

Rev. Jessica Margrave Schirm
Grinnell UCC Staff Annual Review / Self Reflection
Global Pandemic - Covid 19 Edition
September 2021

Job Description Attached

Please see attached excerpts from the 2018 Grinnell UCC Church profile which highlights expectations of/hopes for pastor and congregation and the Marks of a Faithful and Effective Authorized Ministers in the United Church of Christ.

Question Regarding Goals/Role Pre-COVID-19

- *What were your primary goals for your position going into 2020?*

Going into 2020 my hope as pastor was to maximize the welcome and accessibility renovations we had completed in 2019 through increased programming and community outreach - we had plans to focus the program year around the 20th anniversary of becoming an ONA congregation with dreams of an Adult OWL session, partnering with other organizations to host a Pride festival/event; and some sort of educational event related to the intersectionality of LGBTQ+ justice and racial justice which had been our primary program year focus of 2019. In addition we had just begun brainstorming and scheduling some college/student age related events to help develop community among the College students who had become a vibrant part of our church. Personally, I had negotiated an increase to my continuing education budget as part of the 2020 budget with hopes to begin a DMIN in the fall of 2020. I was finishing up my term as the GMA president and had agreed to /just begun a spot on the Committee on Ministry for our association.

- *How far were you from reaching these goals as 2020 began? What were your plans for accomplishing your 2020 work related goals?*

At the time of the shutdown we were near the end of a middle school aged OWL session and halfway through an elementary aged session, we were researching training and curriculum for an adult OWL program to happen in the summer, a college lunch gathering was scheduled, and a Lenten Video study on LGBTQ+ faith and justice had just begun. I had been in touch with an Admissions counselor at CTS regarding a DMIN in preaching with plans to apply.

- *How were you feeling about your role/job description/contribution to Grinnell UCC at the start of 2020? How did you feel about the support you had - personally, professionally? How would you assess the morale in the office and congregation and the mission and vision of our community of faith pre-March 2020?*

At the start of 2020 I was still in humbled amazement that I was the pastor of Grinnell UCC, and honestly wasn't "waiting for the other shoe to drop" as pastors are often wont/warned to do. I believed I was exactly where I was supposed to be at exactly the right time and felt deep love for the congregation and hope for the ministries ahead. I was incredibly proud of the Grace Abounds Accessibility and Welcome renovation - not just the building work itself, but our ability to conduct a successful capital campaign and a robust stewardship campaign simultaneously. The inequity of income related to tithes and offerings was something the search committee had discussed extensively with me and in less than two years it felt like we had made huge strides towards balancing our giving platform and generating energy around funding the mission and vision and future of the church. I felt supported and trusted by the board and staff and was in the process of convening (my second attempt at convening) a PRC as the shut down began. Feedback from the congregation after my first year and half as pastor was universally supportive and positive. The building renovations brought a lot of hope and excitement to the wider church community and there was great participation in all areas of our Christian Education as well. While 2019 had taken its toll a bit on the staff having to work through the building being loud and in a constant state of flux, as a staff we were eager for the ways in which 2020 would allow us to truly live into programming and ministry plans where "No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here" was something we tangibly lived out. Staffing wise we made some changes, namely hiring a maintenance custodian in place of outsourcing those tasks to a variety of other companies which saved us money on the budget and stress for Elizabeth related to communication and getting things done. Our maintenance custodian had been in place for one month before the shutdown began.

Questions Regarding Role/Accomplishments Post-COVID-19

As I reflect on March 2020 to May 2021 (when we returned to in person worship) I firmly believe that had 2020 handed me, my family and our church "just" a global pandemic OR "just" the death of both my dad and Matt's dad (plus a broken leg for me and emergency surgery for Matt in either scenario, along with intensified Police brutality and racial violence and the deaths of two of our church matriarchs), I think I would have been able to cope in a way where, looking back on 2020, I would have felt like I'd

survived and grown as a person and professional by redistributing my emotional, spiritual, familial and professional resources to the area most in need - either my own grief and the grief of my family (while keeping professional stuff status quo) OR the complete alteration of life/church as we know it (while keeping family stuff somewhat status quo). As these devastating realities combined to create a perfect storm, the likes of which I was entirely unequipped for as a person and a pastor, I look back on 2020 with a sense of utter loss and failure and flailing on every level. As I type this my heart is racing, my hands are clammy and I feel the panic, anxiety and grief creeping in that undergirded nearly every moment of the last 18 months as if it were March 7 or August 9 or September 2 all over again. My experience of this last year and a half is not unique, it is not better or worse than anyone else's, but it is real, just as everyone's is. I am grateful for this space to name it and own it as I try to pull together a reflection of what it meant to be the pastor at Grinnell UCC over these last 18 months.

