place, but rather sprang up organically,

growing out of conversations, spiritual growth activities, listening to the needs of our neighbors and larger community, and discerning what our faithful response as followers of Christ might look like and how we might love God and love neighbor in light of the world around us.

- New leaders came into place, new gifts were identified and shared, the passion and energy are palpable and people cannot wait to gather again and to get to work in these areas.
- I wonder how these teams might serve as a blueprint for filling out our organizational structure and what we might learn from them and from our other ministry teams operating at high levels of vitality that can inform how we fill out our structure and form processes, relationships, and systems that are life-giving, adaptive, and faithful.

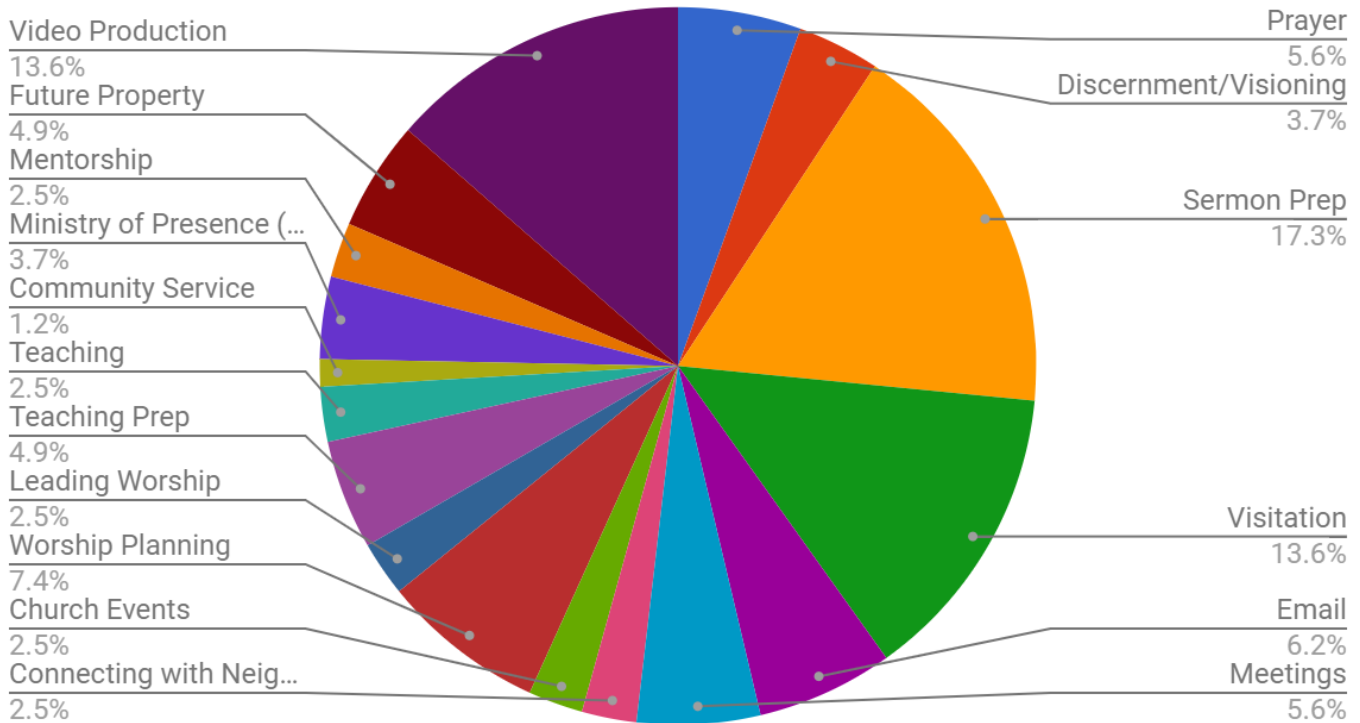
Some new things that took place this year and seem to be giving life to the congregation and inspired by the Holy Spirit:

