

## Pastor Jon Pedersen's Annual Report 2020

Dear Siblings in Christ,

**2020 began so normally . . .** It is hard to believe that when we began 2020, it looked like it was going to be a “normal” year. In January 2020, we were making final preparations for our second SOTH delegation to Nicaragua in February. As a strategy for raising money for the materials for our work project, we sold pieces of pie and we created a raffle to see which baseball jersey I would have to wear on Major League Baseball’s opening day. Scott Likins’ name was drawn, and I was to bear the indignity of sporting a St. Louis Cardinal jersey (gulp) on March 26<sup>th</sup>. (Little did we know that opening day would be postponed until July 24<sup>th</sup>.) Our Nicaragua trip of eight delegates from February 9-16 was fantastic!

On February 26, Lent began as any other Lent, with ashes imposed, spaghetti eaten, and the beginning of a 40-day fast. By then, we were hearing reports of something called the *coronavirus* and we were all beginning to wonder how it was going to affect us. In the meantime, we were making our regular plans for VBS, Summer confirmation camp (we had 18 signed up), and our high school work camp in West Virginia (we had 4 signed up). We were beginning to make plans for the next ELCA Youth Gathering in 2021 and asking ourselves how we were going to raise the necessary money.

Two weeks later, the Illinois Department of Public Health began restricting public gatherings, first gatherings over 500, then gatherings over 100, then 50, and finally 25. Within a week, our best laid plans for summer youth ministry were falling apart one by one. Our last in-person worship (without masks and limits on attendance) was March 15<sup>th</sup>. On March 21<sup>st</sup> we celebrated our first online worship service. By the end of March, our preschool was closed for the rest of the school year and we were working remotely from our homes. Suddenly, Zoom would become the means by which Church Council, Bible studies, worship planning, and confirmation would be done.

On June 20<sup>th</sup> we once again were able to gather in-person; this time outdoors, in our parking lot, with masks and enforced social distancing. Our parking lot became our sanctuary as we were privileged to host the ordination service of Tom Redig on July 11<sup>th</sup> as well as two funeral services and one baptism. We would continue our weekly outdoor worship until mid-October, growing to appreciate watching the sunset as a backdrop for our altar.

Just as it was becoming too impractical to worship outdoors, COVID mitigations started to ease, allowing us to cautiously prepare for indoor worship once again. Beginning on October 11<sup>th</sup>, we were able to welcome groups of 50 masked and socially-distanced worshippers. Within a couple of weeks, however, the mitigations tightened up once again and groups of 50 were cut to 25. Under the limits of 25, we were able to have our celebration of Confirmation on November 1<sup>st</sup>. By November 14<sup>th</sup>, however, we were again worshipping together only online.

As we looked at the prospect of not being able to worship together in person for Christmas Eve, we initiated plans to be able to celebrate the birth of Jesus in the familiar space of our parking lot. On a 15-degree Christmas Eve, we were able to safely exit our cars with candles in hand and sing “Silent Night”. For most of us, it was a strange yet beautiful way to celebrate the Nativity.

As we enter 2021, we await the numbers that will allow us to safely return to in-person worship. When we do, we will be able to rely on the good work that was done by our safety teams throughout the rollercoaster year of 2020.

**Worship wasn't the only challenge . . .** It was not just worship that occupied our minds and hearts, this past year. In the midst of this pandemic, we were asked to face difficult losses. Not only did we lose congregational members to COVID-19, but we have also been kept from accompanying our seniors and our sick and dying during their most challenging times. This has been, perhaps, the hardest of all the obstacles the virus threw into our path. When we return to in-person indoor worship, there will be some empty pews marking the spots of very dear people who have passed through the doorway of death into eternal life. We have not yet been able to grieve these losses in a way that we wish. This is work that we will need to do in the upcoming year as the vaccine become more available.

