



October 30, 2019

THINKING PAST TOMORROW

Today I am pleased to share news of a milestone in my ministry with the Hills Church. The summer of 2020 will mark six years since I began my tenure as this congregation's fourteenth settled senior minister. Our church plans for and encourages its ministers to take a three-month sabbatical every six years, and I will mark the milestone with a sabbatical leave from May-July, 2020, a time for renewal in my call to ministry.

I am also happy to share the news that our church has been awarded a grant from the Lilly Endowment Clergy Renewal Program. This program supports the health of local congregations and the clergy who serve them by funding plans for renewal that would otherwise be unaffordable. The Lilly Endowment's vice president for religion, Christopher L. Coble, wrote that "Pastors play an important role in nourishing the spiritual lives of individuals and in guiding the work of the Christian congregations they serve. Through these grants, we seek to honor pastors for their extraordinary service and enable them to engage in a brief period of rest and renewal. We have learned that such experiences invigorate the leadership of pastors and bring new vitality to their congregations as well."

With support from Church Council, the Board of Deacons, and Pastor Parish Relations, I designed a grant proposal based on the theme "thinking past tomorrow," a phrase I borrowed from the musical *Hamilton*. These words describe a sabbatical plan that will focus on exploring places that hold deep memories of Christian spirituality. By immersing myself in this broad view of history, I hope to renew a perspective for the church's future.

Beginning in May, Betsy and I will travel to Italy, Scotland, and Ireland. Our sons and their significant others will join us in Italy, where we will visit Rome, Assisi, and Florence during an extended stay near Bologna. In Scotland, we will spend a week in residence with the Iona Community, a Christian ecumenical community that has reimagined monastic practices on an island with a long history of spirituality. Finally, in Ireland, we will visit the places where my ancestors lived.

As Betsy and I prepare for this sabbatical leave, I am grateful to this congregation for this opportunity. Next year will mark 19 years since I was ordained, and this is my first chance for a sabbatical leave that is focused on rest and renewal; my previous sabbatical, from the church I previously served, was for doctoral studies.

We chose these months for the sabbatical to coincide with the end of the program year, after Easter, as the church moves into the calmer weeks of summer. The Board of Deacons, which is responsible

for clergy positions, has developed a preliminary plan for pastors Judy Swahnberg and Anne Marie Holloway to share pastoral leadership, along with the opportunity to invite guest preachers for some of the Sundays during my leave. This will be a great opportunity to hear new voices, and perhaps some returning preachers.

There will be more conversation in the months ahead as we prepare for this opportunity. After Easter, I will present two sermons on the theme “thinking past tomorrow,” and I will pick up the theme again in the fall, after our return. In the meantime, I invite your suggestions and your questions.

I’ll see you in church.

Peace,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Matt". The signature is stylized with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Rev. Dr. Matthew Wooster
Senior Minister