

MINISTER'S REPORT

“Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him.” I John 4.7-9

Here on February 12th, so close to the feast day of St. Valentine, I thought I would frame my pastoral report to you in the form of a love letter. Love, after all, is something no Christian should be ashamed to express, and a little more than five months into my ministry here, I find that I love you. I *still* love you, having first been overwhelmed by your Call to me last Spring, and by the supportive friendship, generosity, and wise counsel of so many in the congregation during my initial months of “settling in.” And I am *growing* in love for you, as I see and learn more of your commitment to Christ, this congregation and its ministries, as we risk more honesty and practice more grace with one another around those differences of opinion which will inevitably arise from time to time, and as, through our celebration of the Christian year and the Christian sacraments, we solidify our relationship as minister and congregation.

“Love for people” is the thing, together with “faith in Christ” which Presbyteries have to see in a person before they can ordain them. I have come to the view that “love for people,” like “faith in Christ,” is not something any of us has by nature; it is a gift of the Holy Spirit. Its origin is mysterious. It cannot be worked up for trying. Something mysterious happened about the 5th week after my induction. I looked out over this congregation as I was preaching, and I found that it was not simply *a* congregation, any longer. It was *my* congregation. Westminster-St. Paul's had ceased to be “you” and had begun to be “us.” I found that as I prayed the prayers of thanksgiving and intercession in the service, the knowledge of some of your struggles began to fulfill those petitions and give them an urgency and a concreteness they had not had before. I found that as I gardened or worked in the house on my Monday Sabbaths, I could not keep my thoughts from you. I wondered about you. I worried over you. I smiled as I thought about something one of you had said. When I have gotten together with friends, I have found that you are uppermost in my conversation. Although I am protective of certain times when I have resolved to be “not available”, I want you to know that I have never felt burdened or less-than-enthusiastic at the thought of “going to work.” In fact, I am daily aware of the grace of being freed financially to do work, which is an irresistible vocation and a labour of love.

I knew that when I undertook the work of ministry I would enjoy the study involved in preparing sermons week by week, and would enjoy the privilege of celebrating the sacraments – giving out God's gifts – on those happy and holy occasions when called upon to do so. But I don't think I was prepared for the joy involved in preaching *to a community* – in hearing back throughout the week how the gospel of Mark was hitting the road in *your* lives. I was definitely not prepared for the way in which gospel Love is palpably released, it seems, *within this community* when we draw together around the Lord's Table, or receive a little one into our fellowship through baptism. Nor for the determination with which you *follow through* on being a sacramental community, after the bread and wine are cleared away and the water on the forehead is dried. Calling the miffed back toward reconciliation is what the Lord's Table means *in between the times* we are gathering around it. Working to improve our nursery, Sunday School and youth programme so that Hailey, Mikaela and Benjamin, and all our covenant children, may come to know God in our midst, is what baptism means *in between the times* the font is actually in use. This is what you do. These are the things you care about. This is why I love you.

I have enjoyed sometimes just standing at coffee hour and watching you express care for one another, reaching out to new-comers – *doing* the ministry. Occasionally, as minister, I have received thanks from people who have benefited from your generosity, or have been told by folk who are fairly new to the church of the warmth they experienced from the moment of their arrival at Westminster-St. Paul's. These are *your* ministries they are experiencing; generosity and warmth are two gifts which the Holy Spirit of God has given this congregation in abundance, and I admire the way you look as you exercise them. I have also enjoyed being able to respond when one of you lets me know “so-and-so is in hospital,” or “so-and-so might appreciate a visit” – it's at times like this that I feel our partnership in ministry. And, somewhat to my surprise, I have greatly enjoyed the part of my work, which could broadly be called “leadership.” In the Presbyterian system, a minister does not lead alone. It is the minister and session together who set the direction for the congregation, and keep it accountable to the abiding purposes of Christ for His church. Working with the session of Westminster-St. Paul's has been a real pleasure. I have found the elders to be wise, and deeply committed, mature, godly and gifted. I have especially enjoyed the enthusiasm with which the session has participated in the opportunities we have recently had for enrichment, through the Leading with Care day in Hespeler, the Presbytery and Elders' Institute workshop day with Roberta Clare in October, the session day-retreat held in January, and our ongoing project of reading *The Purpose Driven Church* together.

