

"The State of Westminster"

Inviting All, Exploring Faith, Experiencing God

August 21, 2016

Rev. Hal Murry, Teaching Elder (Interim Pastor)



I. Overview: Interim Ministry at Westminster: June, 2013 -

- **Beginnings** Hal Murry began as Westminster's full time Interim Pastor in June, 2013. Hal followed Mark Achtemeier who served for five months as Westminster's part-time "bridge" pastor following the retirement of Tom Young in December, 2012. Interim Pastors serve on the basis of a one-year maximum renewable contract with the Session and are not "called" and "installed" by the congregation. This arrangement allows for maximum flexibility for all parties to the agreement (Session, Presbytery, Pastor) for churches in the midst of transition. Typically, Interim Pastors are given specific items to be addressed during the interim period.
- **Renewable Contract** Hal's one-year contract was renewed for 2014, 2015 and now runs through 2016. One benefit of the nature of this arrangement is that the Interim Pastor frequently initiates conversations related to goals and strategies with the Personnel Committee, Session and the congregation. This helps to assure that everyone is on the same page during this transitional period. The potential for renewal of the contract is discussed in the Fall of each year.
- **Initial "Understandings"** When Hal began in June, 2013, there was an "informal" (unwritten and non-binding) understanding among all parties (Westminster's Session, the Interim Search Committee, the Presbytery's Committee on Ministry and the candidates for the position) that this would be an "extended" interim (estimated 2 to 5 years) to help Westminster address both immediate crises and make headway on long-standing, systemic issues before the Presbytery would approve the formation of a Pastor Nominating Committee to search for a new called/installed pastor.
- **Job Description/Goals** Here are the goals established in Westminster's Interim Pastor's job description:
 1. Provide initiative and leadership for the healing of divisions within the congregation
 2. Assess the health of the congregation: spiritually, financially, organizationally.
 3. Provide leadership in discerning next steps

4. Engage the congregation in a mission study process to clarify purpose, values, needs and direction
 5. Cultivate a healthy and faithful congregational life
 6. Help deal with grief, anxiety and resistance to change
 7. Explore possibilities for new mission and ministries based on the resources and passions of the congregation
- **Additional Needs** In addition, Westminster's Interim Search Committee articulated additional concerns during the interview process:
 8. An immediate financial crisis
 9. Continued recovery from turmoil and conflict that emerged during the previous called/installed Head of Staff's ministry
 10. A desire for spiritual deepening

II. Addressing the Goals

As of the summer of 2016, every goal/need listed above has been addressed. In many instances, the best responses involve initiating longer-term processes, the outcomes of which remain to be determined. Here is a brief status report on responses to date on each goal.

1. *Provide initiative and leadership for the healing of divisions within the congregation.* With the help of two gifted organizers, I began this ministry in the summer of 2013 by inviting the sharing of the hopes and concerns of the congregation through a series of small-group meetings, most hosted in the homes of Westminster members. Called "Moments with Murry," these meetings allowed me to quickly meet many of the friends and members of the church and to identify issues of common concern. Findings were reported in the *Hotline* (church newsletter) annual report and sermons, and served as the basis for a number of initiatives, most importantly, Westminster's Vision and Mission Statement, approved in 2015.
2. *Assess the health of the congregation, spiritually, financially, organizationally.* 2016's new initiative related to organizational assessment and health is "**Recommendations from the**

Reorganization Task Force" approved by the Session in July. These recommendations will provide a template for administrative, governance and ministry changes ahead. This Task Force report is attached.

3. *Provide leadership in discerning next steps.* I have a particular "advantage" in this regard. I've worked with scores of churches in transition over the years. Though no two situations are exactly alike, there are similarities and experience helps! I work hard to foster conditions in which leaders can discern God's call and act on it. As Presbyterians we believe this happens best through group process. Frequently this involves reading, study, discussion and prayer by leaders who have a passion for the topic and are willing to make the time to participate in group discernment processes.
4. *Engage the congregation in a mission study process to clarify purpose, values, needs and direction.* This was a major accomplishment for Westminster in early 2015. The *2020 Mission and Vision Statement* is the foundation for all that has followed: "*Inviting All, Exploring Faith, Experiencing God.*"
5. *Cultivate a healthy and faithful congregational life.* Measures of the "health" of congregations vary. Positive indicators at Westminster include: Financial support for Westminster's ministry and mission has increased for three consecutive years. Average Sunday worship attendance has increased by 11% since 2013. These positive indicators stand in contrast to the following realities:
 - Average Sunday worship attendance decreased in more than 80% of Presbyterian congregations over the same period. This trend is longstanding and reflects broad trends in American culture.
 - I have presided at more than 40 funerals for members and friends of Westminster

When it comes to "faithfulness," every Interim Pastor has the responsibility to provide leadership that brings the congregation into compliance with Presbyterian standards. For Westminster this has involved:

- Re-committing to filing required denominational Annual reports and to having our Session minutes reviewed for compliance with Presbyterian polity. Hours of labor by gifted and committed volunteer Clerks of Session have made this possible.
 - Reviewing and then "rightsizing" Westminster's active roster to reflect current realities. This "required" task (by our polity) had not been accomplished for years and so it was especially arduous. We've been blessed by countless hours offered by dedicated lay leaders to accomplish this.
6. *Help deal with grief, anxiety and resistance to change.* Increasing needs for care and support along with decreasing resources for professional pastoral leadership led to the creation in 2016 of the Westminster Care Team, a group of volunteers who find ways to reach out and express God's love and our care to first-time visitors as well as to any friend or member of the church who could use a kind word or a listening ear. (Thanks to leader Glinda Manternach who helped launch this initiative.)
7. *Explore possibilities for new mission and ministries based on the resources and passions of the congregation.* Several initiatives are indicative of the innovation occurring in response to this goal:
- The emergence of two "Missional Communities"
 - One is seeking to discern how God is already at work in Dubuque and how best to join God in that mission (Leader: Lindsay James)
 - The other seeks to establish a new church for the growing Mandarin-speaking community in Dubuque (Leaders: Tina and Moses Wu)
 - A grants fund has been established by Westminster's Mission Team (formerly Mission Committee) to encourage friends and members of Westminster to engage in hands-on mission in order to bless our community and nurture our faith (*see Westminster Mission Statement "Experiencing God"*). The first grant was awarded to a Mission Team led by Rich Henderson for establishment of the Mission Garden. ALL produce

from the garden is given away to help the hungry in our community.

- Two leaders have a sense of call and are working together to develop new "hospitality" initiatives to lead us in making Westminster an even more welcoming place for newcomers. *"We would welcome you as we would welcome Christ himself."*
 - Technology "strides" have been made in recent years. Numerous cosmetic and technology upgrades have occurred in Westminster's classrooms. Soon additional speakers will be installed in the sanctuary in an attempt to address longstanding audio concerns.
 - Westminster's Personnel function is greatly improved. New job descriptions have been written. All employees now receive annual reviews providing feedback on their job performance. New staff has been hired; Westminster's Personnel Policy has been painstakingly reviewed and rewritten.
 - Westminster's Finance Committee has reviewed and revised its policies. Annual audits by the University of Dubuque and strong "internal control" policies are key components safeguarding Westminster's financial assets.
 - the Property Committee invested months developing a systematic long-range plan for addressing Westminster's major maintenance needs.
8. *An immediate financial crisis.* Gifted leadership and hard work by dedicated lay leaders has reinvigorated Westminster's Annual Stewardship campaign. Financial support for the operating fund of the church has increased for three consecutive years. To God be the glory!
9. *Continued recovery from turmoil and conflict that emerged during the previous called/installed Head of Staff's ministry.*
Westminster's Session has been resilient in the midst of recent

conflicts, some of which have long "roots." By "resilient" I mean that the Session has not succumbed to the temptation to recycle old conflicts, a frequent indicator of organizational dysfunction. Increasingly we have been able to engage disagreements without negative systemic consequences. In our discussions, Session members have agreed to abide by "group norms" designed to remind us both who we are as leaders and "whose" we are as Christians. Soon I'll begin more teaching on the ways leaders can helpfully respond to systemic organizational conflict.

10. A desire for spiritual deepening. What can be better for a pastor than to hear this request?! I've allowed this "desire" and your feedback to inform both my preaching style and content, offering weekly insight into the original context of Biblical passages discussed at worship. Consistently Session members express appreciation for the monthly Bible study which opens our meetings (and often "previews" Sunday's upcoming sermon). A recent summertime Adult Formation class on Biblical interpretation for Presbyterians had an average attendance of 50. Years of dedicated leadership by Nancy Wallace have set the stage for a bright future. Meanwhile Westminster's Youth Formation Team (with staff leadership from always learning and innovating Lisa Fast) continues to create quality opportunities for young people to have experiences of Christ's love in Christian community.

III. The Most Significant Ongoing, Long-Range Challenges Facing Westminster

Here's my list:

1. Demographics -- a challenge for most mainline Protestant congregations in the USA and a particular one for Westminster.
2. Changing Culture -- Mainline Protestant churches continue a long struggle to adapt to functioning in a non-supportive cultural environment. Christians are no longer "formed" by the culture; nor is the "average" American expected (or even encouraged) to participate in the life of a congregation.

3. Physical Facility -- Westminster's current congregation numbers around 300, considerably smaller than the size of the congregation (1,000-1,400) that strained the building's capacity in its early years. The physical plant represents a huge investment by generations of Christians. The question now is, can the existing congregation "get in front" of long-term maintenance requirements (through bequests/endowments) or, will the costs of maintaining the existing facility outpace the ability and/or willingness of the existing congregation to pay?

IV. Conclusion

Thanks for the privilege of serving as your Pastor for these years. Your transitional needs have called out the best of my gifts and experience. Thanks for your engagement with my preaching every Sunday (or at least three Sundays a month!). Thanks for taking seriously (and not being offended) by the hard questions I ask and challenging visions I share. This is a place where God's Spirit is stirring. May all that we accomplish, and try (!) to accomplish be motivated by our desire to follow Christ and to know him more. Peace to you!