

"A Risky Investment in the Future"

Matthew 25:14-30

"Again, it's like a wealthy landowner who was going on a journey and called in three workers, entrusting some funds to them..."

Back in 1849, a piece of land was purchased on the shore of Lake Ripley for the purpose of establishing a Presbyterian church.

With the Rev. William Cargen as the first pastor, those charter members helped build that basement like structure which served as both the worship space and the "manse" (house for the minister) for the newly formed Oakland-Cambridge congregation.

The property and the crude, church structure was entrusted to them by the larger body of the Presbyterian Church in Wisconsin, as they began their ministry in the Oakland and Cambridge area, looking nothing like it does today.

Over the years, as the area grew and changed into a lake community, a lovely, small village, and a tourist destination, this church has also grown and changed with it.

Members and friends, some who were your relatives, and others you never knew, joined, served, and then for various reasons left the church or in their time, joined the Church Triumphant.

Entrusted with the ministry and mission of OCPC from the previous generation, those individuals contributed their own time and finances to ongoing service of this congregation and to the larger Presbyterian Church as a part of the Body of Christ.

In time, each of you became a part of this congregation. Some of you have been attending here since you were born. Others of you started attending in more recent years, more recent being in the past, say 40 years up until the past couple of months.

I have been serving as your part-time pastor for the last 9 years.

For however long each of us has been a part of this congregation, together, we have been entrusted with this ministry of the Presbyterian Church (USA) from those who have previously served here as Christ's followers.

Jesus told them a parable about the kingdom of God, saying: "Again, it's like a wealthy landowner who was going on a journey and called in three workers, entrusting some funds to them."

Some of you may be aware of this and others of you may not be. As in all denominations, Lutheran, Methodist, UCC, Moravian, Episcopal, the property and funds of a local congregation, while they are the responsibility of the local church, they are also legally held entrust with the larger denomination of which the church is affiliated.

It is not just the current members of any congregation who own the property, buildings, investments.

It has been entrusted to you by past generations, who entrusted their investment and care of the building(s) and finances, its mission and ministry, handing it on to the next generation of people they did not necessarily know.

So when a church comes to the end of its ministry, and sadly, it happens and is happening far too often, those remaining members in partnership with the Presbyterian Church (presbytery), begin a process to entrust the remaining property and remaining funds to serve the larger church, carrying on the ministry and ministry of Christ in its ever changing form.

If we here have ever received a grant or loan through the presbytery or Presbyterian Church (USA) these are some of the ways those types of funds are used.

It is also set up legally this way so that a pastor, like me, cannot come in and say to a congregation, like you, I don't like the way the Presbyterians believe, so follow me, and I take you and all of your finances, property and start my own congregation using everything that had been entrusted to you by previous generations.

The same is true as a protection if some members would be upset and want to leave the Presbyterian Church and do the same. And believe that has happened before, and it can be a very messy legal battle with lots of emotional pain caused between members.

Friends, in reality, any church, and its ministry and mission, doesn't belong to its members, or a minister or a denomination, does it? It is entrusted to us by the head of the Church, which is Jesus Christ. As the Apostle Paul reminds us, Now you are the Body of Christ...

For close to 175 years, Oakland-Cambridge Presbyterian Church has been a part of the Body of Christ through the Presbyterian Church. In that time, each of you have been a part of this ministry in one way or another as well.

While I have been a part of your ministry for the past 9 years, I have been a Presbyterian since my birth in 1959, and serving as an ordained pastor in the denomination since 1985.

Much has changed since I was ordained. The certainty that I or any minister had of a future, serving a congregation as their full-time pastor or associate pastor with medical benefits and a pension is no longer a reality.

The same is true for many congregations, including our own.

Each of the churches I have served as a pastor have declined in membership. My first small church decided to merge with another Presbyterian church, selling their building to a couple who turned it into their home.

Northminster in Indianapolis, the largest church in the city, with over 4,000 members, and clergy staff of 4, including me, moved to down to 3 pastors after I moved to Monroe in 1994. Today, they are down to 1 pastor, hiring retired clergy and lay leaders to assist in their ministry.

In 1994 when I began my ministry in Monroe, we had a membership of over 200, and worship attendance of 115. Today, they have a membership of 60, and are struggling to maintain a full-time pastor.

When I moved to Monroe, Hugh was my welcoming pastor and he was your full-time minister.

And here we are all these years later, growing older, lamenting the past, and wondering about the future of our ministry here at OCPC that has been entrusted to our care and the future of Christ's Church overall.

And we are not alone. London Moravian, Rockdale Lutheran, West Koshkonong, Deerfield Lutheran, Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church in Cottage Grove, all like us, are small membership churches with half-time or less than half-time pastors. Several of those churches are even struggling to find someone, retired or otherwise to serve as their pastor.

Budgets are tight, memberships are aging, worship attendance is declining, finding leaders and volunteers is a constant struggle. Like us, they too are lamenting their decline and worrying about their future, asking the same type of questions.

Your Session is asking these tough and challenging questions, because they are aware they have been entrusted as stewards of the property, finances from previous generations as Christ disciples. They are helping us look with hope to the future.

You will be receiving a letter soon from them concerning the financial picture facing us for the upcoming 2023 year.

It is no secret that the stock market has been on a wild roller coaster ride. Our investments in the Hazel Maine and Bernice Gillingham accounts, both of which more recently provided us with a healthy supplement to our

budget income are like at a point we are not able to draw from them unless in an emergency.

Member giving is down close to \$8,000 from last year.

The manse has been in need of some long overdue updating. The church also has four plots of land that sit in two different counties, one of which as I stand here in the pulpit happens to be in Jefferson County, while some of you sit in Dane County.

So we have to resolve that before we can sell the manse, and yes, we really do need to finally sell the manse.

Heavy sighs here.

I would ask you to join me in paying attention to how you are feeling in your body right now. Can you name one or two things you are feeling right now?

I feel a lot of sadness and grief. Four of the churches I have been a part of in my ministry are now closed. The others are all in state of decline, and facing, like us, challenges about their future. My vision of ministry has changed since I was first ordained, and is still constantly changing.

Ministry and the way churches and pastors are doing ministry is changing.

Even in the midst of my grief and sadness, I see possibilities and hope.

What possibilities and hope do you see for Christ's church?

Your Session leadership is aware of this and is seeking to address it.

As I mentioned in my previous sermon in regards to find the lost Advent "Hope" banner. We are not throwing "Hope" away.

The Session is reaching out to Cambridge a group of Cambridge business leaders, inviting them to join us here for a breakfast brainstorming session to think of creative ways that our building might be a community resource for a non-profit business.

We are also reaching out to the Cambridge Arts Council.

There are many ways to engage in creative ministry beyond a Sunday morning in this every changing way.

Two of the workers in Jesus parable took risks with the landowners funds, investing in a future. One held back, and played it safe.

The first disciples Jesus called also took risks. They their lives and lively hoods and followed Jesus, who did not call them to build a church building, but to share a message of love about the Kingdom of God for all.

Somehow, we turned that risky investment simply into bricks and mortar over the years, and staked our future as Christ's Church on just buildings and not on the Kingdom of God which is within each of us and all of us.

Maybe, we need to rethink what it means to be the Church as we face this new time, and be creative with the investment that has been entrusted to us not just by the generations of OCPC members who have gone before but by Christ, who is calling us, as he called the first disciples, to follow him into the future filled with possibilities and hope.

Amen.