- Online Book Group (new in 2019, greatly expanded in 2020)
 - We read *Dear Church* by Lenny Duncan and were engaged in deep and challenging conversation on what it means to love our neighbor, especially with regard to racial justice and the inclusion of marginalized people
 - Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Ministry
 - A group from the book study was not finished and wants to keep plumbing the depths of what it really means to be a community where **ALL** are welcome and that really means all, so they have kept meeting and dreaming up ways our congregation can live out the hospitality of Jesus.
 - Opportunities to worship in small group settings with adequate time for sharing and reflection moved online but were no less meaningful than before
 - More opportunities to engage in the life of the congregation using technology that enabled new people to participate
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I like to share how my time is generally allocated throughout the year with all of you. This is important because it helps you see where your resources are at work, gives you a glimpse of some of what takes place day to day and week to week, and helps all of us take a look at how my time and the congregation's resources are being prioritized, allowing us to check if this is in line with our goals and expectations.

This chart is given for your information based on the average of three weeks (one in late March, one in August, and one in October). Time spent in meetings that relate to one of the ministry area categories is included as an average in that category (i.e. meeting with the Treasurer would be included in the Finance category). Continuing Education time was also allocated into the ministry area it fit in.

Activity Hours as % of Total Hours Worked per week (81hr total)



Here are some descriptions of the categories you see:

Worship Preparation includes sermon preparation, getting ready for the week ahead, and also some long-range worship and sermon planning and preparation (like planning the How To Be A Neighbor series). While **Worship** refers to Sunday morning worship and any other worship activities that might have occurred during that week (LT Independent Living, Lenten Wednesdays, etc.). Both of these together account for my time spent on worship and music.

Prayer is time spent praying for our ministry and its members. Much of this is done on my own while some includes praying with groups and with members of our prayer chain.

Teaching Preparation is any planning and preparation done for a weekly teaching activity or long-range planning for an intensive series, while **Teaching** is the actual time spent teaching in a week. Much of this teaching takes place at Adult Sunday School and Thursday Bible Study with the rest being Confirmation, Baptism prep, First Communion, or any additional teaching like the Online Book Group. These two, along with prayer and some aspects of pastoral care and communication account for my time spent on Spiritual Growth.

Pastoral Care is any and all activities of caring for the spiritual needs and tending the personal spiritual growth and wellness of members of Spirit in the Hills. This includes hospital and home visits, conversations had during office hours, phone calls, letters, emails, and text messages related to the ministry of pastoral care.

Communication encompasses time spent working to communicate with the congregation, council and ministry teams. Everything from daily emails that pertain to the ongoing life of the congregation to my weekly devotion (which could also be considered a “teaching” task) and monthly newsletter, as well as any promotional communications I am involved in or work to coordinate with the Communications Team, as well as managing the congregation’s web presence.

Finance is mainly the time spent reflecting on the budget, preparing for the next year’s budget, and keeping track of and turning in expense reports and mileage. Much of this happens monthly in practice.

Staff Management is time working through staff schedules, connecting and evaluating, that isn’t directly related to a ministry area but more about relationships, schedules, expectations.

Discernment/Visioning is time spent in prayer and scripture and conversation discerning the future of Spirit in the Hills both short-term and long-term, reflecting on our goals and values, coming up with events and ideas that align with those things and help us listen to the Holy Spirit among us.

Other Administration includes tasks that are primarily administrative and don’t fit into a ministry area category.

Outreach is time following up with visitors, meeting with community members and leaders, inviting, having a presence at Chamber of Commerce meetings, serving in the community, and working with our Outreach team.

Future Facilities is time spent weekly checking in with the Future Facilities Team and doing work and planning for our new space.

Mental Health Ministry includes the time I spend weekly on our 2019 Annual Roadmap goal of learning what it means to be a better resource (and becoming a better resource) for people in our congregation and community with mental health challenges.

Video Production includes time spent setting up video and audio recording equipment, recording and editing videos, uploading them to our website, YouTube channel, and Facebook page, creating custom graphics and lower-thirds for videos, creating scenes for OBS livestream software that change week to week, and packing up recording equipment, as well as time spent coordinating with others who might be helping record a part of worship, participate in a video, or help with the post-production process.