

2021 Pastor's Report

Partners in Ministry,

When we thought 2020 had fully prepared us for whatever could come our way – 2021 had plenty of surprises and new twists to throw our way. Just as we were getting the good news of COVID-19 vaccines available and people were beginning to gain immunity to this virus, our portion of the world God so loves froze over.

We found ourselves locked in our homes for new reasons, once again separated from our family and our family of faith just as we entered into the Lenten season and closed in on the one-year mark since the onset of the pandemic in our neighborhood. Time for another round of learning to connect with one another while we are isolated.

Wow! I am still overwhelmed by the ways I saw you loving your neighbor within and beyond the congregation both through phone calls and social media check-ins as well as those of you who were out delivering water to those without it, offering your homes for a warm meal and a hot shower, tracking down plumbing supplies from across the country to help aid with repairs and doing the repairs yourself for people you barely knew or had just met. A wonderful example of God's work in the world with your own hands.

While we certainly would never hope for a disaster – be it pandemic or freeze or flood or fire – the way that you live out your faith, freely sharing God's love and focusing not only on your own needs but those of your neighbor that all may have life and have it abundantly is surely this church being the body of Christ giving itself away for the sake of the world as a joyful response to the free gift of God's grace.

Through Spring and Summer we were riding a rubber band of joy in gathering together in the flesh and disdain when we'd need to break from it for the sake of the health of one another and our community. Whether we were together outdoor, indoor, or online, the Spirit of God was with us at Spirit in the Hills teaching and leading us into the future that was unfolding as we still live through this unprecedented change. Our revitalized Phone Call Care Ministry took the lead in making sure we have an intentional way to check in with members of the congregation each month. We also found new ways of utilizing our outdoor space for worship and fellowship.

Along the way we gathered online to carry out our leadership retreat in a new way with an expanded group from the congregation discerning what God is calling us to be and do in the year ahead. We also began our Strategic Planning process after a year of delays and gained a new partner as we were selected to be one of 50 congregations in the ELCA's Congregations Lead Initiative.

The beginnings of Fall brought good news on several accounts.

- As COVID-19 hospitalizations decreased and leveled out we were able to worship together in our new space week after week celebrating the feasts and festivals of the church throughout October and November into the season of Advent.
- After two long years, we received approval of our final site plans and our permits from Travis County to begin road construction and the final pieces of this stage of development.
- A baptism and new members received during worship
- Plans for finishing our worship space to help increase its capacity to serve us and draw us toward Christ

Along with the good news this fall came one of the most difficult moments for our congregation – the death of our musician, Jacquie Tomhave. We continue to grieve Jacquie even as we trust that she is surrounded by the love of God in Christ from which not even death separates us. We grieve not only Jacquie's death, but the lack of a chance to properly give thanks to God and to Jacquie for her years here at Spirit in the Hills and across the church sharing music and leading worship. We continue to hold Jacquie's husband, Dick, in our prayers and to pray for one another as we learn again what it means to worship in a new way without Jacquie's musical leadership.

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.

Remember the good news of this season that when we feel far off, when the nights are at their longest, when we don't even know what home is anymore, God comes to make God's home among us in Christ.

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 2021:

- 1 baptism
 - Riza Maxwell
- 4 new members
 - Bob & Mary Ellen Madsen
 - Dave Morris
 - Donna Herschleb
- 4 visits to members in the hospital, 34 visits to homes (mostly distanced visits outdoors)
- 19 unique visitors for Pastor on the Porch, with a weekly average of 2
- 6 one-on-one conversations with key community leaders
- 76 online worship services
- 40 (36 on Sundays) in person worship services as of December 12
- 4 evening prayer services at Lake Travis Independent Living with an average of 28 people in attendance
- 2 funerals
 - One for Jacquie Tomhave
 - One for Ken Wiedrich, a neighbor who died by suicide last summer and whose family had no one to turn to but found hope and comfort through Spirit in the Hills

Pastoral Goal Evaluation:

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

Refresh and Restart Phone Call Care Ministry with a plan for Sustainability

This kicked off in August and has been going really well so far!

Leading the congregation through a process to articulate a 5-year vision, with the help of a partner organization such as LEAD: Living Everyday As Disciples or another combination of coaching and consulting for pastors and the congregational visioning team

We are making some exciting progress on this with the ELCA Congregations Lead Initiative (CLI) and are looking forward to building our connection to the neighborhood, identifying our core values, and setting some long-term goals aligned with who we hear God calling us to become. We are well into this process and have an outline that will lead us to presenting a new plan for mission in January of 2023.

