



Vision of Ministry with Children, Youth, Young Adults & Worship
Rev. Dr. Dawson B. Taylor, Senior Minister
August 19, 2018

I want to echo what Ann has already said and thank you for taking time to be here today, either in-person or virtually. I am grateful for your love of our church and your willingness to spend additional time today listening.

I also want to begin, as I did a few weeks ago during the Words of Welcome, by acknowledging the pain that comes with change. I also acknowledge and apologize for my own part in not communicating well the progress of the renewal of a specific ministry area with our entire community of faith, and I continue to ask for your understanding and mercy.

Today, I will do four things:

- (1) Describe the horizon as I see it for faithful and fruitful ministry for and with children, youth and their families as well as young adults.
- (2) Discuss worship.
- (3) Share with you how we are managing this transition
- (4) Point to where we are going.

One of the things that is asked of me is to maintain the “big picture” and that includes staffing. Our congregation’s median age is 74 and we provide a high level of pastoral care. We continue to grow and, with upcoming pastoral changes, I began to

see the need for an additional pastor on our staff to maintain the level of care that we provide.

In addition, the structure of one person overseeing ministry to those from birth through high school does not provide for growth. A structure began to emerge that would provide for a part-time Director of Children's Ministry who will empower and lead ministry to those from birth through fifth grade, and a called pastor, to be identified through a search committee, who will work with sixth grade through young adults. In addition, this pastor will be asked to begin and lead a new worship service at an alternative time (likely on Saturday night) with an alternative style, at which they will preach;. That pastor would, of course, as do all the pastors on our staff, also provide a level of pastoral care in concert with Deb's lead.

Last summer, under the capable leadership of Dudley Lyons, 572 members of our congregation participated in a churchwide survey. We contracted with Dr. Larry Webb to help with the correlation of data, just as we had in our previous survey in 2009. In his executive summary of our survey, Dr. Webb stated the following:

- "Approximately 75% of respondents are 70 years of age and older, therefore, it is logical they have little interest in projection screens, a third service or a contemporary service. However, if a goal is to connect with the 25-40 cadre then a separate service, in McSpadden, with screens and contemporary liturgy would be an asset."
- "If a separate service for young persons and families is added, it will be important to have some across-age activities and events that bind the separate groups into a single congregational culture and avoids creating a church within a church."

In the last two years, we have seen a 17% increase in worship attendance. And on Easter weekend this year, we crested the 3,000 mark in attendance for the first time in this church's history.

We must find new ways to reach people at different times. Our Sanctuary has the capacity to hold these numbers, but our parking lot does not. Sociologists tell us that when someone sees a parking lot that is 75% full, they perceive it as 100% full, and that there is not room for them. Can you imagine how many people have driven up to our parking lot, perceived that it was full, and driven on to brunch instead?

While there are dramatic declines in Christianity in the United States across the board, here at Naples UCC we are seeing dramatic increases in our ability to reach new people, in new ways, with meaningful impact, through our mission-driven approach to ministry. Thanks to your generosity, our budget continues to grow, and we are able to have even more impact.

Part of that growth included a capital campaign, to renovate and refurbish McSpadden Hall that was begun before my predecessor, Dr. Ron Patterson, retired. In the summer of 2015, McSpadden was refurbished to include screens, projection and an updated sound system to allow versatility in our worship style offerings.

That was all done with our eyes on the future. As Associate Minister, at Ron's direction and our lay leadership's request, I created a plan to launch a new worship service, and had a tentative launch date for a worship service with financial support from our Endowment. However, it was determined that with Ron's retirement and the possibility of me succeeding him, and the subsequent need for a search process for a new Associate Minister, that it was not the right time.

It should be clear that our Sunday morning worship is not changing, because it does not need to; clearly it is working! We continue to see tremendous growth. Don't

forget that we are expanding our pipe organ next month. The people who are already here value traditional worship, as we are a “traditional church...”

But one of my responsibilities is balancing ministry to those who are already here with ministry to those who have yet to find their way to us. And God has given us too much to let us be comfortable with small visions.

