

2018 Senior Pastor's Report

Worship

MCCGSL has a proud and long history of excellent worship and music. This year saw that tradition continue as our wide variety of sermon series and musical offerings continued. Our choir always stands out as a key component of worship, and they have continued to be ambassadors of our church in the community. Most significantly, our praise team went to Community Christian Church (CCC) in West County this year and led worship for them. Months before that, I began meeting with CCC's leadership to assist them in becoming an Open and Affirming Congregation. They will be holding their official vote in just a few weeks, and they have already invited us to join them in celebrating their achievement as the vote is expected to pass resoundingly. Our choir has also begun receiving so many invitations that we have to turn down opportunities all the time. Most recently, we had to decline an invitation to sing prior to the upcoming Harlem Globetrotter's Game!

In the coming year, you can expect to see us continuing to pursue excellence on Sundays in worship, while always trusting the Spirit to ultimately take the lead when we come together for prayer, praise, exhortation, and Communion.

To be a bit more specific about what is coming up right away, this Advent we will be trying something new. MCC Omaha and their pastor, Rev. Tom Emmett, have joined us to plan Advent worship alongside our staff and Pastor Wes. Our two churches will hold very similar, near identical, worship services this Advent in an effort to strengthen our connection and reap the benefits of two church staff's ideas and creativity. One of the most noticeable things about this year's Advent services is that we will be connecting our Advent Wreath lighting with Communion each week. We are doing this in an effort to highlight the values of the Advent Wreath (Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love) by connecting the lighting of the Wreath to Holy Communion. Because of this connection, for the four weeks of Advent we will celebrate Communion earlier in the service than normal. Our hope is that this focus on the Wreath and Communion will be a blessing to your Advent this year.

Programming *(This portion of the report is from Rev. Lillie Brock.)*

2018 has been marked by many changes in the area of programming. It seemed clear by the end of the first quarter, that several things were true:

- Attendance at Spiritual Location Gatherings was declining
- Participation in program offerings was holding steady to match declining worship attendance but losing momentum
- Feedback from congregants and visitors revealed a sense of disconnection or a sentiment embodied in this remark, "This is a very friendly church, but I haven't been able to make friends."

Along with these truths, came the journey of grappling with decline in members and finances which led to the decision to pursue selling our building. In light of these things, it seemed crucial to address the

issues of connection, making friends, having more fun, and still continuing to grow in our faith. After some research and grappling to find a “small group” model that could work for us, I discovered a system called Activate.

In conversation with Pastor Wes and the staff, we decided that, with some tweaks to match who we are, this system could be an exciting experiment for us. So, in September, we began in earnest to launch Meetup Groups (MUGS). They are predicated on having opportunities for people to gather in small groups because of a common affinity or interest and as a result, become community for each other. The statistics after completing 4 full weeks of Meetup Group Meetings are:

- Total # of Groups Offered = 12
- Total Individual Sign Ups = 183
- Total # of Groups that Made = 11
- Total # of Attendees to Groups = 126

While most churches our size would love to have this many people participating in small groups, we still have some work to do to determine why more than 50 people signed up for a group but either never attended or dropped out. These are things I will be studying and addressing as we prepare for a new set of groups in January 2019. We will also be making some decisions about whether to offer other programming in 2019. We made an intentional decision to discontinue all other programming this fall in an effort to highlight and focus on lifting the Meetup Groups.

All in all, our 5-year effort of enhancing programming and inviting people to a deeper spiritual life, has been very successful and again, has produced results that most churches would envy. Every year teaches me that we must remain flexible and innovative around programming as we listen and pay attention to the needs of our people, the community, and the broader spiritual landscape.

Administration

2018 has been a year that has demanded a higher-than-average amount of time and energy from the Board of Directors and me focused on the administration of the church. Certainly, a lot of that administrative work revolved around the building (which I will address in a moment), but there have been a number of other administrative issues as well.

This year we worked hard to try to support Tori Jameson in her path to MCC ministry, but despite a great deal of energy and effort, it became clear that MCC ministry was not going to be a good fit for her. That process was one that took a great deal of painful, soul-searching effort on behalf of everyone involved here at the local level and beyond. We continue to wish Tori all the best as she explores God’s call for her life.

Of course, this year we also acknowledged that our efforts to grow our children and family ministry over the last three years had not succeeded in the ways we hoped. This led to the need to down-size our staff and eliminate the Pastor of Family Programming position that was held by Rev. Katie Hotze-Wilton. That process was also one that included painful, soul-searching moments on the part of everyone involved, and it necessitated a significant amount of additional time as we worked to make the transition as smooth as possible for everyone effected (which was basically the entire church).

Finally, this year also included a lengthy series of meetings in the homes of the Pastors as we sought to listen to the input and guidance of the congregation in regard to where we've been, where we are, and where we are going. These "Holy Conversations for our Future," held from January through May, provided invaluable insights that led directly to many of the programmatic changes that we have rolled out this Fall.

Building

Of course, one of the biggest elements of this year's work has focused on the evaluation of our current building's cost and ability to meet our needs. Beginning in January of this year, the Board, then the Staff, and finally the Congregation as a whole took a long, hard look at the long-term challenges we have faced to afford and utilize our current building. We also asked ourselves a lot of questions about what matters most to us as we deploy our tithe dollars and our volunteer resources in effort to make a transformational impact on our community.

In May, the Board of Directors presented their research about our options and asked for congregational input. For eight weeks, they held listening sessions and forums to allow us to talk together and discern God's call and direction. In July, we held a vote of the congregation that gave the Board of Directors a clear mandate to begin working toward the sale of our current property. To remind you of the result of that vote: 86% affirmed looking into a sale of the property, 50% affirmed attempting a \$1M capital campaign, and 48% affirmed further reducing staff to cut costs. (Recall that everyone was asked to vote yes or no on each item independently.)

