

How to Welcome Your New Pastor  
1 Corinthians 3:5-11, 21-23; 16:10-11a

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July 25, 2021

*If Timothy comes, see that he has nothing to fear among you, for he is doing the work of the Lord just as I am; therefore let no one despise him. 1 Cor. 16:10-11a*

We are now engaged in the work of closing down my pastorate in Verona. As part of that work I come today to the second in a series of three sermons themed around my departure.

Our theme last week was “My Hope for Salem’s Future.” Under that title I charged you to remember your past, be at peace with one another, have realistic expectations, and seek the kingdom of God by focusing on Christ.

The sermon next week will be “My Song of Grateful Praise.” It will involve, as the title suggests, both looking back and giving thanks.

The subject today is “How to Welcome Your New Pastor.”

Much of your future as a congregation depends, under God, on how well you welcome your new pastor. In speaking of the new pastor, I refer both to the interim who will take up the work shortly and to my successor, the next resident pastor, whom you will elect much farther down the road.

There are at least four positive lines of approach toward welcoming your new pastor. I hope that you will take them all. Each one will work toward establishing the future strength of the church. Fail along any one of these and trouble will ensue. So listen carefully.

*Trust the process our denomination has in place for selecting new pastors.*

Salem has not used this process for thirty years. Many of you may not know it exists. But it is there. It still works. It is a proven method for helping the congregation to rediscover and reshape its identity under God for a new day, and it is a tried and true way toward discerning who God is calling to lead you in bringing about the identity you envision. Trust the process and you will be led by God to a candidate with the proper credentials, authorization, and skills to lead a congregation as fine, healthy, and full of potential as this one. Some congregations have short-changed this process, not trusting it, and they have leaders without the background and theological depth pastoral ministry requires in days such as these.

You are already engaged in the process the denomination wisely has in place for selecting a new pastor. The Council has been working under the guidance of Lorraine Ceniceris, our Area Conference Minister for the Southwest Association of the Wisconsin Conference of the United Church of Christ. She is and will be your guide through what is known as the search and call process. She has recommended an interim, taking into consideration the present-day needs of the

congregation and interim availability. The Council has considered her recommendation, has been in conversation with him, has come to agree that he is a good fit for Salem's needs now, and has entered into contract with him on behalf of the church. This is the way interims are chosen in the United Church of Christ. The chief work of the interim will be not simply holding down the fort but helping you re-imagine what God is calling Salem to do and to be in Verona and beyond given the present context of the congregation.

Eventually the congregation will name, by way of a careful nominating process, not simple volunteering, a search committee which will then conduct a national search for a new permanent pastor. The committee will be looking for someone with the gifts, qualifications, and credentials to lead the church in light of the goals the congregation has determined under God. This is why the process takes time and why it should not be hurried. A company in business or industry can make a new hire rather nimbly and just change the name on the door. A congregation needs to patiently reflect on what God is asking of it – demanding of it – here and now and the search committee needs to discern who it is that God wishes to bring here to serve. The congregation will eventually vote – yea or nay – on the one whom the search committee believes God is wishing it to recommend. Only one candidate will be presented for an up or down vote.

I hasten to add here that the search committee's work is to be done in strict confidence. The purpose of the confidentiality is not to keep secrets from the wider congregation but to avoid the development of camps within the congregation so that there is no lobbying for one candidate or another, which can lead to hard feelings and resentment.

The main point is that you will be laying the best groundwork toward welcoming your new pastor if you trust the process our denomination has in place for selecting new pastors. It works. It works rather well. And you are not alone. You do not have to figure everything out for yourselves. Plug into this process. Trust it. And all should go smoothly and happily.

*Treat the new pastor as the individual God has made and is still calling him or her to be.*

Understand and expect that the new minister will be different from me and will conduct ministry in a way different from the way I have gone about the work.

God has guided me – I think – in using preaching and teaching to lead the church with something of a scholar's mind and a pastor's heart. My emphasis has been on preaching, teaching, writing, and pastoral contact. I think God has wanted me to use the scriptures to shed light from heaven on life today, all in way of helping you to imagine that the living God is present to you, right alongside you, in living ways. I have come at this task from the perspective of the Reformed tradition and as a liberal evangelical, which is to say as one who is too liberal for the conservatives and too conservative for the liberals. I have tried to have a growing edge in this work – ever striving to know more and be better – but there comes a time when more is needed than a growing edge.

What is important for you to understand is that my style of ministry is not the only one there is. Paul did not work the way Peter worked, and Peter did not work in the same way as John. Likewise, the new pastor will work in a way differently than you have become accustomed

to in me. That is as it should be! God calls particular people to particular places at a particular time for a particular purpose. And half the fun of retiring is getting out of God's way so God can do a new thing here with you and through you under the guidance of a new leader with new skills and interests.

So treat the new pastor as an individual whom God has blessed and called into ministry. I go farther than I should when I say I hope you find someone who can preach, but – Lord! – think of this: you may even find someone who can sing!

