

The United Church of Strafford

P.O Box 124
Strafford, VT 05072



April, 2024

Dear Church Family,

I am writing to let you know about some big and important changes that are in the works. They are the result of many conversations that the Church Council and I have had over the past several months. In summary, they are:

1. Pastoral Care: I am once again providing pastoral care upon request with individuals, couples or groups, including in person or on video or phone calls. I will also officiate at memorial services.

2. Volunteer or Paid Opportunities: In order to free up my time to do pastoral care, the Council and I ask that you please consider volunteering to help out with the streaming and recording of worship services, or administrative work like copying bulletins (these positions could also be paid);

3. My Retirement: I began to move toward retirement when I reduced to one-third time in December, 2021, and I plan to retire fully from the church at the end of January, 2025;

4. Future Directions Planning: The Church Council and I are discussing a new planning process. The last one we did was when I began serving here in 2017-18. Much has changed in the world and church since we arrived at that Future Directions Vision. It's time to talk again.

Here is a little more information about each of these:

1. Pastoral Care

Before I say anything else about this I want to apologize to anyone who felt abandoned or let down or hurt in any way because I was not offering the full range of pastoral care for the past two years. Please forgive me, and please believe that my heart ached as I saw needs and was unable to meet them. I am very relieved to be taking this work back on now, but I know that does not help those who had needs in the recent past that I did not meet. I am so sorry.

I began my move toward retirement toward the end of 2021 when I reduced from 1/2 to 1/3rd time. Pastoral care hours are difficult to contain, so in order to hold the job to 1/3rd I gave up pastoral care and continued to lead worship and work with the church leadership, as well as oversee the streaming and recording of services and perform some administrative tasks.

Pastoral care was covered by an ordained chaplain when the Council and I made this change, but when that care-giver retired, the burden of meeting pastoral needs in times of crisis landed on the shoulders of a small core of church leaders who were already overburdened and were not trained to do that work. It has become clear that the church needs me to return to this form of ministry. I am glad because I have missed serving you in this moving and meaningful way

The problem remains, though, how to handle the inevitable times when my ministerial load may as much as double in a given week because of a pastoral emergency or memorial service. The Trustees and Church Council have worked with me to come up with a kind of “comp time” system to make up for the hours over 1/3rd time that I give to pastoral care.

2. Volunteer or Paid Opportunities

The Church Council and I are freeing up my time for pastoral care in part by relieving me of responsibility for overseeing the streaming, recording and posting of services. We have two teens who are available to do the actual work most weeks, but we could use a team of adults to support and oversee them. We have one adult (Christina Robinson) who has been trained to do the streaming and recording. We could use a few more who could stand in on those rare Sundays when the teens can't be there. We also could divide tasks up, like setting up or putting equipment away, hosting the Zoom or editing the video, or posting the video and text and publicizing their availability. Much of this can be done remotely.

In addition, we need administrative support for things like copying bulletins, assembling the hymn folders for some services, helping compile the Annual Report and other tasks.

We can configure these as paid positions if that would make a difference for you.

Please be in touch with me or Council Chair, Joey Hawkins, if you would like to explore taking on any little or not-so-little part of this!

3. My Retirement

I intend to retire fully from the church at the end of January 2025. I am bi-vocational as a pastor-writer, and it has always been a struggle to contain the church work enough to focus on editing and publishing my writing. I am at the age where it's now or never to focus on those tasks. I also look forward to increasing my time grandparenting, and I suspect Christina will appreciate having me more available as her under-gardener, as well as firewood provider.

I fell in love with this church at first sight when I came to a service over forty years ago led by the Rev. Dana Douglass. I served as a Deacon and on the Pastoral Relations Committee and the Search Committee that called the Rev. Regine Harding. This congregation shepherded me as I

made the transition to ordained ministry. My experience and love of this congregation is long and deep. Christina has been part of the church only for seven years, but her love is just as deep. We intend to remain in Strafford after I retire, and while ministerial ethics require strict boundaries for my engagement with the church, we are hoping that Christina may stay involved.

4. Future Directions Planning

I am very excited to help you think about future directions for the congregation before I go. We did this seven years ago when I began serving as pastor here, and it is work I love to do.

Enormous changes have come since 2017 to the earth and our nation, and Strafford has not escaped them entirely. Church attendance has also continued to decline nation-wide and especially in Vermont. Younger generations and young families may well have greater spiritual needs than ever, yet are more estranged from institutional religion than ever.

The Church Council and other leaders have been asking ourselves how our congregation can serve our community, nation and earth in this crucial time, and serve especially younger generations and others who have spiritual needs, yet who for various reasons are not comfortable in a Christian church. We are at the beginning stage of this thinking and don't yet know what form the process will take, but I hope you will join us when opportunities arise to participate in this important and sacred conversation.

Please feel free to ask me questions about any of these topics, and feel even freer to volunteer to help the church in any way that matches your gifts and interests, and please remember that I am now available to provide pastoral care. You can email me at unitedchurchofstrafford@gmail.com or call my home landline at 333-9967.

Thank you!

Grace and peace,
Tom