

According to Mark . . . June 2017

This month we started a new chapter in the life of Townsend Congregational Church as we voted on May 21 to pursue a permanent call to me as your settled Pastor. Has it been three years already? We might remember that on my first week here our church was struck by lightning, requiring the rebuilding of the steeple, the belfry, and the bell tower, as well as replacement of the 2-story columns on the front portico. This is just one example of how what we thought was going to be an insurmountable challenge not only turned out to be solvable, but we rallied and came in largely on time, on budget, and most importantly, launching us with new energy to begin doing the work in building the Kingdom of God.

Our dear friend and member, Jim Gage, (never one to mince words) said after the work was done something like, "it looks like we're in business again." That fall of 2014 we began to dream what it would look like to live into the dream of my interim call; Revitalizing our Church. What we learned was that it's hard work. It requires us to look outside our walls and into the world. Outside our own attitudes and pre-conceived notions of what church should be like to start knowing what church should do. And most importantly, it required us to start to participate more fully in the needs of others in the community, not just inviting them into our building, but starting to take our message of love, kindness, justice, mercy, and forgiveness to the Townsend in which we live. We had to start to not just follow the words of Jesus, but start to become servants of Jesus' message, and faithful stewards of what we have been given in time, place, and resources here at TCC. We learned that thriving churches share gladly, abundantly, and freely.

And we took that work to heart, recognizing that we could start slowly with new ways to engage our ecumenical faith partners in town. We now do joint services where we can on Palm Sunday, the Blessing of the Animals, and with our Catholic brothers and sisters attending our Christmas Eve lessons and carols as we then follow our light into the Christmas night to midnight mass at St. John's. We get out of our hot stuffy sanctuaries in August and do a community hymn sing as we share each others' musical gifts and traditions, singing songs we all know and learning new ones from each of our Methodist, Catholic, and Congregational traditions. We all turn out for Greg's Run; one of the premier community events every Columbus Day, as all the churches help with running the event, the kitchen, and the race. And we have coordinated our schedules so that at each church during the school year, families can come to one church on Wednesdays and receive a hot, free meal with a free will offering that helps support those with food scarcity needs through the purchase of Hannaford gift cards.

We have done lots of other stuff too: We expanded our facebook presence and put up a new website where we can post information, sermons, and take online contributions. We kick-started the Deacon's Fund so that we can help our own families in need and those in the greater community who have fallen on hard times. We started a Stephens' Ministry program to help those who just need someone to listen, and we have won a grant for \$15,000 that, along with our partners at Townsend PD and NM Cares, will help educate our community to drug awareness and offer hope and healing for families impacted by drugs and the opioid crisis sweeping the country. We also offer individuals and families access to mental

health services that are otherwise unavailable in Townsend at low/no cost so that people can get the help they need locally.

Jesus says "If you love me, keep my commandments." Folks, we are turning the corner from a re-vitalized church which is thinking about its future to becoming the vital church which is doing it. I have been proud of this congregation for stepping forward and boldly into some uncertainties, some of which have worked out and others which never fully developed. But we are always, always leading with our hearts, minds, souls, and spirits, looking to spread our message of love and mercy to all, and figuring out how to show our love for Christ to the world. It's why we are gathered, and it's why I am here and will be for a good, long time. Because like you, I want in on what we're doing and where we're headed. I want to enjoy the ride as we start to live God's will for each of us, and all of us.

Thanks be to God,

Pastor Mark