**Despite closed doors, SOTH's work never wavered. . .** In spite of not being able to meet regularly for in-person worship, Shepherd of the Hill was never closed. The work of the congregation continued through Bible studies, confirmation, children's ministry (online), and pastoral care (via phone, text, email, and Zoom). SOTH remained faithful in its generosity outside of itself through our commitment to help our local elementary school with two fund raisers. We continued to support Food for the Poor, the ELCA Hunger Appeal, Operation Christmas Child, Bags of Hope, Habitat for Humanity, and the work of Jubilee House in Nicaragua. More than \$4000 was given and distributed for emergency help in our community. With our Zoom Coffee Hour, we even devised a way that we could share stories and coffee in a virtual narthex. Even in the midst of COVID, we had funerals for seven people, baptized four children, and affirmed the baptismal faith (confirmed) of eight young people. We created non-traditional ways to celebrate communion and eat a communal meal on Maundy Thursday by inviting others to eat with us virtually. Our online worship services gave us a way to see the faces and hear the voices of dozens of new lectors and worship assistants. Just because we were often working from home did not mean that SOTH was closed. We were just fulfilling our call in a different way.

**LEAD and Strategic Planning for the Future . . .** In September 2020, SOTH began a three-year relationship with an organization called LEAD (Living Everyday As Disciples). LEAD provides coaching and training for pastors and congregations to help them create stronger connections to their surrounding neighborhoods. A team of eight SOTH members was recruited to learn a different way of 'being church.' The team meets twice per month for team-building and strategic planning. Four times a year it receives day-long training sessions from LEAD instructors. In early December, the congregation was asked to participate in the LEAD process by filling out an assessment (survey). 96 people responded. As a follow-up, an 'open-ended' survey will be made available by early February. It is our hope that LEAD will help us take advantage of the good foundations that have already been laid in order that we may faithfully live out our collective mission and ministry in Lockport and the surrounding area.

**Our Education Ministry marches along . . .** In spite of pandemic challenges, the educational ministry for children and youth has continued faithfully. When the time of quarantine began in March, the confirmation ministry and the WOW children's ministry quickly pivoted to online formats. We had to learn the ins and outs of Zoom on the fly and the results were mixed, at best. When we reconvened these ministries in the fall, our confirmation ministry was able to be modified in such a way as to fit under the recommended COVID mitigations. Grade levels were separated and placed in different meeting spaces, allowing for proper social distancing. WOW made the decision to remain with an online format. Unfortunately, we are still without a much-

needed high school ministry. It is our hope to be able to return to LOMC for confirmation camp during the summer of 2021 as well as offer a retreat/work camp experience for our high schoolers. For all who were involved with these ministries – too many to mention – we thank God for you.

**You continued to give . . .** Financially, we have held our own. I continue to be amazed at the financial support of the congregation for our mission and ministry. As you can tell by a careful look at our proposed 2021 budget, we are hopeful that our income from tithes and offerings will be the same in 2021 as it was in 2020. In the midst of shifting worship formats, your support never wavered. Thank you. SOTH qualified for the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) loan/grant that was offered in the first federal COVID relief legislation. Between the preschool and the church, we received approximately \$57,000 to help defray payroll costs for the last quarter of 2020. We are providing the proper documentation to ensure that the PPP loan is excused. If we are eligible, we will request another PPP grant for 2021. In March we received our facilities improvement loan of \$150,000 from our mortgage company. Of that loan amount, approximately \$40,000 remains, the majority of which will be applied to the new sign that will be constructed on 9<sup>th</sup> Street in front of the church. Our office staff has worked tirelessly in shepherding these projects. Thank you.

**Taking advantage of an empty building . . .** In addition to the aforementioned improvements to our facility, we used 2020 to make major upgrades to our internet throughout the building. We also created the infrastructure to be able to live-stream our worship services using multiple cameras. In the Property Ministry Team's report, you can see for yourself all of the hard work that has been done. We are thankful for the hard work of our many, many volunteers.

**A huge thank you . . .** Finally, I need to take a moment to thank our SOTH leadership team. This year has been a challenge like no other. Yet, we have rolled with the punches faithfully and creatively, while keeping smiles on our faces (mostly). God has given us a phenomenal team, both paid and volunteer. God used each of them in innumerable ways to help SOTH not only survive – but in many cases – thrive. I am grateful for each one of them:

