



March 24, 2019

My Friends,

This is a tough letter to write. I can only hope it conveys not only the joy of a new chapter beginning for me and my family but also the sadness of seeing a cherished chapter coming to an end.

I write to inform you that this morning I was approved by congregational vote to be the Pastor and Head of Staff at Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Church in Knoxville, TN. Pending acceptance by the Presbytery of East Tennessee, I will begin in ministry there on August 5, 2019.

The Lord has blessed Frances and me with the clarity of our sense of call to a new place of ministry. An old mentor once told me that when it comes to discerning a call in ministry, one is looking for the twin emotions of peace and excitement: peace, in that there is a quiet assurance and conviction, and excitement, in that there is an unmistakable eagerness and energy about it. As conversations began and deepened with the Pastor Nominating Committee in Knoxville, that sense of peace and excitement grew and grew for Frances and me.

It is precisely the same feeling I sensed when coming to GPC seven years ago.

I could write more about the joy and clarity I feel about this new call in ministry, but because following one call inevitably means leaving another behind, I fear that my sharing further could be interpreted as dissatisfaction in being your Associate Pastor.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

Seven years ago, this congregation took a chance on a young pastor right out of seminary. No matter how extensive the training, no matter how thorough the education, no matter how shining the references may be, a congregation simply can't know what it's getting in calling a pastor new to ministry, so there's always a bit of a gamble. You have shown grace to me in my mistakes, celebrated with me in our successes, and guided me as I learned the day-to-day demands and joys of pastoral ministry. You have supported me in the pursuit of a doctorate, readily welcomed Frances when God brought her into my life, and rejoiced with me at the birth of our son Jack.

Gratitude feels like too trite a word to communicate the thanks I have in my heart for you.

I've been told that a pastor's early years in ministry are disproportionately formative, shaping a minister's perspective and passion for many more years to come. Sadly, I have heard horror stories from peers in ministry who found themselves confronted by any combination of toxic congregations or overbearing supervisors. Whenever I would hear of such situations, though I would grieve with the friend sharing it, I would inescapably find myself so thankful to have been called to a healthy, caring congregation with strong, stable lay leadership, a vibrant staff, and an exemplary leader and mentor in Will Jones.

I can only pray that the Lord will use the decidedly positive dynamic here, in which I have learned and grown, to bring about good fruit for his kingdom in this next chapter of ministry for me.

Though a definite timeline has yet to be presented to and approved by the Session, Will and I have tentatively tossed around Sunday, June 30, 2019, as my last Sunday with you, as I hope to continue in ministry with you during a somewhat longer transition time than is normal.

Usually a pastor shouldn't linger too long after announcing the acceptance of a new call. However, because of some providential timing in Knoxville, the start date in early August grants some flexibility, not to mention a less hectic pace in pulling off a move with a newborn.

A couple of factors lead me to think/hope that it could be a positive thing all around. First, an extended transition time affords us the chance to work deliberately to prepare various programs and ministries to run sustainably even without direct oversight from me, especially in Adult Education and Missions. Second, these next few months, perhaps selfishly, will give Frances and me more time to say farewell.

Of course, undergirding those factors is a bit of presumption on my part that, even though there is no such thing as a hierarchy among calls or pastorates, I sincerely hope that this move for me from being an Associate Pastor to a Head of Staff will neither come as a total surprise nor be perceived in any way as a lack of love or gratitude for this congregation.

This letter runs the risk of going way too long, if it hasn't already. Suffice it to say, Germantown Presbyterian Church will always, always have a special place in my heart, and no matter how excited we are for this next season, we will miss you terribly.

Gratefully in Christ,

Jay