*Open your hearts and lives to the new worker as you have opened them to me.*

Here is where I come to the most deeply tender part of my message for you today. It is tender because it is the closest to our hearts.

Ministry is personal. It is rooted in relationship. The denomination, through an Association, gives a person the authority to be a member of the clergy in the United Church of Christ and wear the stole of ordination. But the authority to be a pastor comes from the congregation when its members open their hearts and lives to the one in the pastoral office.

A story may explain this best. The University of Dubuque Theological Seminary graduated me at the head of my class and awarded me a Master of Divinity. What was then the Northern Illinois Association of the United Church of Christ ordained me to a ministry of Word and Sacrament in the UCC. St. John's United Church of Christ in Belvidere followed the denomination's process for selecting a new minister and voted me to take up residence in their parsonage and pulpit. But people like Mary Mayberry made me the pastor of that church. Mary Mayberry was a little old lady and a member of St. John's. She invited me to her home one afternoon when I was still rather fresh from seminary. She sat with me on her couch and brought out a small spiral notebook. She said, "I think you will be the minister to do my funeral. Here are the songs and the scriptures I would like." What a gift! There was a woman looking at life's last and most personal moment, and she invited me into it – she began building the pastoral relationship.

Just so here. The Southwest Association of the United Church of Christ approved my credentials in 1991; Salem's search committee selected me as the candidate to recommend to the congregation; and the congregation voted me to become Salem's new minister. But people like Fritz and Alice Wittwer helped me to become the pastor of the church by opening their lives to me. I started here on August 1, 1991; the Wittwers celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary just a couple of weeks later. They invited Sherrol and me to the party and we started to become a real part of Salem and Salem a real part of us. This has continued in and with family after family through wedding receptions, hospital visits, deathbeds, funerals, and all the frontier stuff of life. I am an introvert by nature – not a good mixer in crowds or small groups – but by inviting me into the holy ground of your lives, you have given me spiritual, emotional, and personal authority to be your pastor.

So this is the fundamental reason I cannot accept any request from Salem's people to conduct a wedding, baptism, or funeral after I leave. It is not because I don't love you. I do! Dr. Snider found your names written on my heart when he opened me up for surgery 18 years ago. I

will turn down those requests because I love Salem and because weddings, baptisms, funerals, and the like are the holy ground where pastoral relationships – relationships that can last for thirty years – first take root and grow and deepen.

Open your hearts and lives to the new worker. The one who begins a stranger can become a pastoral friend if you let it happen.

Now the fourth line of approach which I am about to mention toward welcoming your new pastor may be less important than the first three, but I say it anyway for my successor's sake.

*Be sensitive to the idea that the new pastor will tire of hearing my name.*

Right after we did our remodeling and new construction in 2011 there was some thought of hanging the pictures of the former pastors of Salem in the conference room. I try to lead at meetings with a light touch, but I put my foot down pretty hard at that suggestion. The conference room, when it functions as the church's main meeting room, is the place where ideas are proposed, projects are envisioned, and plans are made. No new leader trying to find his or her place will want the old guard staring down at them. Sometimes it is good to be out from under the cloud of witnesses, especially when it is just the fog of the past.

Les Kingsbury was a wonderful man whom I came to know and like. He served as the interim of St. John's before I started there in 1982. Before I met him, though, it seemed as though he was in every conversation that took place at church. It was Dr. Kingsbury this and Dr. Kingsbury that. There I was with my degrees, my ordination, my robe, my stole, my readiness, and my enthusiasm. I was full of myself – perhaps too much – but the congregation was still full of him. I came to wince every time I heard his name.

Now it is natural for parishioners to talk about their former pastor. That really can't be avoided. But it is also natural for the new pastor to almost grimace at the old pastor's name. I don't know that there is anything to do about it. I'm just calling upon you to be sensitive to it.

My conviction is that the Spirit will guide you to the one whom God is calling to lead Salem in the next steps and stages of its life as a congregation and in yours personally as a Christian.

While God is already at work calling that person, God is now at work calling you to act on that person's behalf by readying yourself to welcome him or her. Trust the process. Treat the new worker as an individual. Open your hearts and lives to him or her. Be sensitive to the fact that he or she will tire of hearing of me.

Take a lesson from someone who used to occupy these pews: Minnie Schneider, whom some of you may still remember. The church produced a little flyer prior to my arrival in 1991. The flyer bore a photograph of our family and a brief biographical description of me. I do not remember exactly when it was, but I was in Minnie Schneider's home one afternoon. It was some relatively long time after my arrival and just before Minnie made the difficult move out of her little house on Marietta Street. While I was there, I noticed that Minnie had that little flyer

taped to her wall by her telephone. And it was Mary Mayberry all over again. It showed she anticipated me, expected me, welcomed me, and gave me a place in her heart as her pastor even before I arrived. I can't tell you how much that meant to me.

I suspect I do not need to tell you how to welcome your new pastor. You are a sensible people full of kindness as well as love for your church. Let that kindness and love be your guide and your new relationship with your new pastor will be rich and full and growing in trust and purpose.