- **Dawn Virva, Parish Administrator** – for her diligence, flexibility, and constancy. She is my right hand.
- **Vicar Sue Hoff – Parish Worker/Intern** – for her creativity, professionalism, gentle nature, good humor, and faithfulness. This year has had some fun moments because of her.
- **Ellen Schroll – Minister of Music** – for her faithful, persistent, and tireless pursuit of quality regardless of what format is thrown at her.
- **David Rhodes – Organist/Pianist** – for his willingness to see major changes in his job description throughout this year; becoming a sound technician/producer/mixer in addition to the fantastic musician we know him to be.
- **Ken Franz – Financial Secretary** – for his willingness to wade through the quicksand of red-tape to keep SOTH afloat financially.
- **Karen Pedigo – Preschool Director** – for her clear-headed leadership during very, very difficult times; for her ability to plan and the flexibility to pivot to something else when conditions called for it.
- **Steve Kirk – Church Council President** – for his support, friendship, and faithful leadership for these past six years.

- **Executive Council and the at-large Council Members** – Rick McManis, Nancy Baumgart, Amber Nickel, Fern Kinder, Dan Rogan, Ken Bobek, Cheryl Zacharias, Diana Vargo-Lewandowski, and Kevin Helfert – for their prayerful and faithful support and willingness to jump in with whatever needs to be done.
- **Kris Glowczynski** – for ALL of her help to better utilize our website, Facebook, and YouTube presence.
- **Audrey Bjerum** – for always working to spread the gospel with our children.
- **Bob Barwa** – for his willingness to use his musical and technological gifts for our worship.
- **Rick McManis** – for always being ready to try something else and making it happen.
- **Sonya Pedersen** – well – it’s obvious – but also for her leadership and servanthip in everything.
- **Scott Likins and Heidi Habas** – for their great joy in leading 6<sup>th</sup> grade confirmation.
- **Bryan Rauworth and Chip Lake** – for taking on project after project and being my teachers.
- **LEAD Team** – Tom Gustafson, Amber Nickel, Jim Zacharias, Sue Hoff, Susan Mead, Rick McManis, and Carole Ziemke – for saying ‘yes’ to something they had no idea about.
- **COVID Choir** – Judy Matarelli, David Helfert, Jan Rauworth, Harold Sager, Bill and Linda Bunting, Amy and Gary Haut, Donna Rothlisberger, Sonya Pedersen, Ellen Schroll, Donna Woods, and David Rhodes – for countless hours of sharing their talents through music and worship, all with masks on.
- **The Members of Various Ministry Teams and Task Forces too numerous to mention:** Property, Technology, Outdoor Worship Team, Indoor Worship Team, Memorial Gifts, Endowment, Personnel, WOW, Shepherd Ringers, Allegro Bells, and Reverberations – for saying ‘yes’ even during a pandemic.

**Finally . . .** Without a doubt, we were all ready to see the calendar change from 2020 to 2021. Yet, God proved once again that this is His Church. What 2021 will look like, only God knows for sure. I suspect that many of the new skills we worked so hard to master will continue to be used. I also suspect that Shepherd of the Hill will look different post-COVID than what it looked like pre-COVID. That is not bad. In fact, it might be right. However, that does not make light of the fact that there will be much need of healing. The deaths, the lingering health effects from COVID, the stress, the grief, the financial hardship, the isolation, and the loss of a year’s worth of birthdays, holidays, summer camp, games, vacations, visits to shut-ins, etc. will all need to be redeemed and healed by God, the great healer and redeemer. I have no doubt that part of SOTH’s future call will be to be part of God’s healing for our surrounding community. With Spirit-given faith, hope, and love, let us march into the future praying this prayer from our hymnal,

*“O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.” (Evangelical Lutheran Worship, page. 317)*

With Great Love,  
Pastor Jon

## Pastoral Acts Report of 2020

### **Baptisms:**

Vaughn Turner  
Lucy Rasiarmos  
Gabriela Esparza  
Isaac Esparza

### **Due to COVID No New Members Received**

### **Affirmed Their Baptismal Faith:**

Abigail Mack  
Meghan Mack  
AnnaBeth Glowczynski  
Antonio Lopez  
Ryan Soderstrom  
Maddi Ganser  
Daniel Likins  
Dylan Barth  
Hailey McManis

### **Funerals:**

Carol West  
Laurie Pietkiewicz\*  
Fred and Sharon Grabenhofer  
Duke Cartwright  
Bob Schroll  
Maria Gritsch\*  
Lora Hajek\*\*

\*Non-members

\*\*Memorial Service postponed until 2021