

January 7, 2024

Dear Friends at the Presque Isle Congregational Church,

The United Parish Church in Fort Fairfield had a church council meeting after worship today. We have been discussing working with your congregation for the strengthening of an open and affirming message of love and faithfulness in northern Maine. Today we shared our feelings, our hopes and our thoughts about what a cooperative ministry effort might look like as we gently tried to grow into this cooperative future in Christ. I would like to share our consensus.

We recognize that we are too small to provide a long term, viable presence as a church body in Fort Fairfield. We have many gifts. For one, we have about twenty folks committed to being the church. We have others who join us with some regularity. We love each other. We work hard and well together. We have a committed pastor (me!) who is dedicated to remaining in northern Maine. Together our congregation is committed to providing a strong, social justice message that is rooted in Scripture and the example and call of Christ. We understand the Bible and our Savior to call us to full inclusivity of all of God's children. We understand the spectrum of sexual identity and expression to be rooted in God's own creation. We see diversity as both blessing and call. Our church is both UCC and UMC. We honor both denominations within a firm open and affirming stance. Our pastor is an ordained UCC minister.

We feel that a partnership with the Congregational Church could bring renewed vitality to both our churches' ministries. We have two young folks of confirmation age and we understand that you have three. We would like to start a combined confirmation class. We would also like to form a joint youth group. We believe joint Bible studies could include more variety of input and discernment that would benefit all. We have one person who is committed to teaching Sunday school, but according to safe sanctuary policy, we are looking for a co-teacher from another household. If we had combined Sunday school, we would have the two teachers we need. It occurs to us that finding new church board members and other church positions would also be easier if we joined forces.

It is important for both church bodies to be able to pray and discern their ways through what a blended church body could look like. United Parish is very familiar with pastor Diane as she served us for fifteen years before spending eight years in Florida. She has been back for almost two years. This means folks at United Parish are familiar with her preaching and trust both her leadership and pastoral care. To date, pastor Diane has provided contracted pastoral care for PIUCC for almost three months and you have heard her preach twice. This is a start, but it is a bridge that needs to be strengthened if we are serious about combining gifts. Change, for both churches can provide challenges... change requires us to stretch and grow and be willing to get off autopilot. We are finding that there is some grief that is unavoidable as we consider leaving our sanctuary and joining in a new ministry body. We imagine you will experience similar growing pains and grief if we are to be partners on this journey.

One thing that will be essential is that we get to know each other better and you have a chance to listen to Diane preach to see if the fit is a good one for you. We have a proposal for an initial stage. If you count on Diane to preach twice a month, you could begin to get a feel for her as a worship leader. Additionally, our congregations could get to know each other better if we worshipped together on those Sundays. We

suggest that one Sunday a month we would close our church and worship in Presque Isle with Diane preaching and another Sunday a month you would close your church and worship in Fort Fairfield with Diane preaching. Together we would be testing compatibility and commitment. On the other two Sundays of the month, we would remain “as we were” with each congregation worshipping without participation of the other. Hopefully, we will grow to appreciate life together and the strengths we develop more than our separate worship worlds. We also suggest that we work toward shared Bible study and youth group/confirmation sessions as soon as possible.

Please let us know what you think of these suggestions. Please join us in committed prayer focusing on discernment regarding shared ministry. At this point, none of us can be sure of how we will grow and who we will become as we walk this journey. We have two church buildings as well as two congregations. We also have two parsonages. You are preparing to sell your parsonage currently and United Parish is using ours to house an active food ministry for our community called Basket of Blessings. What will we decide to do with all these buildings? Sell some and keep one? Would we sell them all and build/find a new location? These are questions for travelers who are further into the journey than we are now. We need time to trust our companions and develop our skills for faithful response to Christ’s guiding call. Please share your thoughts and hopes, your questions and concerns. We do not begin with all the answers, but we do begin with hope and a sacred call.

In Christ’s Love,

Pastor Diane and the church council of the Unite Parish Church