

NEXT STOP: YEAR TWO  
NOVEMBER 16, 2014  
ELIZABETH MANGHAM LOTT  
ST. CHARLES AVENUE BAPTIST CHURCH

When you move to a new place, particularly *this* place, the first weeks and months are spent getting the basic details of life figured out. Where will my kids go to school? How do I get there quickly for drop-off and pick-up? Who will be my dry cleaner, my pediatrician, my dentist, my babysitter? Which grocery is closest for grabbing milk and bread? Which one do I like the best for real shopping? How do I drive from point A to point B given the curve of the river or the cut of the interstate? Then you start to learn the rhythm and specifics of the city: its festivals, its seasons, who has the best snoballs, which parades to anticipate, when people leave town for weeks on end, where's the coziest cafe for writing and planning and the "go to" restaurant when friends and family come to visit.

Our first year together has been a study in similar tasks. What's our process? How do we get things done? What programs matter and make a difference? Who are our neighbors and how do we engage the community around us? Who do you call when you need to get a party planning committee together? Who makes the brisket, the coffee, the First Sunday cookies? Who will paint the walls and weed the beds and secure the safety strips on the brick steps? Where do we keep the staples and paper clips? Where does that ladder lead? What's beyond that door?

As we have gotten to know each other and gotten our bearings, we have heard each others goals and dreams. Most of you had been waiting for a pastor for quite a while, and you had lists. Sometimes literal lists that you gave me! :) Lists of hopes and plans and edits to bylaws and changes we needed to make. And you discovered that I said "no" a lot in my first twelve months. That's a 2015 goal, I'd say, or that's not in my top ten right now. You have been patient with me as I have listened and studied and learned your rhythm. While we lived with some "no" and "not yet" answers, we also discovered the places where it was time to say "yes." We have done a lot together in twelve months, and it is good for us to reflect on this year in worship.

#### PASTORAL STAFF

One of the first things I did was get to know the two people with whom I spend most of my time: Tim Moon and Stephanie Coyne. I knew very little about them before September of last year when we met at the PJs on Maple Street for what would be our first of many, many, many trips for coffee in that spot. Tim is a graduate of Truett Seminary at Baylor University, Stephanie is a graduate of Mercer's McAfee School of Theology, and I am a graduate of the Baptist Seminary at Richmond. All three ministers

of the church were born in the late 1970s or early 1980s, all are graduates of theological schools less than 25-years-old and born out of the end of what was once the Southern Baptist Convention. What does it mean for a 116-year-old, esteemed church to be led by this particular group of ministers trained in this particular period of American church history? What are the unique opportunities and gifts that come out of the synergy of this pastoral staff?

I met with Tim and Stephanie together and separately and learned about their skills and gifts. Tim is built for relationships and for calling people to act in the world in ways of mission and ministry. Stephanie has great gifts for worship leadership and pastoral care but also a much-needed administrative eye. Large church staffs often have a Pastor of Administration, and Stephanie has helped me to better understand what it means for church administration to be done with a ministerial eye. She has been and is organizing our finances, our policies, our day-to-day procedures to reflect who we are and who we are becoming. At the beginning of 2014, we agreed to update their titles to Associate Pastors, and we continue to study their gifts and job tasks to best determine the structure for honoring their unique talents and callings. It was a privilege to bless and ordain Tim last week in worship, and we hold that same space open for Stephanie if she determines that this is the right place and right time for her to accept that blessing. Scott Bond calls us the “Triple Threat,” and I am thankful for their partnership and support in this first year. Expand that staff circle to include the dedication, wisdom, and charm of Tom Rushing plus the delightful, brilliant, endlessly thoughtful and talented Mark McCreary, and we have quite a team on our hands!

## BUDGET & FINANCE

On the financial front, we have had some clean-up to do. After a few rocky years, Stephanie Coyne and Bob Marye became a fearless duo sorting through years of records and documents. I arrived just as the 2014 budget was being finalized and presented with an anticipated \$30-45k shortfall. At my request, we did not have a proper stewardship campaign last year. We simply prepared to push through the year ahead as you and I learned each other and began to discern precisely what road it was that we were walking. After a year of studying income and expenses, with Courtney asking lots of questions about each and Bob and Stephanie doing research and generating consistently helpful reports, we are now looking at a 2015 budget with a realistic goal of little-to-no deficit.

