

## **What Mattered Most: Our Pandemic Story**

**December, 2021**

The Ministerial Search Team embarked on our work together in March of 2021, knowing our task would be shaped by the events of the COVID-19 pandemic that had left us separated, cautious, and changed. How we responded to the pandemic speaks volumes about who we are as a church. It's a story that influences how we think of ourselves as a congregation in search, and what we need from a settled minister at this unsettled time.

When the pandemic broke open in the spring of 2020, our Board realized it would be prudent to delay the search, scheduled to begin that year. Our settled ministers, Rob and Janne Eller-Isaacs, accepted the Board's request to stay on. At considerable personal sacrifice, they postponed their retirement by a full year and continued to serve the church during this unpredictable time. The building closed immediately, and services began to be livestreamed. We upgraded our technology, and pivoted to hosting programs on-line; in time, there was little difference in the volume of programs offered by the church, but now they were accessed via Zoom. This was both a tremendous accomplishment and a strain on staff.

Unity secured a federal Payroll Protection Program forgivable loan, and all staff were retained and paid at budgeted levels while everyone adapted to what their new roles would be (That summer, with the building still closed, some part-time facilities staff had to be let go.). Pastoral care efforts were re-doubled to provide outreach to isolated members. Videotaped ministerial messages were delivered to congregants' inboxes daily. An on-line hymn sing was introduced, in which participants could learn the history of the hymns, one by one, through the entire hymnal. Choir members rehearsed and recorded music individually to form virtual choirs that, while stressful and even demoralizing to produce, were a balm for listeners. A few events enabled congregants to come into the sanctuary, as a way of touching base. It was the kind of year that we will think back on with disbelief at all that was accomplished.

In September 2021, with interim minister the Rev. Dr. Kathy Hurt in place, the church building reopened for services and programs on a limited basis. Live streamed services and programs continued to be offered, but for many it was a time to slowly begin to come back together and re-knit the community we had so missed. This was the very time that the MST wanted to host Listening Sessions, our version of Cottage Meetings. We did not know how many would feel ready to participate, but ultimately about 250 joined in both open sessions and focus groups, followed later by staff listening sessions. We recognized that, whether in person or on Zoom, these sessions might be the first opportunity for participants to talk together in something other than crisis mode, to be invited to dream instead of merely cope.

For this reason, the first question we posed was designed as an in-gathering question. It would enable participants to bring their personal experiences into the room and name them. It would also enable us to take the “emotional pulse” of the congregation. The question was: “The building was closed, but church was open. What mattered to you most in this time of separation?” Here is what we heard.

### **FROM THE CONGREGATION**

**The commitment, presence, and care of staff.** We heard deep appreciation for the investment of staff, from delaying retirement to offering pastoral care and responsiveness in times of loss and isolation to the care taken regarding safety during COVID. Staff didn’t lose touch. In fact, we got to know our ministers better through their daily messages. “They didn’t give up on us.”

**Continuity.** Programming went on and even expanded. Rituals were maintained and helped provide a sense of place. Activities were easy to access; groups could keep in touch through technology and continue to do their work. Having occasional touch points when congregants were invited to enter the building meant a lot; flower communion and an opportunity to say farewell to the ministers were examples.

**Adaptation.** Staff dug in and figured it out. The pivot to massive use of technology was fast and professional. Production efforts were herculean, especially for the music program and religious education. There was variety and fun in programming, too. The annual Children’s Musical was even produced, virtually.

**Depth of Spirituality.** The combination of national events – the rampage of COVID, the murder of George Floyd and the subsequent unrest, and the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021 – produced high anxiety and many spiritual challenges. Ministers gave a variety of messages to help us cope, and continued to offer opportunities for racial justice work. Engaging with anti-racism programming engendered spiritual growth. And in the midst of the horrors of the year, beauty was still there, through flowers, music and art, new rituals to practice at home, and relationships deepened by sharing on-line worship with family or friends that live far away.

**Preservation of community and connection.** Continuation of groups was crucial in a time of isolation. Access to activities and programs through technology meant that new relationships could form and grow. The weekly hymn sings and cook-alongs were great new ideas. Recording the Sunday services enabled members to access worship at any time. The on-line coffee hour lacked only for donuts.

**On the other hand, we felt loss.** We missed the in-person connections that can't be replicated on-line. Zoom fatigue was real. It was painful to be unable to work in person with community partners. For some there was a palpable disconnect of the congregation from their own cultural experience. We were reminded of how meaningful it is to be fully together.

#### **FROM FORMER BOARD CHAIRS**

In a special Listening Session designed for former Board chairs, we asked what stood out for them about the church's leadership during our time of separation. The qualities they named echoed the stories we heard from congregants. They commented on the creative adaptation and innovation that began immediately and has continued. Thinking of the energy required for that, Board chairs highlighted the leadership qualities of resilience, determination, and tenacity. They were impressed by the commitment and tirelessness exhibited by leaders – including current board members, staff, and the retiring ministers. On a personal level, Board chairs were touched by these leaders' loyalty and thoughtfulness.

#### **FROM STAFF**

In six Listening Sessions held with staff, we gained a fuller picture of what the pandemic instigated behind the scenes, at what cost and with what gains.

**Opportunity.** Facilities staff took care of many things that are difficult to do when congregants are in the building, such as putting a fresh coat of paint on 90% of the rooms. Air quality systems were improved. The demands of on-line worship and programs accelerated the upgrade and use of technology, where staff felt we had been lagging before.

**Responsibility.** Staff were ramping up while the broader community was shutting down. Many staff members were pushed to learn skills that had not been part of their jobs before. They faced the same challenges that many other professions did, trying to balance new work demands with all they needed to do in their personal and family lives. A few staff contracted COVID-19. Some felt that the world was expected of them, and in the scramble to keep up it was hard to take stock of what was reasonable to do outside of a crisis response situation. There was a sense of urgency to not let anything fall away. It has been a time of tremendous stress and stretching.

**Shouldering disappointment.** Given how hard staff has worked to preserve meaningful community, it has been difficult to hear from congregants who say "I can't feel connected to church right now," or to field complaints about things that haven't gone smoothly. Church is a

place where people come for comfort and to make meaning out of what's happening. Staff – ministerial, program, administrative, facilities – all want to give to this community, and some people seemed to take advantage of that, perhaps forgetting that staff, too, were going through a great deal personally due to the pandemic.

**Relationship to the building.** At first it was sad and stressful to be in a building that was mostly empty. As time went on, staff appreciated their ability to be in the building from time to time to produce programs. For facilities staff, the pandemic initiated a shift from being seen as strictly custodial to being acknowledged as stewards tending the space for holy work, and as front line workers who provide welcome, emergency response, and a great deal of situational awareness.

**Pride.** The pandemic drove home to some staff the critical importance of their work. They began to discern how much “authentic church” could happen via technology. The daily ministers’ messages grew in intimacy as they realized how much they meant to viewers. Program and worship service participation remained fairly level and, in some cases, grew. The staff worked together in new ways, increasing their support for one another. They recognize the scope of what they were asked to do, and that they stepped up with confidence, professionalism, and mutual care.