- *Given the changing nature of life and work during this time, what additional tasks or roles did you take on to contribute to getting Grinnell UCC to this point in the pandemic? What are some sacrifices you made to get the Grinnell UCC to this point in the pandemic? What pandemic related challenge are you most proud of overcoming?*

As soon as I was back to Iowa after my dad's funeral Elizabeth and I quickly began brainstorming ways in which we could maintain some semblance of worship for our intergenerational congregation, many of whom, including our music director Ken, were very limited with technological skills, resources and equipment. Our initial goal was to cultivate a worship resource that would be accessible to the least technological person in our congregation - this looked like orders of worship and manuscript sermons mailed or emailed to the entire congregation with an audio sermon recording (which was the only technological component to our worship that was in place pre-pandemic) made available via links in the email. It was quickly obvious that the churches that already had a pattern of video recording and live streaming complete worship experiences were ahead of the pandemic worship requirements and we were woefully behind. Over time, folks in the congregation asked for more technologically advanced worship opportunities, like they were seeing other churches do, so Elizabeth and I learned how to record decent quality worship videos, create and share youtube playlists, and then eventually lead worship via Zoom. In addition to this I learned how to utilize facebook live for Lectio Divina Bible studies and we increased our church wide communication with Tuesdays Together emails. I worried about and prayed regularly for our ability to provide a good quality online worship experience with few skilled and willing volunteers to help and with minimal tech skills between both Elizabeth and I.

I attempted to create an intergenerational small group network for pandemic pastoral care - utilizing members of the Governing Board and Care Connections team as team

leaders with the hope that these small groups would be able to communicate on a regular basis, keep the wider church abreast of otherwise unknown needs and could maintain a sense of fellowship and pastoral connection despite our social distancing. There was little traction with this effort - the intergenerational nature seemed to be a deterrent for leaders and group members and this quickly fell by the wayside. I did my best to maintain pastoral connections with folks individually - via phone calls, emails, hand written notes, etc. We also hosted monthly in person, outdoor, brief worship gatherings in September, October and November to give folks a safe way to see each other and feel a part of the community and online Zoom fellowships before Zoom worship became the norm.

Despite the limits, concerns and struggles that we had regarding the evolution of our pandemic worship offerings, I am incredibly grateful for the core group of folks who faithfully worshipped with us through every iteration and offered support and prayer and encouragement along the way. In addition to our worship and pastoral care efforts, it was equally important to maintain our Christian education programming and our wider social justice ministries and to do what we could to make Advent and Christmas especially meaningful. I am deeply grateful for Erin's leadership in this area and the ways in which our Christian Education programming evolved to allow for online classes, the robust thought and intention that went into our Advent bags and Children's pageant and the ways in which our church became a host site for a vigil and memorial for a George Floyd and Michael Williams maintaining our historical commitment to anti-racist work even in the midst of the pandemic.

- *What skills or knowledge have you developed over the last 18 months that enabled you to be successful in your role during the crisis?*

So much technology! I've never been a very tech-oriented person and, while seeing the benefits of technology for making worship more accessible (i.e. screens in sanctuary for visibility, etc) the level of technology knowledge required to sustain a year and a half of church, entirely in an online format, was daunting and exhausting. I'm grateful for what I've learned, especially the ways in which Zoom allows for a hybrid learning platform in Sunday School, keeping our unvaccinated kids safe. I've also keenly learned the limits of my technological knowledge/capacity and am eternally grateful for the volunteers who stepped up to the plate when we returned to in person worship in the face of an urgent need for a live-stream option. Live-streaming will be a permanent fixture to our worship going forward, as it contributes to our accessibility and welcome, and dare I say I'm "thankful" to the pandemic for forcing us to figure that out.

In addition to learning what I have about technology in relation to worship, Christian education and pastoral care, this has been a year of learning and growth for me related

to my own grief, vulnerability, fragility, and emotional/mental/spiritual capacity. In the 'before times' I would routinely say that "self-care" and "Sabbath" were my two greatest challenges as a professional. I had to work very hard at not working - not thinking about work, not checking my email, not reading work related books, not just sending that quick text, not filling my sabbath time with housework or errands. While I had developed some Sabbath routines and self care skills prior to the pandemic and deaths of our dads, I found myself woefully flailing when the rubber met the road. As one therapist asked me, "What would it look like to cultivate a life - both personally and professionally - where you didn't need a pandemic, horrific personal tragedy and a broken leg to finally convince you that it is ok to spend regular time laying down in green pastures and resting." The last 18 months have forced me to deeply examine my self-care habits, develop skills for resting and restoration that are maintainable, and set some boundaries related to my pastoral work/life balance that have, unfortunately, resulted in pushback from a few members of the congregation. However, I am convinced that I am well on my way to being healthier in body, mind and spirit, and healthier as a pastor, than I have been in a long time. As I said before, I have these past awful 18 months to thank for that.

- *How has the crisis allowed you to work on additional projects you previously did not have the opportunity to?*

See the previous question for my answer to this related to self-care and boundaries.