In a way, all these enrichment opportunities have been raising the same sorts of questions for us: what kind of community is Christ calling His church to be? What is the church for? How well do we carry that vision through? What processes do we have in place to make sure it gets carried through, and how do each of us see our own role in those processes? These are important questions for the church to be asking itself at all times, but it is particularly important, I think, for *us* to be thinking them through *this year*, now that a new minister is part of the mix. Something that happy couples do together is take stock of where they are in life, so they can plan for the future: perhaps plan for an expansion of the family. I think everyone at Westminster-St. Paul's has been craving “an expansion of the family” – new and younger life in our midst. I cherish that hope with you. I also believe it is God's will to give us that expansion, for it was His will from the beginning for His Church to grow. I hope the next year or two will see us making a major effort to reach out to the families in the rapidly growing sub-division across Victoria Road. But there is a great deal of preliminary work, which needs to be done before we undertake a venture so daring. It would be no less daring than the recently completed building project, only we would be building a temple of “living stones” (I Peter 2.5): an edifice of people. The preliminary work of which I speak is not *structural* – the structure is now in place; it is a work of *spiritual* preparation. “Unless the Lord build the house, its builders labour in vain (Psalm 127. 1). This year must be for us a year of getting to know one another, of building our relationship together, as together, we draw closer to Christ. This year we should explore what kind of church-family we are and want to be, with a view to “expanding the family” at some point in the not-too-distant future. We must keep God central to all this, gathering around His Word each week, straining to hear His practical direction for us, praying to Him for His direction – letting Him in every way be architect and foreman of the project.

I have valued the session's input in this process of thinking and praying and dreaming more than I can say, but it is time for the leadership to go to the congregation, and to widen the participation in this spiritual preparation process. Each one of us should be praying for our church: for its spiritual well-being, for the smooth integration of your new minister, for a harmonious spirit to prevail here, for God to show us new and creative ways of loving one another. For my part, the decision to preach through the gospel of Mark, and my plans, after Easter, to begin a series on the book of Acts, were not made lightly. They emerged, I believe, in response to God's leading. The “gospel” is the good news about Jesus Christ, which is ours to share. There can be nothing more important for us than to gather in faith around this basic story, in a year when we are grounding our

love on what we have in common, and preparing to reach out in love to those who do not yet know the story. Acts is a book about the *church*, growing in the power of the *Holy Spirit*. There can be no book of the Bible of more vital interest to us, in this year when we think and dream about the growth and fruitfulness which we are praying God's Spirit will give *us*. As I look to the immediate future, I am excited about celebrating the season of Lent with you, and especially the services of Holy Week and Easter, which mark the true high-point of the Christian Year. I am excited about the course in Christian Basics, which will run throughout Lent, giving new members of the church, those preparing for church-membership, or those simply wanting a "refresher," the chance for a stimulating discussion of the faith, in small-group format. I am excited about the Song of Mark, which the choir is preparing for after Easter: a cantata-like review of the gospel of Mark in its entirety, which will be our series-end celebration. In short, these five months have been wonderfully rich, and I can only look forward to spending the future with you, growing in love.

This past month, I have begun marriage preparation with some couples who are looking at being married in the summers of 2006 and 2007. Something which my understanding of love in the New Testament, and my theology of marriage leads me to emphasise, is that the love of a Christian marriage is not meant to be exhausted and contained within a fellowship of two. Starting out, the focus may be "you and I" but it quickly shifts to "we" and then to "they." Marriage, in the Christian understanding, is one way of fulfilling one's calling to serve God in the world. The couple exists not for themselves alone, but for the service of God and the neighbour. The same might be said of the church. However cozy a society the church feels, if the love which characterises us is true Christian love, it is quickly extended upwards to God, and outward to our neighbourhood. May our love so bloom and grow, ever and always.