

November 14, 2022

Dear Congregants:

The results of the All Church Survey showed that First Congregational Church is a strong community with vibrant music, religious education, social justice and witness activities, and worship ministries. The survey also showed that many members of the congregation were concerned about the finances of our church. This past week the board met to address the financial situation of the church and have received two significant announcements from our pastors. This letter is to update you about the facts concerning:

- organizational changes recommended by the FCC Finance Committee and agreed to by the Board to address our financial situation;
- Pastor Jessica Shine's letter of resignation to the Board and staff on November 11, her public declaration of her resignation during worship on November 13, and her November 13 letter of resignation to the congregation;
- Pastor Jonathan's announcement of his retirement to the Board on November 7, his sharing of his retirement with the FCC staff on November 13, and his November 14, letter of retirement to the congregation.

I. Background:

Our Financial Condition

On October 20, 2022 John Soper, Finance Committee Chair, reported that the Finance Committee had concluded that First Congregational Church cannot sustain its current spending. The Finance Committee recommended that the Board plan and implement a transition process to move the church from its current two-pastor staffing model to a one-pastor model. John noted that both pastors were involved in the Finance Committee's deliberations, and both fully support the recommendation. (See John Soper's letter that is attached to this memo).

It is the Church Board's belief that two intersecting trends have contributed to our financial situation. First, regular attendance at worship is lower than before COVID (this mirrors a national trend). Second, several of FCC's most generous members passed away over the past two+ years. We are now a smaller church with smaller financial resources to cover our staffing, facilities, and ministries.

II. Board Deliberations and Decisions

On November 7, the Church Board met in Executive Session to discuss the Finance Committee recommendation. Prior to the meeting, Pastor Jonathan announced his retirement sometime between February and April, 2023. The Board reached consensus on two separate issues.

Issue One: Move from a two-pastor model to a one pastor. Given our financial situation we do not anticipate filling an Associate Pastor position in the foreseeable future.

Issue Two: Planning for transition to new Senior Minister. In keeping with UCC Synod recommendations and best practices in church leadership and ministry, FCC will immediately begin the process of hiring an Intentional Interim Pastor.

The United Church of Christ (UCC) Synod recommends that UCC churches utilize an Intentional Interim Pastor in times of pastoral transition. According to Synod guidelines, an Intentional Interim Pastor is a specially trained minister from outside the church (in this case outside FCC), who will not be a candidate for the senior pastor position and will serve essentially as a “transition coach” for the church.

III. How do these plans fit into our current Stewardship Campaign?

The Stewardship campaign is off to a strong start with the inspiring and uplifting voices of members sharing their stories of transformational giving. The board’s goal is also to be as honest and transparent with you as possible regarding our current financial situation and upcoming pastoral changes. Change and times of transition are never easy, and we believe it is important to provide you with the most complete information we have, as you prayerfully consider your pledge for 2023. Remember, our pledges reflect the faith we have in FCC, in each other, and in the revitalized and re-imagined future we envision together.

IV. Scheduled Board “Listening Sessions”

The Board has planned three “listening sessions” to get feedback and answer questions on the upcoming changes. These sessions will be held at the church on Wednesday, November 16, at 5:30 p.m.; Monday, November 21 at 6:30 p.m.; and Monday, November 28 at 5:30 p.m.

V. Conclusion

Our pastors have given FCC a sacred gift with their decisions to leave FCC to allow us to chart a new path forward. We will continue to experience the grief of our loss of these two servants of the church. We anticipate a slow recovery from the effects of COVID-19 for FCC and Christian congregations throughout the world will continue. As with all challenges, we will seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit and listen to what God is saying. Our church may be smaller, but we are resilient. It is time for us to come together as one body and chart a new path forward. It is going to take all of us and will require everyone’s support and commitment. Jesus taught his disciples in Mark 10:27 “With mortals this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God”. Our faith will sustain us and together we will emerge stronger and ready to embrace both the challenges and joys ahead as progressive Christians.

I will send a series of Questions and Answers about the process via email later this week. Thank you for your support, understanding and prayers.

Daniel Close, FCC Moderator