Small, designated gifts were tracked for years as “Warehouse Accounts,” but were not always protected or honored. A group of us met multiple times this year to study what funds were documented and which gifts needed to be honored. Bob Marye and Tina Clark set up a new, separate account for Designated Gifts, and Stephanie Coyne has

created a clear, separate way of documenting those gifts. Over the next two years, the Trustees will contribute toward those accounts as we maintain the integrity of the donations individuals and family estates have made and will continue to make toward the life and future of this church.

Multiple committees in the church read Henri Nouwen's *A Spirituality of Fundraising*, and we have used his language to guide our ongoing conversation about stewardship—being responsible for and protecting this place, our resources, the life within this institution, our unique, Baptist presence in New Orleans. It is my goal that talking about money need not be anxious or confusing. We can be clear, simple, and transparent in discussing the church's finances. We must be generous in sharing our individual resources because we understand that particular kind of giving to be but one aspect of living a generous life. Our time, our energy, our skills, our talents, and our money can all be used to honor what God is doing here at St. Charles Avenue. Next week we will pledge to support the church in 2015 with our prayers, our skills sets, and our finances. We give of ourselves because we believe that God is doing something exciting here, and we understand our personal participation to be the essence of renewal in this place.

#### COMMUNITY PARTNERS

Stewardship of space requires us to make honest assessments about this large building. In the 1950s and 60s, Baptist congregations expanded educational space to accommodate Sunday School for all ages in perpetuity. But almost all of those buildings are now too large and often sit empty for 98% of the week. Long before I arrived, empty classroom space here had become offices. After many years renting the second floor of our third building, Habitat for Humanity moved out in March 2013. When I arrived, one small congregation rented the chapel, a second congregation rented the sanctuary, one pastoral counselor met with clients in an upstairs office, and the Center for Equal Justice (a group working to exonerate innocent death row inmates) rented half of the space beneath the sanctuary. But considerable square footage sat empty, in need of paint, and ready to be used.

In 2014 we did away with the idea of renters because we are not an office complex. We embraced the language of Community Partnership, instead, because it gets at the idea that we want to connect with the neighborhood and city around us in intentional ways. We created a Partner Covenant to describe our relationships to the various non-profit entities seeking to share space here, and we began to look for individuals and organizations who could affirm alongside us a call to work for the common good in New Orleans. The congregation in the chapel disbanded, but the other three partners remained. With the idea of Community Partnerships firmly in place, in 2014 our partnerships began to grow. We added two small offices connected to the remaining

partner congregation, and we welcomed a musician who works for national non-profits and foundations. We added Positive Family Solutions: a social worker who works with families in crisis. Then came Learning Laboratory; a tutoring group prepared to welcome students into their colorful new study lab. After months of conversation, we now host the headquarters for the Greater New Orleans Youth Orchestra; a 20-year-old organization boasting five student orchestras who practice on Loyola's campus. And easily the most visible of all the partners is Girls on the Run; a comprehensive wellness program for 3rd-8th grade girl. Girls on the Run's philosophy starts from the belief that every girl can embrace who she is, can define who she wants to be, can rise to any challenge, can change the world. Under one roof are eleven entities working to make the world a better place. We get to hear their stories, support their missions, and watch them succeed. We are proud of our Community Partnerships.

### MISSION ACTION

Continuing with the expanding understanding of Community Engagement, in 2014, Tim Moon became the pastoral staff representative for Mission Action as the Associate Pastor for Community Engagement. The group rallied around the continuation of today's Gospel reading, and those verses that will be our text for next week's sermon: "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." In years to come, we'll look at clean water, prison reform, homelessness and hospitality. This year they led us through a range of activities focused on hunger. We hosted a mid-summer food drive for Second Harvest, several groups met in Summer Supper Clubs to watch the documentary *A Place at the Table*, and more than two dozen of us met on the lake front on a windy September Saturday for the CROP Hunger Walk to raise funds and awareness through Church World Service for those who go hungry every day.