Ask your Membership & Growth committee. In February of last year, while John Richardson was our Moderator, they asked John, David Kaiser-Cross and me to come visit about our plans to respond to the growing and changing demographic needs of our church and community. As we did not have answers to those questions, they asked me to return six months later with more specific plans, and I did. Expanding our worship opportunities is one of those answers. Increased staffing to meet the needs of families is another. A more accountable staff structure with delineated responsibilities for specific age groups is yet another. You hold me accountable as Senior Minister and in turn I hold our staff accountable. My leadership style is a collaborative model which tries to best utilize all gifts that are available.

I envision a children’s and youth program where relationships are key, where healthy relationships with each other, the church and God are sought, affirmed and grown, and where ministry is empowered by staff people, not simply checked off a “to do list.” More directly, it means that I will increasingly be asking our staff to “give their jobs away.” I will be asking “Who have you empowered for ministry?” not whether they’ve done it themselves.

I believe that people in our world are starving for connection today, perhaps more than ever. For instance, I think of my sister and brother-in-law as perfect examples.

They live in the fourth largest city in the country. Ann and J.T. are both successful young professionals raised in the church, yet they spend most of their Sunday mornings together at home and sometimes Livestream our worship services. Why? Because my brother-in-law likes a more contemporary style of worship and my sister is more traditional. They both work, and enjoy a lazy Sunday morning together as a family before getting ready for the week. They don't want to go to a church where they are told that their gay brother/brother-in-law is wrong for who God created him to be. If they could find a church like ours which also offered a worship service with a more contemporary feel, and more ways to connect to younger families, they would sign up in a heartbeat.

I think that we sometimes fall prey to the idea that there just aren't a lot of young families in Collier County. But did you know that there are 41,000 registered millennial (born between 1981-1996) voters in our county?

You have seen, both last week and today, how Children's Time and Sunday School will work for this transitional time. Our Executive Minister, Rev. Dr. David Kaiser-Cross has graciously stepped-in to work with Leanne Badham, the Director of Precious Cargo Academy (PCA), to lead those programs on Sunday mornings. David not only managed programming like this at his previous church, but also did it at various times as was needed. Leanne has a degree in Christian Education and has also graciously stepped forward to help.

We will begin our Junior Disciples program the Wednesday after Labor Day and Leanne Badham and Dr. Becky Weese-Rumpf are working together to ensure a smooth start to that program. The core constituency of that program will be children enrolled at

PCA and so it is a natural tie-in. I attended Back to School Night at PCA this past Monday and heard Leanne and Becky eloquently explain how it will work, with just a few minor structural changes.

In partnership with the Personnel Committee, Board of Trustees, the Moderator and myself, David has also created a job description for our new Director of Children's Ministry position; it has gone to our Board of Christian Education for feedback, and should be finalized tomorrow.

Our Youth Choir begins rehearsal next Monday night at 5 p.m. and Becky sent handwritten invitations to 23 youth two weeks ago. And, at her church in Coral Gables before coming to us, Becky directed a children's choir with more than 75 elementary age children in it. Once again, David has agreed to work with youth and parents who want to maintain a youth program this fall for programming. In addition, the Clergy Team is committed to offering a confirmation program this spring, if interest remains.

I will be working with the Long Range Planning Committee which is chaired by our Vice Moderator, Michael Downs, this fall to tweak and fine-tune this vision of how we move forward. From there, it will be sent to the Church Council for their approval. Following that, a search committee chairperson will be named by the Executive Committee with approval by the Church Council and will work with our Moderator and myself to name a committee to have a Minister for Youth, Young Adults and Worship in-place no later than next summer.

I want to close with these two thoughts. First, congregationalism is messy. I remember when I attended my United Church of Christ Doctrine, Polity & History class I jokingly kept asking where the rule book was. I grew up in the United Methodist

tradition, where everything a church does is prescribed by the Book of Discipline. In United Methodism, there is no autonomy at the local level. In congregationalism, we have complete local autonomy, which is wonderful, but is also messy. And we are experiencing a messy time. Those of us in leadership have apologized for this messiness, and are doing our best as we look to the future.

And lastly, I offer this personal insight. There was a time in my life where I prayed to be a perfect pastor. I believed that if I was perfect, that I could prove to God, to the congregations I served, and to the world that I was “enough.” Fortunately, I learned that I cannot be perfect, nor does God ask perfection. I am enough because I am a child of God, just as each of you are. Instead, I pray to be a faithful pastor. I believe that I am being faithful to who God is asking us to be as a church, and to who you are asking me to be as a pastor and Senior Minister.