

Pastor's Annual Address to the Congregation

2018

The Rev. Matthew J. van Maastricht

It is an honor to present this address, first in written form first, and to be delivered at the congregational meeting. It has been a joy for me to complete my first full year as your pastor. It has been a year of getting to know one another, of learning about one another, of working on adjusting to one another and trying to figure out who we are with one another. There have most certainly been some bumps here and there, but I think like we are doing well together, and I hope you think the same.

The year 2018 saw...

...nearly 900 dinners served (so far) to our neighbors on the first Monday of the month
...and we've had enough volunteers for each dinner (we require about 30 per month!)
...welcoming five new members into our church family
...restarting children's Sunday school
...renewal of the joint youth group with Lynnwood Reformed Church
...the ability to help people in our church family and community access needed resources including food, healthcare, and helping one to stay in one's home.
...the welcoming of One Love Preschool to share our space
...a wedding in our church family
...the continued support of over 25 unique ministries in our community and around the world.
...the welcoming of Audrey as our organist
...and so very much more!

These are all points of celebration for us. So often we can get stuck in the comparison with "how things used to be" that we can forget about the amazing things that are happening with our little church under the mountain. When you look at all the activities of this church, all the ministries in which we participate, we are a very active church.

But these are not things that just happen, they are not something that some organization called "church" does. Indeed, a church, as such, exists because we do.

I think of the song that I sang as a child in Sunday School, complete with hand motions, of course:

*The church is not a building,
The church is not a steeple,
The church is not a resting place,
The church is people.*

*I am the church,
You are the church,
We are the church together...*

Indeed, the church is not something that exists apart from us, we are the church. Not just because we are a part of an organization that says "church" on the sign, but because the church is the body of Christ in the world. I think of the term "member." So often, "member" has been used similar to a

member in a country club, or member in a fraternal organization, or a member of public television or radio. Membership is established with signing on a dotted line, paying dues, which grants certain rights and privileges.

But this is a modern, and rather watered down understanding of membership. An arm is a member. A leg is a member. This is what it means to be a member of the Body of Christ. The Bible speaks of hand and eye, and arm, and leg. The church, the body of Christ, is essential to our identity in such a way that without participation in the Christian community, we are not fully who we are to be. I can be me without being a member of the American Society of Church History, but my arm and leg are certainly far more essential to my being. When we think of membership, it is not an ancillary thing, it is like being an arm or a leg. Each of us is a member of the body, we all need one another. Our local church does need people in order to exist, but more than that, we each need the church, we need the Christian community, we need to participate in the visible body of Christ because it is an essential part of who we are.

And the various ministries of our church require the participation of the whole congregation. Our local church was able to depend on paid staff for, perhaps, longer than ordinary. Ministry, the activities and work of the church, can no longer be given to paid staff, or borne by a small group of people, but it needs to be widely taken care of by the church -- that is, the people. A smaller congregation is often challenging, but it is also an opportunity for us to *be* the church in a deep and renewed way.

And we are doing this! Look at the community dinners! Each dinner requires approximately 30 volunteers per month for it to function, and we are able to find them. There is a lot of good stuff going on, dear church, we simply build upon what is already going well.

The times in which we find ourselves now also allow us the opportunity to rediscover “the love [we] had at first” (Rev. 2:4). This allows us the opportunity to rediscover what it means to be the church, what it means to be the body of Christ in our community. It is true that there is so much that demands our time and energy. But we make time for the things that are important to us.

But being the church is not just about doing jobs, it is finding where we fit, where we belong. We all have different gifts and there is a place for all of them in the church. Perhaps your gift is hospitality, and you can greet people as they come into worship or the community dinner and help members, guests, and visitors alike to feel welcome. Perhaps you are good with your hands and want to help maintain our property to be a suitable “home base” for our ministry. Perhaps you have a heart for youth and want to commit to serving as a youth leader to help shepherd our young people. Perhaps you have a heart for mission and want to serve in the benevolence ministries of the church, or have a passion for outreach and want to help with the various aspects of our congregational life, either fellowship or outreach.

This is the church: Everyone belongs. Everyone ministers. We have challenges, that is to be sure. But there are so many opportunities, if we would choose to engage them. We are doing a lot of great things, and if we commit to it, ARC can continue to minister in this community for generations to come.

And this brings us to the scary word, “change.” The community that existed in the 1960s was different than the community that existed when this ministry began in the 1880s. And the

community that exists today is different from the 1960s. We have to continue to adapt to meet the community that is, not the one that was or that we wish it were.

One example is sporting events on Sunday. Those are not going anywhere. But we can find a way to adapt to this reality in which we find ourselves. The Christian Church began in the Middle East and the Mediterranean world hundreds upon hundreds of years ago. Adapting to new social and cultural contexts is nothing new. And this is that to which we are called, even today.

Some changes are big, others are small. Some you may like, others you may not. But while the message is constant, the way in which the message is presented and enfolded is as various as the cultures in which it finds itself.

Some things will be consistent, some things will change. I have some ideas, and I think you do, too. But the task ahead is not for me to implement my ideas, or you necessarily, yours. But for us, together, to collectively discern how we sense God leading us in our place, in our time, to respond to the needs and concerns around us.

Who knows what the future might hold? The future is in God's hands. The important thing is that we make it there together.

I continue to be grateful for you. We love Altamont, the Capital District, and our little church under the mountain. *There is so much good here.* And for that I am filled with gratitude. Thank you from the deepest parts of my being for allowing me to serve as your pastor.

Respectfully submitted,

The Rev. Matthew J. van Maastricht.