As I alluded to earlier in this reflection, before the start of the pandemic I had attempted to convene a Pastoral Relations Committee twice. My need for additional professional support during the last 18 months resulted in a third and successful gathering of a PRC. This group has been invaluable in creating a space for some important congregational work/conversations/reconciliation/reflection to happen. I am grateful for the ways in which Rick Ramsey, Judy Scheer, Henry Rietz and Laura Nelson Lof have loved and supported Grinnell United Church of Christ, and me as its minister in this long, strange season.

- *Have your career aspirations or development goals changed as a result of the pandemic?*

One of the most delightfully surprising outcomes of these last 18 months is mine and Matt's evaluation and trajectory of our career paths which, in turn, has allowed our family to make the decision to (finally) move to Grinnell. I know that having a minister who lives in Grinnell is something our congregation has longed for for many years now and I am so glad that our family is finally in a place where that is possible. While Matt's story is his own, what we both have experienced over this past year and a half is a total

reimagining of who we are as people, parents, partners and professionals. Our family tree has suffered the loss of a branch on both sides, we've both learned that the poor boundaries we've maintained professionally have corrupted our family life and mental and emotional wellbeing to an unhealthy level. We've questioned our callings (he's as called to baseball as I am to ministry) and re-evaluated what it looks like to live out these callings in a way that infuses our family and our marriage with life instead of grief. We've reassessed our financial goals, our professional goals and future goals to get to, what I think is, the healthiest place we've been in as a couple and a family in years. Moving to Grinnell will not only allow me to be even more invested in Grinnell UCC than I already am, along with the ministerial and denominational efforts in the wider community, but will allow us to gain some financial freedom which will make it even more possible for me to work towards a terminal degree in the near future (while also putting kiddos through college in the next few years...yikes)

One of the questions I've asked myself over these last 18 months is if it is more important for Grinnell UCC to have a minister who is a Preacher who also provides Pastoral Care/Wider Ministries or to have a minister who is a Pastoral Caregiver/Involved in Wider Ministries who also Preaches. I've come to the conclusion from conversations with and criticism from church folk, and re-reading the church profile from the search and call process has helped confirm this, that Preaching is the most important thing I do in the context of my all-encompassing pastoral ministry here at Grinnell UCC. Knowing this affects the ways I allocate my working hours during the week and has confirmed that if and when I do move forward with a DMin, I will focus on finding a program that specializes in preaching.

- *Where would you like to see yourself grow? Where are you vulnerable and need extra support? What self-care practices sustained you during the last 18 months?*

I am embracing spiritual retreat and renewal as a growth priority going forward. I plan to apply for the 2022 Women Touched By Grace Cohort hosted by the Our Lady of Grace Monastery in Beechgrove, Indiana which will provide multiple opportunities over the next 2.5 years for this work. In addition, I am going to begin the initial planning process for my sabbatical in 2024 which will prioritize spiritual renewal as well.

It is embarrassing for me to say that these last 18 months have been the first time in my adult/professional/ministerial life where I have routinely felt like I was failing at my job, where people were verbally disappointed and disapproving of me, and where I questioned my calling and my ability and my skill related to this vocation. I suppose I'm lucky that I've spent 20 years in ministry to only now (or perhaps only knowingly now) flail like I have recently. It has been humbling, hurtful, and isolating. 2020 irrevocably changed me from the inside out and much of who I am as a person and as a pastor still

feels very new, vulnerable and tender. I think I am finally getting to a place where I can hold my fragility with gentle hands and am able to not take everything quite as personally as I was six or twelve months ago, but there is a long road ahead. I have spent my entire ministerial career being as transparent, real, authentic and honest as I can be. When I've been whole and healthy, happy and confident my realness has always been well received. This past year I've learned that having a minister who is honest about being broken, sick or hurt, grieving and insecure isn't as well received and I've felt at times that I had to pretend everything is "ok" so I don't make others uncomfortable. This is a place where I am continuing to work and grow and process in therapy and self-reflection.

Intentional rest, reading, water aerobics, walking, volunteering with and spending time with animals, praying, and meditating have been some of the self-care practices that have gotten me through this last year and a half. I am committed to continuing them.

● *What are you most proud of achieving or contributing to Grinnell UCC and the wider community during this time?*

Honestly, I'm most proud that we've survived, and not only that we've survived but we've been able to maintain a level of sustained financial giving and generosity that many other churches have not. I'm proud of the ways we've gone from approximately 5% technology in our worship offerings to a full, live-streamed weekly worship option and hybrid options for our Sunday School classes, committees and Governing Board. I'm proud of the way our social justice focused witness and mission has continued uninterrupted and, if anything, has increased as we've responded in very real ways to the needs of our community related to LGBTQ+ and racial justice.

Personally, I'm proud that I'm still in this role. I'm proud that I didn't quit. So, so, so many pastors are leaving professional ministry after this year and I understand why. Staying in ministry is a profound act of faith for me and I'm grateful for the Spirit's leading to do so.

Mostly, I'm proud of the continued faithfulness of this congregation, for our incredibly resilient staff, and for the leadership of individual folks who've carried us, and me, through. I'm proud in advance of the ways in which I know we will face the days to come, uncertain as they are, with hope and grace and extravagant welcome.