

I want to share news about our leadership team's plan for the future of Berwyn United Methodist Church.

At last year's fall retreat, we talked about the dire financial state of the church. For several years, the church has been running a deficit significantly fueled by the debt on the 2002 construction of Schieck Hall and extensive remodeling of the church building. We still owe \$488,000 on the church mortgage. We have been funding the church's ministry and debt servicing by spending down the church's reserves, cutting expenses and staff hours, not meeting our connectional obligations, and drawing on pastor-compensation grants from the Annual Conference.

The interest rate on our loan will adjust for the next five years in January 2025. If it were to adjust today, our monthly payment would increase by \$1,000, making our deficit that much worse.

Over the years, there has been the hope that the school district would buy the back portion of the church property. The sale would have allowed us to pay off the debt, carry out much-needed maintenance, and cut expenses from our yearly operating budget. Unfortunately, the school district decided to go in a different direction. They've entered into an agreement to buy a property on Swedesford Road, and so that option is no longer available to us.

At our fall retreat, we resolved that, as we figured out a path forward, no options would be off the table.

We talked about five main options:

First, the church could vote to close, concluding it no longer had a mission in Berwyn. Our leadership team felt that there was indeed a mission for a United Methodist church here in Berwyn. We didn't think closing was the right idea.

Second, we could vote to merge with another United Methodist church. Choosing this option would not, of course, guarantee that another church would merge with us. Nor would it decide whether our members would go to the church we were joining, or whether its members would come here. The consensus was that we would be leaving a place with a chance for a viable community mission.

Third, we could move to a part-time pastor. This option has two drawbacks. First, the budget savings would not be enough to erase the deficit. Second, if we do have a mission here in Berwyn, there would not be a full-time pastor to guide the congregation into that future.

Fourth, we could sell the entire property. This would enable us to pay off the debt and invest the remainder to fund the church in a new location. That new location could be "nested" in another church, United Methodist or not, or in a rented facility. This option would free up funds for the church's mission. So, we began to explore selling the property and nesting temporarily in another church's building or finding a rental space.

Fifth, we could rethink the relationship with our nursery school, with the goal of improving the revenue stream. The leadership team thinks this is our best option. We began conversations with an outside group about transforming our part-time nursery school program into a full-time model. We called area daycares to see what their rates were, what their size was, and how long their wait lists were. In addition, we looked at our facilities, considering whether we could expand to roughly 100 children. (The nursery school now has 56 children and has roughly 40 registered for next year.) Our advisers projected an annual budget that looked promising.

The Nursery School Expansion as Our Path Forward

The leadership team is exploring ways to transition to a full-year program in the fall of 2024. It would have been ideal to wait and make those adjustments gradually. However, with the impending interest-rate increase, and the growing deficit, the leadership team realized that waiting would diminish the reserve funds available to pay for the transition. In order to grow this program, we have decided to draw from those reserve funds to invest in facility, child-care programming, and the nursery school staff.

We are going to work with a company called the Child Care Success Company, which offers consulting and coaching to help us grow into the full-day model. They will work with our unique situation and our unique challenges to help grow the program. In our research, we found that there was a tremendous child-care need in our community, with one facility having a wait list that stretches all the way into May of next year.

From the church's perspective, this transition does two things. First, it increases revenue to the church as the program takes root and grows. It will take some time and investment from the church's funds to make that happen, but in the long run, the projected numbers say that it will.

The second benefit of this path forward is that it introduces us to families in the community.

For the last several years, due to COVID there has been a functional wall between the church and the nursery school family. It hasn't been intentional. It was just a product of the COVID pandemic.

By making the work of the nursery school more closely aligned with the broader church, we believe this opens up a mission field for determining the needs of families in our community and developing programs and ministries to meet them. We will no longer just trying to guess what the needs in our community are. We will have a direct line on the pulse of our community and its families.

We recognize that the families that come through that full-time child care may never come to church on Sunday morning. And we have, as a church, incredible work to do to reach out to new people who will be interested in coming on Sunday morning. But with the families of the child-care program, we can still build faith-developing

activities, family-developing activities, and foster a sense of spiritual desire in those families. Their support of the church ultimately comes through their payments for child care.

Addressing Challenges and Embracing Change

I know this is a big change. Our plan impacts the staff of the nursery school and the families already registered for next year. For the families, we're striving to create a program that meets their needs. For the staff, we're striving to retain as many as possible, subject to the requirements of the new program and the staff members' availability and desire to work in it.

That is the challenge we're facing. The work will be hard. I can't guarantee it will be successful. But I believe this is our best chance at becoming a vital and long-lasting congregation in our community.

Closing Thoughts and Invitations for Engagement

I invite you to pray for this endeavor. And keep an eye out for future online and in-person conversations. You will have a chance to ask questions and voice your concerns.

I have been in constant prayer for this church, seeking fervently a way that we can live out God's mission for this church, here in Berwyn and around the world. And I look forward to hearing from you with any questions, concerns that you may have. I look forward to those conversations. And I look forward to a bright future made possible because of this change.

Your Servant in Christ,
Pastor Kevin