



First Presbyterian Church

1505 E. Grand Avenue / Ponca City, Oklahoma 74604 / (580) 762-2431

January 21, 2024

Dear Congregation,

What a joy and a privilege it is to be in ministry with you, as a Commissioned Pastor in this Interim period. We worship together, share the sacraments together, care for each other, mourn and rejoice with each other. Truly the love of God is expressed in this congregation in a beautiful way.

During this past year, we have also looked carefully at who we are, where we are and what's next in our journey forward into the future to which God is calling us. Your Session has worked diligently to discern God's leading. Like many other congregations across the nation, we are an aging congregation, dwelling in a huge facility, designed 70 years ago for a very different set of needs than the needs we have today. It was intended to serve a group at least 10 times our current numbers and its operation and upkeep now consume all of our current income and are a burden on our active members. While our financial resources, given by faithful members over the years, combined with further efforts to reduce expenses could enable us to remain here for a few more years, we feel we are called to do more than just survive.

Last summer, we began to explore ties with the congregation of the First United Methodist Church of Ponca City. Our two congregations share many friendships, a deep love of worship and music, and a common outlook on many current issues. We have hosted each other and deepened ties, while waiting to gain the consent of the Oklahoma Conference of the United Methodist Church. We have recently received an enthusiastic response from the Oklahoma Conference to set up what we are calling an **ecumenical partnership** with First United Methodist. Gordon Edwards(our General Presbyter) and Carol Cook-Moore(the local Oklahoma UMC District Superintendent) have both been deeply involved in putting this together and it is now time to implement the partnership.

This is neither a merger, nor a federation, nor is our congregation closing. It is a new thing! Our partnership will be guided by an advisory team consisting of both Pastors, Linda Vanderburg and Bill Salmons from our leadership and Terri Harris and Jan Matheson from theirs. In this **partnership**, we will worship and work together while maintaining our distinctive denominational affiliations and commitments. We will share in the work of our common committees (Worship, mission, fellowship etc), and share in the costs of operation and staff proportionally to our attendance numbers. However each congregation will continue to maintain separate governing bodies (our Session, their Council) and support their own denominational missions. It is our common prayer that together we will be led into greater mission outreach and still others will come and share the love of Christ with us.

We will discuss the full details at the annual meeting of the congregation on January 28th immediately after worship. The full text of the partnership agreement will be available in the meeting packet. The Session requested that this letter be sent as soon as possible to let you know of the plan. We are targeting our final congregational worship service here on February 11th and a service with the whole Presbytery on February 13th which will also honor the proud history of this worship space and the holy things that have happened here. Please invite past members and guests to either or both Services.

As we begin this Partnership, we will begin to worship together with First Methodist on Ash Wednesday, February 14th, followed with a covenant service on Sunday morning February 18th. Starting this journey together during the season of Lent as we look forward to new life and the joy of Easter seems deeply meaningful.

At the Session's invitation, I plan to remain involved in Pastoral care, Moderating the Session, and helping in Worship when I am not needed elsewhere in the Presbytery. Pastor Leon Veazey will be the primary worship leader. I know that you will extend the same love and care to him that you have to me.

Having already received both the congregation's and the Presbytery's permission, we are placing the existing facility up for sale. We will be contracting with a national firm recommended by the denomination with extensive experience selling church properties. This facility remains our responsibility and is not involved in the partnership. It is our hope that this decision will enhance our ministry partnership by freeing up valuable resources for use in the kingdom of God. Our building will remain open and staffed at least until June 1 with a number of special community events still scheduled. After that, we will begin a process of dispersing assets not needed for the sale where they can be of use in the community.

There are many other questions that remain to be answered. Let's covenant together to work through this transition with love, wisdom and gentleness. Let us also covenant together to use this unique partnership as a springboard into new life and new possibilities as the Spirit leads us. The words Isaiah wrote to his people by the Spirit in a difficult time also speak to us in our time: "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert." (*Isaiah 43:18-19 NRSV*)

So may it be for us as we do this new thing and live out new ways of being the people of God.

Grace and Peace,



Pastor Mark