Based on the July vote the Board of Directors began working toward a sale of the building. Meanwhile, the staff was working to launch new ministries (the Meetup Groups) to help attract new members and better engage our current membership. In August, the 2019 Budget Team formed, worked on a draft budget, and discovered that we were not going to be able to afford our building and the current staffing through 2019. This discovery was taken to the Board of Directors and the building sale efforts were accelerated.

In September, our current property was listed for sale, and an offer from our neighbors at Lift for Life Academy was received in just three days. One other offer was received and negotiations continued with both parties for two weeks while we prepared for a Special Congregation Meeting. Then, on Sunday, October 14, a best and final offer from Lift for Life Academy was presented to the congregation for a vote of support. The Board of Directors unanimously recommended the sale offer to the church. The result of the congregational vote was 101-1 in favor of moving forward with the sale.

Currently, we are in the due diligence period during which Lift for Life will secure financing and perform any inspections or studies of the property in preparation for closing.

Congregational Care

This year was a transitional time for our Congregational Care Team. Sometime during this year, every Pastor of the church has been assigned as the primary liaison to the Congregational Care Team. Rev. Lillie started the year overseeing the group, then Rev. Katie reassumed the role for a number of months,

and finally, after Rev. Katie's departure, I have taken on the primary role of overseeing Congregational Care. The team leader also changed this year as long-time Congregational Care Lead, Bettye Babb, decided it was time to step down and let someone else take up this vital ministry. Jerry McGinty-Gayer stepped forward to do so, and he has been serving as the Team Leader since May.

Our Congregational Care visits have increased this year as we have supported a number of congregants with serious and sometimes long-term health issues. We have also had a number of congregants who have experienced deaths in their family this year. This includes the support that was given to former MCGSL Vice-Moderator, Bruce Wessler, in the months leading up to the loss of his battle with cancer and the efforts to help his partner, Joe Johnson, after the death to grieve and hold a memorial service.

You can be assured that Congregational Care remains one of the most important elements of our church's work and that we are always seeking to provide the best care we can. At the heart of it, we simply want to make sure everyone knows that they are loved by their MCGSL family.

Connection Corner and Visitor Retention

Connected to Congregational Care is also our work to ensure that we express care, love, support, and welcome to those who are coming to us for the first time. This year Rev. Lillie has been overseeing an effort to reinvigorate and revamp our new visitor process. One of the key elements of this new process is to include our Meetup Groups as an easy way for new visitors to get "plugged in." We are still tweaking and working on this process, but we believe that one of the keys to our growth lies in doing "best in class" follow-up with those who come and visit. If you are passionate about reaching those whose lives could be transformed by the message of grace and love here at MCC, I encourage you to join this team of folks by talking with Rev. Lillie.

2019: A Year for Trust and Faith

Though there is always more that I could say about the year behind us, it is key that I reserve some space and time here to discuss the road ahead. While none of us has a crystal ball, I do want to try my best to give you some rough idea of what we are hoping to see happen in 2019.

First, let me address the biggest question: When will we get a new building? As I said, I do not have a crystal ball, but here is what I can say. Because church buildings come at much more affordable prices, it is likely that we need to find a church building for sale in order to keep the cost of our purchase down. An added benefit of buying a church building is that the renovation costs are likely to be much more modest. If the building is already laid out for church use, it is unlikely that we will need to perform massive renovations. On the contrary, if we buy an old grocery store or office building, massive renovation costs could cause the building to become simply more than we can afford.

Since we are primarily looking for a church property, we know that there are only 5 for sale in St. Louis at this time, and none of them meet our needs. Our basic needs list that we are using is as follows: a sanctuary that can seat 150-200, a comparable fellowship hall space, a parking lot, and rooms for offices and classes. I should note here that we are not insisting that the property be ADA-compliant at the time of the sale because that kind of renovation is something we will do prior to moving in. We are

committing to ensure that our next building is ADA-compliant prior to our official move-in. Said differently, if we are in a multi-level building again, we want to ensure that there is no unfinished elevator this time.

Since no property currently on the market meets our needs, we are waiting for something new to appear. I am praying that God is preparing a property for us that a current church is preparing to list for sale after one last Christmas in their building. I invite you to join me in praying for God to begin now preparing a way for us in the new year. If our timeline were to be perfect, a January/February purchase (contract) date would be just what we need. So, let's pray for that!

Beyond the building search process, next year is going to be a year for us to walk in trust and faith. There is so much uncertainty that it will require that we continue to take the next step (whatever that step is) trusting that God is watching over us...even when we cannot see beyond that next step. God has been so faithful to our church this year (and all throughout our 45 years) that we must recognize that 2019 is a time for us to trust that our God who has been faithful before will be faithful once again.

In practice, this is going to require us to be patient with one another, gentle with one another, and lavish with our kindness and grace for one another. When we get worried (or scared, anxious, frustrated), we can sometimes forget to be patient, gentle, kind, and grace-filled. 2019 is a year for us to remind one another that no matter what, God has a plan for us (Jeremiah 29:11).

That said, we must remember to all that building search stuff in proper perspective. Even though we will be looking for a new home, God has already blessed us by bringing Lift for Life Academy to us with their generous offer to house us while we are looking for our next property. Given that generous blessing, 2019 will also be a time for us remember that the building search isn't all we are to be about! We have ministry to do each and every day of the year...no matter what our address is. There are lives—real people!—who need MCC to tell them about God's unconditional love. So while we will do our administrative work in the background, in the foreground, let us commit that 2019 will be a year in which we continue to strive to be the beacon of hope and light that we have always been for all of "Greater Saint Louis!"