

## A Pastoral Response to our Financial Situation

If you have received and read your March newsletter, then you know that we are facing some financial difficulties at our church. I would like to share some of my thoughts on where we are, how we got here, and what the future may hold.

First of all, I want to thank you for the many ways in which you continue to support the church. Due to the pandemic, the past year has been difficult for our church, nation, and world. Some in our congregation have lost family and friends or their employment, while others are facing uncertainty and loneliness. Throughout this time, I continue to be grateful for the many volunteers who step up to assist with worship services, children's ministry, prayer group, calling team, committees, and other ministries. It has been a blessing to see you continue to be the body of Christ during this time.

When this pandemic started about a year ago, we didn't know how it would impact the church financially. Thankfully, giving remained steady for much of 2020. Another bit of good news is that when we received pledges for 2021, those who pledged increased their pledges by a total of around \$8,000. That is amazing to have happen during a pandemic! Thank you to those of you who have increased your giving, those of you who continue to give what you are able, and those of you who cannot give financially but continue to support the church through prayer and service.

Beginning in the fall of 2020, we started facing some financial challenges when giving started to decrease. Even with the generous support of those who increased their pledges, the overall pledges for 2021 decreased by about \$41,000. Some of this is due to the death of some of our beloved members, but the majority is due to people withholding their pledges due to their unhappiness with how the greater United Methodist Church and I have implemented COVID precautions. While the church's budget for 2021 has been reduced due to our apportionments being lowered, it has not been reduced enough to cover this significant decrease in pledged giving.

The challenge before us is very real, but we need to keep perspective and remember that we are going through a pandemic. I cannot speak for other denominations or other states, but I do know that many other United Methodist Churches in Iowa are facing similar challenges, including financial difficulties and lowered attendance figures. Prior to the pandemic, many promising things were happening at our church. I was particularly encouraged by the number of new small group teachers and participants we had been having. Regarding M.Y.F. and worship attendance, it is true that the number of families and children attending has decreased over time, and it can be a struggle to find teachers. The challenge of reaching out to new families and recruiting teachers is only going to be magnified during a pandemic. I have faith that momentum will return to all aspects of church life after the pandemic is over.

That being said, if current financial trends continue, many of the possibilities mentioned in the finance committee's update in the newsletter could take place. As you may have heard, our Christian education director, Ronda Evans, has resigned, effective April 7<sup>th</sup>. If current trends continue, we will not be able to hire a replacement, which means that our children's ministries will need to be coordinated purely through the use of volunteers. We could get to the point where we may not be able to pay salaries for our other staff as well (Our paid staff includes a secretary, custodian, four pianists, a drummer, and pastor.\*). This would obviously not be beneficial to the health of our congregation, but I do not think it has to get to that point. I understand that not everybody agrees with the decisions that have been made regarding COVID precautions, but the best way to get through this difficult time is to support one another so that we as a congregation can come out of this and continue making disciples of Jesus Christ in our community.

What can you do? First, pray for the church, that we would have wisdom and unity as we continue to navigate our way through this time. Second, your financial support is greatly appreciated. If you are unable to support the church financially, do not feel bad. There are other, non-monetary ways in which you can support the church. Remember, our membership vows include supporting the church through our prayers, presence (virtual or otherwise), gifts (financial or talents), service, and witness. If you are currently supporting the church financially, thank you for what you do. Giving itself is a form of ministry and a spiritual discipline. Some of you may have had to decrease your giving for unrelated reasons, such as a job loss or cut-back in hours, which is understandable. If you have stopped or significantly lowered your giving due to your displeasure with COVID related decisions, I would ask that you prayerfully reconsider. With the unrolling of the vaccine, I have hope that a return to normal will be coming sooner rather than later. If we all band together, we can continue spreading Christ's love to the world through the ministries of Harlan First U.M.C.

God bless,  
Pastor Mike

\* Correction on March 3<sup>rd</sup>. Our choir director was inadvertently omitted from the list of staff.