

November Remarks from Our Pastors

In their reports to Council each month, Pastor Gregg and Pastor Rachel conclude with some personal remarks that summarize the most recent period of their leadership here at Grace.

Senior Pastor's Remarks:

I remember what it was like when Pastor Rachel and I first moved into our new apartment in Fort Mill. The apartment was nice enough, but full of boxes. We moved right at the beginning of Advent, and with all that mess, our new home did not feel particularly festive yet. We were in the middle of a big change, and everything was in a state of flux.

We had not yet begun our official work at Grace, so that first week was mostly unpacking, adjusting all the things people must do when they move. Having accomplished some of that work, we looked at our first weekend in town and wondered about the Rock Hill Christmas Parade. We wondered whether we should go. We hadn't really started yet, and the interim pastor still had things well in-hand. Still, maybe a Christmas Parade would be a great opportunity to meet our new congregation. We went back and forth on that one for a while. In the end, we decided it would be better *not* to go, at least not that year. And now, having attended several in the years since, I know we made the right decision. If we had decided to attend way back then, we might have misunderstood something important about our new congregation.

In case you haven't been able to attend, Grace's part in the Christmas Parade is pretty special. Our congregation sits at the corner of Oakland and Aiken Avenues, and the parade begins just before that at Stewart Ave. We have a prime piece of real estate for viewing each entry in the parade. Our front porch area is elevated, allowing people to gather and see everything with ease. We also hand out hot chocolate – for free! – and some years we have popcorn, too. Throughout the parade, our doors are open, because we welcome people into our building to use the restroom or take a moment to warm themselves if the temperatures are particularly cold. Grace is very much a part of the community for the Christmas Parade and everybody I have welcomed into the building has been truly grateful for the way we allow ourselves to be a community resource in this way. We model Christian hospitality, and, in more recent years, we have taken the opportunity to make sure our space is fully decorated, so that the beauty of our space is part of what we extend.

Now, here is the potential for a misunderstanding. If Pr. Rachel and I had attended that first year, we might have come away with the impression that all those grateful, festive people were going to keep coming back throughout the year. We would have been just as impacted by the hospitality but might've missed how the familiar way in which people approach the church on parade night is not really indicative of their approach on the other 364 days of the year. It would be interesting to know how many new members Grace has gained because of an introduction at the Christmas Parade; I am willing to bet the number is rather small compared to the people we have impacted. Still, if this is reading like a lament, think again! This is better news than it might seem at first!

There is a beautiful authenticity to the way we welcome strangers into our building. We feed them, give them something warm to drink, and in our efforts, we model the very name on our building. We embody grace at the parade, asking nothing from the people we encounter, and extending to them only Christ-like appreciation. God saw fit to bless this congregation with the ability to operate on a particular corner of town, so faithful discernment *requires* us to make use of that blessing. And still, there is a bit more good news regarding what we do with this opportunity.

The Rev. Herman Yoos - the most recently retired bishop of the SC Synod - was fond of telling pastors and councils some variation of the following:

"You'll probably never know how many people walk by this building every day or every week, for whom you are considered 'their' church. They won't show up on the roll and they won't help your attendance figures. But some day, with very little warning, they will need you. They will encounter a crisis in their life, and they will come to your door because they have always understood your door to be open to them. You are engaged in ministry with them right now, just by being who God has called you to be. So, on their behalf, Thank you."

I think Bishop Yoos is spot-on with this understanding, and I've seen his words come true many times. The way Grace is involved in the Christmas Parade is a particular way of reminding the community that we are *still* here for them. *God* is still here for them!

We didn't go to the first Christmas Parade and I'm so glad of that as I look back on it now. *We* didn't need the reminder that Grace was here for us. The community *did*. And this year, as we get ready for another round, I look forward to being a part of that visible reminder that our red doors and family of faith remain as open as ever.

Peace in Christ,

Pr. Gregg

Pastor's Remarks:

This Advent season is surprising me in the best way. I always love Advent, but it's also a very busy time, at church and at home. At church, we add extra evening services, we decorate, we try to get year-end business finished up. At home, there's less time but more tasks, like buying gifts and preparing for holiday trips or visitors. And this year, Advent is a little shorter than usual, so this is all happening extra quickly! It would make sense for people to be a little shorter themselves, a little less patient, a little less focused on the community. But that's where I'm seeing the surprise – Grace is connecting with our community in some very tangible, generous ways this season, packing in even more than I've remembered in past Advents!

The first day of Advent was the last day of Family Promise, which was already going to be a little complicated with the Thanksgiving holiday. In our Family Promise week, we had multiple changes of which families were with us, various schedule complications for our guest, and several building needs. Our Grace members stepped up, made sure everything was covered, took on extra responsibilities, and even hosted a Thanksgiving dinner! In this week, generosity made all the difference for the community.

As we've done for many years now, we have agreed to sponsor low-income children and elderly members of our community for Christmas, providing them with some gifts to brighten their season. We put up our Angel and Giving Tree tags in the Fellowship Hall – 50 Giving tags and 18 Angel tags this year – and I believe this is the fastest I've seen them disappear. It didn't even take two weeks for every tag to be claimed, and the returned presents are already beginning to adorn the stage. As a special touch, the Stockleys added a tree to the collection space this year, so we can see the gifts under the tree before they're delivered! It's a beautiful sight of generosity and joy being sent out into the world.

This Friday, we'll continue the tradition of hosting Rock Hill Christmas Parade goers on our front porch. We'll offer popcorn and cocoa at no charge. Our bathrooms will be open for anyone who needs them. If you haven't been at the popcorn table or stood near the door, you might not have seen the joy, but let me tell you – it's there! When a teen who thinks they might be too old for a parade comes up for some popcorn and cocoa, the delight breaks through that cool kid veneer. When a parent holding the hand of a small and dancing child hears 'yes, we have a bathroom, come on in,' the sigh of relief is felt by all parents who have been in that place. And there are conversations and excitement and snacks shared, made possible by the time and effort of our Grace members who open the doors to the community.

On Sunday, the Better Together Habitat Build will be dedicated. This build is in honor of Earl Gatlin and the many years he spent pouring into the community, making sure our neighbors have a decent place to live. This year, Habitat is one of our Outreach Partners, and we sponsored this build to honor Earl ourselves. His example of generosity in the community is one we can all hold close this season, and it will be good to gather at this home and bless the family who can now live there safely.

In addition to these events, there will be many holiday gatherings at Grace this season – some for members and some for members of the community. Already, the WELCM Christmas party and the Seniors@Grace Christmas event have been times of laughter and delight. Our scouts, our cubs, our Council, and of course, our congregation will be celebrating the season in the coming weeks.

Each of these events, and still others not listed, is a chance for community to come together, to share in the joy of Advent and Christmas, and to be generous in spirit to one another. I am so grateful for the opportunity this season is bringing us, to see how the will of God – that we would love and care for one another – is being lived out here and now.

Peace in Christ,
Pr. Rachel