Keeler Malmsten and Darrell Smith are leading us to get our hands dirty, literally, and plant community gardens around the church campus. You can sponsor a raised bed, help build and plant. This is just scratching the surface of how Mission Action is inviting us to engage our neighborhood, our city, and our world. We have added Together For Hope, a community development organization in Lake Providence, as an ongoing missions partner. That partnership will undoubtedly lead to site visits and hands-on collaboration with the work Jenny Hodge is doing there to address systemic poverty, race and class divisions, economic and education disparity.

In 2015, the Mission Action Committee will partner with the Outreach Committee to create the new Community Engagement Committee. The goal of Outreach is to tell the story about who we are and what we do. The goal of Mission Action is to do things in

our neighborhood, city, and world because of who we are. They will collaborate to work toward a more comprehensive message of identity, vision, and mission.

## YEAR TWO

Moving into our second year together, we have some growing edges—the places that challenge us and may not be addressed in easy, quick ways. As our congregation grows and welcomes families with children, the work of the Family Ministries Committee will be more significant than ever before. In recent years, the Family Ministries Committee has largely focused on Vacation Bible School and Fall Festival as a planning group. The year to come is the time for Family Ministries to organize with an expectation of growth. They will revue policies and procedures, consider space and staffing and volunteer potential. They will imagine more ways to incorporate children and youth into worship beyond this year's addition of the children's sermon and children's bulletin. We want to honor all stages of faith development and believe children are to be active participants in our worship experience. This is a growing edge.

In year one, we added a Lego Sunday School class for elementary school-aged children. The students walk through stories of scripture and build what they are learning with a variety of innovative toys. The class is growing, and they need more volunteer teachers. This is a growing edge.

Our small but faithful high school group meets off-site one night per week, but there is no intentional time for our even smaller middle school group. There is no on-site space designated for 6th-12th graders in this building. This is a growing edge.

One of our biggest projects this Fall was reflecting on our organizational vision. We have plenty of words in our founding documents, on our web site, and on the back of our bulletin that get at the language of how we welcome, who we are, and what we value. We spent a few weeks in September and October asking questions that helped us articulate our story for today. Where are we now? What do we value today? What are we trying to do here? You gave me notes, I compiled notes from listening to you, and I passed that information to the Outreach Committee, the storytelling arm of St. Charles. With much care and discussion, they identified one phrase that will guide us in this second year together:

At St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church, we aspire to serve God by:  
asking questions, loving neighbors, seeking justice, and welcoming all.

Intellectual curiosity and thirst for truth are essential ways of being for St. Charles Avenue Baptist. We believe in asking hard questions and believe that God is present in

our search for knowledge. We find comfort in knowing that sometimes old questions lead to better questions, and God is honored in that process. We aspire to serve God by asking questions.

We walked through the stories of scripture this year and circled around again and again to God's way being the way of love. Our faith is true when we are loving each well. We will continue to seek ways to be a better, more loving neighbor in our geographical community, our city, and our world. We aspire to serve God by loving neighbors.

St. Charles Avenue has been a justice seeking congregation from the beginning. In the recent rebuilding years, our focus has been more internal as we have trimmed and revised and prepared for renewal. But our voice for justice is coming back and will be stronger than ever. We aspire to serve God by seeking justice.

This is a place where all are welcome. When we say that, we mean it. We affirm that God's grace is big, God's table is big, God's kingdom and love and imprint on humankind is big. And that can bring challenges because welcoming all means welcoming people we don't always agree with, people who aren't always easy to love, people who are very different from us. We aspire to serve God by welcoming all.

That's quite a lot for year one, my friends. Be amazed and proud and delighted by what God is doing here. If you've missed out on these first steps and want to join in for year two, there is always room for more in the life of our community. This is not a place where faith is easy and pre-packaged and handed to you. This is a place where we work, we seek, we tell the truth, we fail, we try again, we apologize, we forgive, we laugh, we notice, we take delight in each other and in God's ways. Year Two starts now. What will God dream for us next?