Outline a plan for future staffing (paid and volunteer) as we move through music staff transitions and discern what our needs are for ministry coming out of a pandemic

Had the opportunity to share both longrange and immediate visions for staffing with the council in the fall.

Currently hiring for part-time music director but we know that additional staff helping in ministry program areas is on the horizon as well.

The congregation gets a chance to share their answers to the question, "Why does Spirit in the Hills exist?" and have them heard.

One opportunity for this took place during our "What Comes Next?" conversations.

Heard some fantastic responses. You can view them in the Session Two notes on the What Comes Next page of our website. <http://spiritinthehills.org/faith-formation/workshops-and-retreats/what-comes-next-2021/>

Our strategic planning team is sitting with this question right now and will be asking it to the congregation and community members throughout 2022.

We make a transition to in-person worship that does not forget about the community that has been built while we have been online and incorporates some of our learning.

We set up technology so that we have a hybrid learning/meeting space at the church.

Participated in Southwestern Texas Synod webinars on becoming a Hybrid Church led by Dave Daubert.

Maintained consistent levels of participation in online activities like Sunday School, Bible Study, Women's Share & Care. However, there was a notable drop in participation and engagement with worship when we transitioned from planning and hosting worship tailored for the online experience to livestreaming our in-person worship.

That 2/3 of the congregation engages a spiritual practice that is new to them for at least one month this year.

Looking for ways to measure this, anecdotally I believe many members tried a new spiritual practice especially during Lent. I will be spending some time in early January trying to track this, but it seems to me that there were lots of opportunities to do so and that many members of the congregation did engage in a spiritual practice that was new to them even if not for a monthlong duration.

Other Year End Reflections

Staff

- We were finally able to celebrate Sharon French's more than a decade of service as a volunteer staff member – Choir Director. It was a joy and privilege to share in that celebration giving thanks to God and to Sharon.
- Lynette Lawson, our Office Administrator, continues to thrive and find new ways to grow her work for the sake of our congregation and its mission. Amid countless changes to volunteer job assignments, worship preparation, working remotely and in the office, and so much more, Lynette is ready to learn and adapt as needed. This year, she also stepped into a new role as the head of the Communications Team and has been doing a fantastic job rebuilding that team and moving them forward in their goals.

- This year we unexpectedly said our goodbyes to Jacquie as she passed from life to death. Jacquie has been up to this point the only staff musician and her presence is missed as a staff member and even more as a sister in Christ here at Spirit in the Hills.
- We have begun our search for a part-time Director of Music hoping to find someone to serve both as primary accompanist for worship and as choir director.

Organizational Structure

- As has been the case for the last several years, we had some ministry teams rebuild and grow and others that are in varying degrees of disarray.
- I am hopeful that we will have a new organizational structure outlined as part of the new mission plan that will be presented in January 2023 so that we might organize ourselves in a way that best helps us live out God's mission for us here and now.

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

- More opportunities to engage in the life of the congregation using technology that enabled new people to participate. We had more than 25 people engage with some part of our ministry for the first time this year.
- Outdoor stations of the cross for Good Friday that had several church members and community members who aren't part of the congregation attend
- New music opportunities thanks to some frequent visitors that are sharing their gifts with us – Brian and Marie Miller
- Lake Travis Community Campfire Songs & Prayers took place during Advent and the wonderful folks planning these have a ton of energy and insight around what it has looked like and what an alternative, outdoor worship experience might look like going forward.
- We were able to have multiple conversations around our purpose as the church at Spirit in the Hills. These conversations were filled with passion, faith, insight, stories of God at work, love and concern for neighbor, and will help us discern and articulate how God is calling us to be the church right here and right now in a changed and changing world.

Goals for 2022:

1. Continue leading the congregation through a process to articulate a 5-year vision using our participation in the ELCA Congregations Lead Initiative. This vision will be presented to council before year end.
2. Average worship attendance in person of 50; average online worship attendance of 80 using ELCA formula for online attendance
3. 25 one-on-one conversations with community leaders
4. 8 pro-active pastoral care visits per month (100 for the year)
5. 80% of people who worship with us participate in one ministry of the congregation beyond worship at least one time this year.