

# A PASTORAL EPISTLE TO THE ST. JOHNSIANS



From: Dennis Foust, Senior Minister

To: The Saints Scattered throughout Metro Charlotte Who Gather at 300 Hawthorne Lane

## AS WE BEGIN A NEW FIVE YEARS TOGETHER

On Sunday, August 28, 2011, you and I began a journey of mutual ministry and collaborative service. Of course, this means that on Saturday, August 27, 2016, we completed five years together. On Sunday, August 28, 2016, we began a new five years. So, I offer to you a brief reflective review and a hopeful preview.

In the autumn of 2011, I started learning your names, meaningful traditions and core commitments. My first impressions of you were consistently positive. Your love for one another was clear and your commitment to be a servant church was evident. The only surprise I encountered was related to the low self-image of the church. Others saw St. John's as a church of tremendous influence. Yet, between 1980 and 2011, tremendous change occurred in Baptist life, ecumenical efforts, the community of Elizabeth, metro Charlotte, North Carolina and American congregational contexts. All of this change created a need to establish new equilibrium.

Therefore, we began addressing visible and experiential factors. We,

- Painted some walls, replaced some carpet, waxed some floors and renovated some common spaces;
- Established an annual Heritage Sunday to remember and celebrate the rich history of St. John's;
- Introduced using the word, 'guest,' as a reminder that we are always nurturing hospitality;
- Evolved into a better understanding of how to communicate internally and externally while learning how to use the new organization which started being formed during the interim; and
- Created new CONVERGE conversations focused on where we desired the church to go in the future.

During these first five years together, we have:

- Welcomed 112 new members;
- Ordained 40 new persons to serve as deacon (exemplary servants in our community of servants);
- Installed Rev. Martha Kearse to be Associate Minister, welcomed Rev. Allison Benfield as Minister with Children and Their Families, ordained Rev. Lee Gray, welcomed Kevin Gray as Minister for Worship and Music, welcomed Noel Lance as Organist, welcomed Jacquelyn McAbee as Administrative Assistant, transitioned Elaine Johnson to be Financial Administrator, welcomed Sandra Rogers as Church Administrator, and welcomed new custodians (we have also grieved the loss of staff members);
- Strengthened our identity in the community and our relationships with several ministry partners;
- Re-positioned our view of ourselves as a Center City Church in the midst of an ever-growing Charlotte;
- Established new approaches for church planning so as to become more proactive rather than reactive;
- Set in place new organizational initiatives for staff roles and responsibilities;
- Refocused our approaches to congregational communications (a never-ending venture);
- Broadened our visions for faith formation by introducing new small groups and fostering purposeful inter-religious and cross-cultural experiences for children, youth and adults;
- Refreshed our intentional efforts of ecumenical, inter-racial and inter-religious relationships;
- Extended our decades-long expressions of hospitality to all persons;
- Re-invigorated our emphasis on the teaching ministry of the church;
- Continued to serve the under-served of our city and the world while also magnifying our influence on our community by opening our doors for community basketball, choirs, etc.; and
- Sought to improve our ministries in several other ways that you have noticed or influenced.

Along the way, we have failed at some efforts and tried to learn what we should. We have grieved the loss of members who have passed on ahead of us into the land of rest. We have expressed compassionate concern for one another in the midst of heartache, burden and struggle. Well, we have been 'church' to one another.

On the other side of this page, I offer an outline of where I plan to lead us as we begin our next five years.

As we enter 2016–2017, please know that I have been asking the ministry staff and church council to think with me about the following questions:

- As we interpret and express God's vision for us and Jesus' mission for his followers, and our commitments outlined in our St. John's Covenant, where do we sense St. John's is being most actively faithful and faithfully active and where do we sense needs for renewal and refocus?
- Where do we sense God at work among us as part of God's people? Where do we sense God at work in the world where we need to join our energies with others?
- As we consider current strengths and needs, what major directions become clear to us, what primary emphases surface as possibilities to discuss and what actions could be taken to affirm strengths and respond to needs?
- What themes emerge as possibilities for us to initiate when we look at these Covenant mission/ministry areas, strengths, needs, emphases and actions?
- What foundational challenges must be prioritized as we move in the direction of God's mission? What resources are we lacking or needing to reapportion to move in the direction of God's mission?
- How might we better collaborate the energies and efforts of our staff and leaders with core leadership groups of St. John's, more effectively steward the gifts and resources of all members of St. John's, and move forward with focus in order to strengthen the life and ministries of the church and increase our impact for Christ in the community and world both now and in the future?

Our conversations and working sessions have brought us to the following points of clarity. By no means is this all we will be doing; however, these emphases will be on our radar throughout 2016-2017:

- **HOSPITALITY** - EXTENDING OUR CULTURE OF HOSPITALITY & OUTREACH: Identifying, inviting, welcoming, and assimilating new people into the life and ministries of St. John's. As a church, we will continue to improve how we clarify and communicate our message of gracious Christian faith which is active in service in our community. Our new initiatives to repurposing Lasater Hall for Sunday Morning inter-generational fellowship is part of this focus.

- **WORSHIP** - EXPANDING OUR PARTICIPATORY WORSHIP WITH CREATIVITY & DIVERSITY: Continue utilizing gifts of members and inviting guests from our community to express our worship of God. We will also offer additional resources for daily and weekly worship.

- **FAITH FORMATION** – PROMOTING AND NURTURING INTEGRATED ACTIVE FAITH: Lead St. John's through a spiritual renewal journey focusing on spiritual practices and healthy theological perspectives so as to strengthen our people for discipleship and ministries in daily life. We will reach toward involving every member in ministry by providing increased awareness of opportunities and pathways for service.

- **DEVELOPMENT** - STRENGTHENING OUR EFFORTS IN LEADER AND TEACHER DEVELOPMENT: Providing foundational and advanced tracks for our members to learn how to teach and lead more effectively and faithfully both within and through congregational life and in the life of the metro-Charlotte community.

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On Sunday, September 18, we will begin a season focused on Spiritual Renewal. The emphasis, through November 20, will be ***LORD OF THE HARVEST.*** We will focus our worship of God through the two lenses of Jesus' teaching on The Greatest Commandments, 'Loving the Lord Your God' and 'Loving Your Neighbor.' Our Stewardship Task Force will also use the Harvest theme in promoting commitments to our Financial Ministry Plan 2017. Our capacity to realize the visions we discern will involve our commitment to be a Faithful Steward church.

During Advent, Christmas and the weeks leading up to Lent, we will emphasize ***THE LANGUAGE OF GOD.*** Using the first 18 verses of *The Gospel of John*, we will emphasize how The Language of God becomes flesh. As followers of Jesus, we are continually interpreting and proclaiming in the world our understanding of the language of God that has been incarnated in the life, ministry, stories and teachings of Jesus.

During Lent and Easter, we will focus our worship on ***CROSS WAYS.*** Our worship of The Living God will lead us on a journey which will recognize the meaning and implications of Jesus' cross for the ways we live.

So, we begin the next five years together. There will be surprises; some will make us laugh and some will make us cry. And, through it all, The Faithfully Active God will lead us to express active faithfulness and faithful action. Amen!

Shalom,  
Dennis