

# REPORT OF PASTOR MATT SMITH

21 Nov 2024

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On Sunday, May 19, 2024, Faith United Methodist Church celebrated 30 years as a congregation. It's been 30 years of highs and lows, laughter and tears, worship and fellowship, mission and ministry, all in Christ's name.

It only seemed fitting that it was also Pentecost Sunday. At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descended upon the believers who had gathered after the resurrection of Jesus. The Church was born, and the world was forever changed! Just as the first Christians experienced twists and turns they did not expect, the people who started Faith were surprised at all the Holy Spirit has done here at the heart of Lake Park.

In my sermon that day, I said that the way we best honor our predecessors in the faith is not by doing everything the way they did. We best honor them by being as committed as they were to do everything possible to reach their neighbors with the love of Jesus Christ.

I'm proud to have been the pastor to such a gifted, caring, committed congregation for nearly 4½ years. These have been eventful days! We've continued to rebuild vitality after COVID in 2024. Though we're working against increasing apathy toward religion, political turmoil, and financial challenges, we are still working hard to reach new, younger and more diverse people.

At the end of 2024, we have a smaller but still strong staff. Our prayers are with Dianna Boyadjian in her ongoing recovery from breast cancer surgery. While we miss Jerry Kemper, Jake Hemminger is doing well in his permanent role as Minister of Music. We are staffing our nursery with one paid person, Nursery Coordinator Maria Starrs, along with volunteers. For financial reasons, we opted not to continue with a paid Youth Coordinator. Therefore, we had to say goodbye to Daniel Nelson. We are grateful for Lindsey, Maria, Jake and Dianna. Sonya and her staff do a great job on the preschool side.

After a straw poll in early 2023, Faith opted to remain with the United Methodist denomination. Representatives from around the world gathered for United Methodism's General Conference meeting in Charlotte in April and May 2024. Among other consequential developments, the denomination removed its restrictions on gay and lesbian clergy and weddings. Some cheered these changes. Others struggled. As a consequence, some dear friends from Faith have joined or are attending other churches. On the other hand, some people have come to Faith because of our choice to remain United Methodist. While we miss those who have left and have sought to bless them, the mission and ministry here at Faith UMC continues. I give thanks that our unity in Christ does not depend upon uniformity of opinion, on these or any issues.

Along with challenges, we also have many opportunities. Now that we're post-COVID, post-General Conference, and post-whatever else, I felt a fresh look was needed at all that were doing as a church. We leaned into the strength of our United Methodist connection, engaging in a process with our conference called The Transformation Journey. The lengthy application process for TJ began in 2023. After interviews, a meeting with conference leaders, and town hall meetings, in June the Leadership Team approved the conference's recommendation that we form groups to tackle four areas they discerned should be our highest priorities.

## TRANSFORMATION JOURNEY

- 1) The first group, our Community Listening Team, has helped us better listen to God, each other, and our neighbors. As they wind down their work with The Rev. Luke Edwards, we look forward to hearing their conclusions. Existing members will be invited to transition into an ongoing Outreach Team to make, lead and share a plan for mission and evangelism. The question guiding the Outreach Team is how can we welcome and bless more people in Christ's name?
- 2) In January 2025, a new, ongoing Discipleship Team will work with a coach to foster more small groups, retreats, individual spiritual disciplines. Their guiding question is what can we do to deepen the spiritual life of the congregation?
- 3) In January 2025, a new, short-term Vision Team will work to revisit our vision and mission as a church... post-COVID, post-General Conference and now that we're 30 years old. They'll ask what is God calling us to be and do now?
- 4) Around April 2025, the final team will begin working with their coach. This Alignment Team aims to put into practice the lessons we'll learn about vision, outreach and discipleship. What impediments to spiritual and numerical growth can we remove?
- 5) Pastor Matt will work with the Alignment Team and a streamlined Leadership Team to make needed transformations by the summer of 2025. How can we line up our people, finances and property to do great (and sustainable) mission and ministry for a long time to come?

Even as we worked on these new and transformative things in mission and ministry, we maintained a full calendar of worship, discipleship and mission opportunities in 2024. Some highlights follow.

