

“CHANGE IS THE ONLY CONSTANT IN LIFE”

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As we gather this morning on the brink of a pretty significant change in the life of this church—the beginning of our journey with our new, part-time pastor—I want to spend some time talking about change in this church.

A well-known quote from a Greek philosopher states that “Change is the only constant in life.” And our Pastor Nicolette Siragusa said in her written introduction to the 2016 Church Pictorial Directory, “Churches, like all living things, are always changing.”

Well, this church has done its share of changing over the 155 years we have been here in Grand Ledge. We are worshipping today in the third church building owned by this church. This “new” church was built in 1969, and since then, even this building has undergone some major changes: an addition adding the choir room and rear entrance area, a new blue steel roof, redesign of the altar area, and installation of new stained glass windows and a sound system in the sanctuary to name a few.

We have had a number of pastors, including a circuit rider in the early years who came on horseback to preach on alternating Sundays. (So, technically, I guess Pastor Laura really isn’t our first part-time pastor!!) We first called a pastor who was openly gay in 2002, and called our first female settled pastor in 2008.

We purchased and began using the New Century Hymnal, which contains inclusive language in the hymns, but still revert back to the “old standard” when it comes to many of the Christmas carols we all know and remember.

We have gone from being a neighborhood church to one that has members and friends coming from the entire greater Lansing area encompassing four mid-Michigan counties. We are currently a lovely mix of those who grew up in this church and are third- or even fourth- generation members and those who moved into the area and/or were looking for something different than the church they grew up in. (I grew up in the Methodist church but came here when my children were young 30 some years ago, not too many years after the move to this “new” church so I am a first generation member, but rapidly becoming one of the “old timers” as time passes. In case you are wondering, though I do NOT personally remember the time when our pastor rode the circuit on horseback!)

Other things have changed as well. Gone are the days when coffee hour offered only donuts and coffee. Now our meals and coffee hour feature a variety of foods, both healthy and sugar-laden, with choices that are nut-free and gluten-free vegetarian, and vegan friendly. Money is now budgeted for a church website versus advertising in the local weekly newspaper, and outreach

missions now include a wide range of efforts impacting our neighbors and the environment both locally and around the world.

But, despite the many changes we have gone through in years past and recently, there ARE a couple of things that haven't changed. The first is God's presence in our lives, collectively as a church and individually once we leave here. Malachi 3:6 says "I the Lord do not change. So you, the descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed." And in James 1:17 we are told "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. But one of my favorite passages assuring us of the omnipresence of God is found in Psalm 139:7-10 where the writer says "Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, You are there. If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You are there. If I take the wings of the dawn, If I dwell in the remotest part of the sea, Even there Your hand will lead me, and Your right hand will lay hold of me. This passage really brings home the idea that no matter what the future holds for us, God IS with us, guiding us in our faith journey. Or, as the UCC boldly proclaims, "God Is Still Speaking!"

The other thing that really hasn't changed much is the mission of this church...The "why we are here" part. A few years ago, we adopted a new mission statement which reads "Following Jesus, our mission is to serve God by building an inclusive community where uplifting worship and relevant messages deepen spirituality and inspire acts of justice, service, and compassion." A great deal of time was spent getting this simple wording just right so that every one of us could readily understand the "Why we are here" part. Previous mission statements (I didn't look up the exact number, but know there were a few!) were much wordier (like an entire page, single spaced!), more grandiose, as was the style of the times they were written in. They seemed more like something you should print off and hang on the wall, and less like something you should carry around in your heart and mind as you went about your daily life. (Actually, now that I think of it, there WAS a framed mission statement-- rendered beautifully in hand calligraphy--hanging in the lounge when I first started coming to this church!) This time around, however, it felt truly important to just say why we are here: to be a place where folks come to be fed spiritually to enable them go out and do God's work and share His love with ALL. Keep it simple so that we can "walk the talk"!!

I love seeing the mission of this church come to life in so many of the changes we have and are now experiencing. The move to this building back in 1969 provided an opportunity for ample parking for those not living close enough to bike or walk to church and also the ability to gather and worship on one level allowing those with mobility issues to more easily participate. The sound system enables the use of hearing enhancement devices for those who find them helpful and the publishing of audio versions of our worship on the website. The replacement of the windows in the sanctuary from simple blocks of colored glass to true stained glass containing spiritual symbology provides a connection to our past and to the origin of our faith and speaks to those who feel God's presence through visual means. (You can check out the brochure "in with the hymnals" for a guided tour of our beautiful windows!)

It is now easier for everyone to “break bread” together, including folks with medical or personal dietary restrictions. Our presence on the “world wide web” assures that folks can find us and learn about us whether or not they live in Grand Ledge. Our outreach efforts target things like the availability of clean water locally and abroad, adequate permanent and safe temporary housing for families, food for food-insecure children and families, an awareness of our impact on the environment, and support for those seeking their basic God-given rights under the law.

In 2006, we voted to become an Open and Affirming church. Our Open and Affirming Statement is a little longer than our mission statement, and a portion of it is printed on the front of the bulletin each week. To paraphrase, it says that we love and affirm everyone and welcome them to join us in the mission of this church...Everyone—young, old, gay, straight, able-bodied, not-so-able bodied, black, white, brown, and every color in between on any part of the path in their spiritual journey. Notice that I said “welcome them to join us”, not “welcome them to come and listen to us” or “welcome them to come and observe us”. “Join us” means be a part of us, partner with us, knowing that we are all seen, loved, and valued by God and by each other. This statement formally affirms that we are “walking the talk” contained in our mission statement.

Although the specifics of how we worship and conduct the business of this church have changed quite a bit in these past 155 years, I firmly believe that those folks who met way back then to establish this church had something very similar to our current mission in their hearts and minds as they gathered to build a place where they could come together to worship each week before going out into the world to live their daily lives. God spoke to them back in 1864, and is still speaking to us in 2019. So, to go back to Pastor Nicolette’s quote from the beginning, “Churches, like all living things, are always changing...” I would add, “but when it comes to the truly important things, perhaps the more things change, the more they stay the same.” May it be so. Amen