

MINISTER'S REPORT JANUARY, 2019

Rather than submitting my regular report outlining meetings, services and brief observations about the state of the congregation, I am taking this opportunity for a mid-year check in. I'm using the medium of my monthly report so that these items can be discussed at the next board meeting. The purpose of this short reflection is to start a conversation and my absence at the January meeting might be an unusual opportunity for you to discuss these things freely.

I am a little worried about our beloved congregation. While none of my observations are unique to us (in fact, they are quite common), I'm afraid we aren't stepping up to the moment at hand and that inaction will cost us dearly. I say I'm "a little worried" rather than being terribly alarmed because we aren't at a crisis point. My concern is that when we reach that moment, the time to have addressed the issues will have passed.

Here are a few of my concerns:

1. As a congregation, we seem to be getting stagnant. We don't have a clear vision for our future, nothing is igniting us (nor am I sure we want anything to), and the only time there's real energy is in response to conflict. This is true even as we see greater civic engagement in our country than we've seen in decades and a serious need for a liberal religious voice to be spoken and heard.
2. Volunteerism is at an all-time low. This is a national condition and one I could explain if you're interested, but the point is, we are dependent on volunteers to maintain our infrastructure. We simply don't have the volunteer hours necessary to keep things running smoothly.
3. We are existing with less money than we have in a long time. This is creating stress in many areas. There are ways to increase revenue but we don't have devoted volunteer hours to make those things happen. In the meantime, lack of funding adds pressure to staff and to our programs which suffer as a result. One of the ways lack of funding adds stress is the reduction in administrative support. Cutting that position has added work to both staff and volunteers increasing the problems.
4. Membership is dropping. Attendance seems fairly steady on Sunday morning, but we aren't bringing in enough new people to cover the number we are losing. People are leaving the area and those who are moving in are young families not interested in our traditional congregation. This is a national trend but because of the issues stated above, we aren't addressing it effectively.

I don't think I need to detail these issues; we are all familiar with them. Instead, I'd like to outline a few possible actions we can take to shift our current trajectory. I recognize these ideas might seem radical, but I believe radical action is appropriate in this moment.

- A. I think we need to spend money. We live in a scarcity model that is becoming our defining mood and it's exhausting to all of us and unattractive to new people. The first way I'd spend money is on an administrator. We need someone here no less (and likely more) than 20 hours a week and we need to pay that person enough to keep them. We've had some wonderful people here but our pay is too low, forcing people to seek alternatives almost as soon as they start working. A part time

administrator can 1) pick up all the slack that creates anxiety like setting up tables, ordering coffee, keeping our space neat and organized, etc., and they can 2) focus on renting our space, and they can 3) pick up traditionally volunteer jobs no one is doing and, 4) go back to being the point person for Barvinok and Juana. This would mean a deficit budget for a couple of years, dipping into savings to cover the expense. If we do this right, though, this person can help us shift the way we make money so that we no longer rely entirely on membership, an unsustainable model. I think we need to spend money on other things too. Cutting back on waste is good but living with such scarcity isn't serving us well and is adding to the decrease in energy and commitment. And, while I'm focusing on an administrator, the rest of the staff is burning out from the long hours and low pay as well. If we want to be a high functioning, growing congregation, we're going to have to invest in that up front.

- B. I believe it would be in our best interest to yoke with a local congregation. Frankly, I ultimately believe we should merge. This isn't to say we should move. What I'm suggesting is that we have one congregation in several locations. Merging would mean we could share staff and resources while increasing membership and reducing the percentage of volunteers needed. But, before merging, I think we should yoke. Mt. Kisco is ready to have this conversation. The minister in White Plains would like to have it too, although the congregation isn't open to it. The president in Croton is very interested in this model. Yoking would mean being in deliberate partnership. Sharing programs like we are doing with Mt. Kisco. It also means intentional relationship. It could increase morale, simplify processes and enlarge our base. If we could do it with 4 or 5 of the county's congregations, we could be on the road to a healthier and more stable congregation.
- C. We need to restructure so that we meet the needs of more people, both in and not yet in our congregation. Tracy and I are talking about more changes in Religious Education. (One of the changes we haven't discussed but should is the merging of that program with Mt. Kisco.) I've made a list of recommendations in the past. We need to actively move these things forward. We've gotten very focused on minutiae and have put the big thinking aside.

To summarize, I think we need to take more risks. I know this is a risk-averse congregation, but I'm sure there are plenty of people here who would be happy to be part of some big, bold thinking. We are being held back by fear, an over-abundance of caution and our own inertia in addition to a broader decrease in interest in religious institutions culturally. For most of American history, houses of worship could exist successfully even with these liabilities, but that is no longer true. If no one agrees with me and everyone thinks we are doing just fine and can and should continue on our current path, I will let this go. But, if I'm not alone in this thinking, I'd like to see us begin the move into a more vibrant life together.

As you know, I'll be taking some vacation days next week to recharge with my family. I'm available for pastoral emergencies, but will put other things aside until my return. I look forward to speaking with you all about this then.