## WORSHIP

In worship, we chiefly worked through series in 2024. Here are their themes:

- Where Heaven and Earth Meet – on the meaning and significance of the Incarnation
- Harder than Chocolate – a series on things like indecision, impatience and power that Jesus invites us to give up during Lent
- Be Renewed – on the renewing power of the resurrected Christ in our lives, our church and our denomination
- The Only Thing that Matters – a survey of the New Testament's teachings on love
- Marvelous News – a follow-up to our superhero-themed Vacation Bible School showing what various DC and Marvel superheroes can teach us about the Christian faith and life
- Lost and Found – an examination of Jesus' parables in Luke 15 about how heaven rejoices when what was lost is found (and why we should rejoice as well)
- Indivisible – four virtues Christians have in common, according to the Nicene Creed
- More than We Imagine – moving from scarcity to abundance by seeing we have more time, talents, treasure and reasons for thanks and praise that we often realize

We enjoyed guest preaching from:

- The Rev. Greg Hamilton – Pastor of Indian Trail UMC
- Dr. Sam Nadler – a respected Messianic Jewish teacher
- The Rev. Rick Jones – Emerging Community Pastor with the Game Faith Collective
- Leslaw Kawalec – United Methodist Missionary from Poland now serving in Ireland
- Elizabeth Carpenton – Engagement Director of Common Heart
- The Rev. Dr. Mary John Dye – retired United Methodist Pastor
- The Rev. Joseph Kim – Pastor of Lebanon UMC in High Point
- The Rev. Dr. Stephanie Moore – Western NC’s Conference Evangelist

## CHILDREN, YOUTH and YOUNG ADULTS

We did some great things to reach young people and encourage them as disciples:

- Eight youth and two adults went to the Western NC Conference’s spring youth retreat.
- Many of our youth helped in a Palm Sunday drama during worship.
- We enjoyed a couple video game outreach nights with Rick Jones of Game Faith Collective.
- We welcomed 45+ kids to Vacation Bible School.
- The congregation supported our youth in their mission trip and enjoyed the testimonies team members gave upon their return.
- We hosted several Young Adult Game Nights this summer.
- Despite not being able to continue to pay a youth coordinator, we’ve maintained a full schedule this summer and fall with The CREW – our shared ministry with Indian Trail UMC.
- We welcomed 200+ kids and their families to our biggest Trunk-or-Treat yet.

## ADULT OPPORTUNITIES

We offered several classes and faith forming groups in 2024

- The Women of Faith had an active year of fun, growth and service including women and girls of all ages.
- Faith Over 55 enjoyed warm fellowship, a great slate of guest speakers and served often.
- Pastor Matt led a Lenten study of Flannery O’Connor short stories
- Sam Stiffler and Matt Smith led Bible studies of Romans 12 that coincided with the Be Renewed worship series
- Michael Williams and Bryan Perkins led a Be Renewed Bible study over disc golf. This study spun off into some monthly rounds of disc golf.
- Belle Walker led a Be Renewed Bible study over yoga. This study spun off into a couple months of summer yoga sessions.
- Margaret LaBossiere is currently leading a book study of *A Faith with Many Rooms*.

## MISSION

We did great things to relieve suffering and bless others in Christ's name, including:

- Feb 14 - Kicked off churchwide coin collection for Rise Against Hunger during the season leading up to Easter.
- Mar 3 - Served as a sponsor and fielded a team for Common Heart's Hunger Walk
- Apr 23 - Hosted Rise Against Hunger, where we packed 11,800 meals for our neighbors in the developing world.
- April 16 & 17 - Faith volunteered with the Union County Special Olympics at Sun Valley High School.
- June 22 - Youth and adult mission team of 20 folks departs for a week making home repairs with Carolina Cross Connection.
- July 14 - Collected 530 lbs. of food for Common Heart to distribute.
- July 21 - Joshua Mckoy, who grew up at Faith, shared in worship about his work with Every Nation Campus Ministry.
- August 4 - Faith sent 30 volunteers and helped sponsor the Union County Back-2-School Bash.
- August 11 - Hosted a benefit luncheon with delicious Cuban food for Carolina Cross Connection that raised \$1500.
- September 22 - Faith baked 180+ dozen cookies for the Kairos Prison Ministry.
- October 6 - Collected \$2000+ for Hurricane Helene relief.
- November 2 - Bagged 40K lbs. of potatoes with the Society of St. Andrew for our hungry neighbors.
- December 15 - Angel Tree gifts are due.

We are making plans for a mission trip to the Western NC mountains after the turn of the year.

In addition to the projects with which we're involved directly, a significant portion of every dollar given to Faith Church goes to support the mission and ministry we share with our fellow United Methodists around the corner and around the world.

We also give monthly support to evangelistic efforts of Campus Outreach at UNC Charlotte and Every Nation at NC Central University.

## CONCLUSION

While we are not without our challenges at Faith, I hope you'll agree that we have plenty for which to give thanks in 2024 and some exciting possibilities in the year ahead. My prayer is that the next 30 years will be even better and brighter than the first 30, with all our efforts and God's help.