

## Questions and Answers: Exploring the Merger Recommendation

Greetings from the St. Peter Community Church Council. We are pleased to submit this document with answers to the questions that you have raised in response to the recommendation that we pursue a merger with Northfield Community Church. We want to thank everyone who shared their thoughtful questions with us. We do want to state up front that we *will not be answering every question that was submitted to us*. In order to best convey the information that you seek we have combined questions that are the same or very similar into one, or have rewritten a question in order to help provide the best answer possible. Please rest assured, that even though you may not find your *exact* question within this document, we have read and reviewed every comment we received. We feel confident that what follows offers a solid cross section of the concerns that you have raised, and we hope that you will find the answers helpful as you help us discern our future together.

### **Our Discernment Process: How did we get here?**

Before we move into the questions and answers themselves, we would like to offer you a brief refresher on the discernment process that has brought us to where we are today. While our time of transition began with our call to Pastor Clint in 2013, the real heavy lifting of discernment began with our Council leadership retreat in February of 2014. At that time, we adopted a model of Holy Conversation for visioning our future together, and began preparing the four options that we felt emerged from our discussions. This led to our series of worship services focusing on those options in November of 2014, and culminated with our vote at the annual meeting in January of 2015 to explore and pursue partnerships with other congregations.

2015 then became the year of engaging potential partners in ministry. Our explorations of partnerships with Trinity United Church of Christ (Deerfield), the Congregational Church in Deerfield, and Northfield Community Church led to insightful conversations amongst the Council and opened the door for our series of worship visitations with the Congregational Church in Deerfield and Northfield Community Church. As we continued our prayerful deliberation, the Council arrived at the conclusion that while none of our options were perfect, Northfield Community Church presented the best option amongst those available to us. We then crafted the recommendation that was presented to you in November of 2015, which led to the request for the questions that we are answering in the document you now read. We hope that you will find our answers clear and informative, and that this document will serve as yet another step forward in our journey of transition and discernment.

## **The Recommendation: What Is It?**

**Q:** *What kind of ‘partnership’ with NCC will this be?*

The proposal as presented calls for St. Peter to begin the process of merging with Northfield Community Church. By the merger’s completion, the members of St. Peter Community Church will become members of Northfield Community Church. While this may not appear to be much of a partnership at first glance, we feel that the overtures that the leadership of NCC have made with regard to welcoming St. Peter and honoring our heritage and history actually do invite us to become partners in a shared future, rather than just new members who have joined an existing community. Some of the details that support this feeling will become evident as we continue to answer your questions, while others will need to be negotiated should we move forward. Regardless, we feel that this path provides us with an opportunity to continue our journey in faith together.

**Q:** *Would a third “St. Peter” service at NCC be an option? If not, how long will St. Peter continue to meet separately?*

Although the desire to continue to worship together just like we do now is certainly strong, we recognize that there are a number of factors that make this impractical. On this point, the leadership of Northfield Community Church has been clear that they do not believe that they have the resources or congregational strength to conduct a third worship service at this time. Additionally, we are aware that the goal of a merger is for two congregations to become one, not simply that two congregations share a name, a pastor, a building, etc. While this would certainly appear to be the simplest and most desirable, it doesn’t seem to be a viable option at this point.

This naturally begs the second half of this question. In the near term, St. Peter will continue to meet as a separate and distinct worshipping community. However, one of our priorities in the negotiation process will be to establish a timetable by which our two congregations might begin to worship as one. Without making any commitments to a specific date, we recognize that Pentecost Sunday would certainly be an appropriate point in the Christian year to celebrate the joining of two communities as one.

**Q:** *Will our memberships be transferred to Northfield Community Church?*

Yes. While a merger may feel no different than all of us simply transferring our individual membership to NCC, the reality is that we’re talking about the future of our *congregation*, and not just ourselves as individuals. A merger provides the means by which our history and heritage will expand and strengthen NCC’s history and heritage, providing NCC with a new history that now has roots in the history of Northfield Township that stretch back over 170 years. Furthermore, a merger insures that those who hold membership in St. Peter Community Church but are unable to join us for worship and therefore make their own public transfer of membership would be admitted to the membership of NCC as well. Our ministry to our

members who are no longer able to join us on Sunday mornings is an important part of our identity, and a merger ensures that our shut-ins continue to be part of our future together.

**Q:** *What will happen to the Heritage Fund?*

While we don't have a final answer to that question, we can tell you what we know. Northfield Community Church has made it clear that they are not interested in the Heritage Fund being a part of our negotiations should we choose to merge. The leadership at NCC has offered us their prayerful support in discerning a future for the Heritage Fund that furthers the mission of the Gospel while honoring the legacy of St. Peter Community Church. In the meantime, we have commissioned a team to review the various recommendations we have received from some of our members and begin developing a plan for the final disposition of the Heritage Fund.

**Q:** *What will become of the St. Peter Cemetery?*

While church ownership and management of their own cemeteries was once business as usual for the congregations, the trend over the past half century has been one of churches divesting themselves of their cemeteries. This change has come about due to questions of liability, maintenance, the resources required to accomplish both of these things, and the shift in the nature and mission of churches that occurs naturally over time. As such, we were not surprised when NCC expressed their unwillingness to assume custody of St. Peter Cemetery as part of the merger.

However, we have identified the Village of Northbrook as a potential steward for our cemetery that has a strong track record in this regard. The village currently maintains two cemeteries, and has proven to be a faithful stewardship of the grounds and legacies of loved ones gone before who have been entrusted to their care. We have opened discussions with the village in the hope of agreeing to an arrangement that will ensure our cemetery is in good hands.

**Q:** *What will happen to our employed staff members at St. Peter?*

Unfortunately, even the newly merged congregation brought about by this proposal will not be in a position to support multiple staff members performing the same or similar jobs. As the Council began crafting this proposal, we recognized that it would ultimately entail the end of St. Peter Community Church as a distinct legal and financial organization. Knowing this, in the fall of 2015 we informed our employees that the adoption of this recommendation would eliminate our need for any paid staff in the second half of 2016. We learned early in our discernment that any feasible path for our future together would likely involve cuts to staffing levels. Unfortunately, this future will mean that we no longer need any of our existing staff.

However, we should note this was our expectation regarding our call to Pastor Clint. When we hired him, we did so with the understanding that his primary task was not to serve as our settled minister, but to specifically lead us forward as our transitional pastor. This call was negotiated as a short-term ministry, with the expressed goal of helping us discern a direction

for our future together. Regardless of the outcome of the vote on this proposal, the Council and Pastor Clint have agreed that he has accomplished what we have asked of him and that his ministry to St. Peter will conclude no later than August 31<sup>st</sup> when his current contract expires.

## **The Partner: What do we know about Northfield Community Church?**

*Q: What special services or annual observances are part of NCC's traditions?*

In many ways, our NCC neighbors are not so different from ourselves. They follow the liturgical calendar – just as we do – and observe the same special seasons and conduct the same special worship services as our congregation: Advent, Christmas Eve, Ash Wednesday, the season of Lent, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter, Pentecost, World Communion Sunday, as well as a Thanksgiving Day service. In addition to worship, NCC hosts their annual Community Christmas celebration following worship on the first Sundays in December and offer their Lenten Soup and Seminar series on Wednesdays throughout Lent.

*Q: What kind of fellowship organizations or opportunities does NCC have to offer?*

NCC offers a number of opportunities for fellowship within the congregation that run the gamut of church engagement. Christian education programs include Sunday School for all ages, confirmation classes for their youth, a weekly women's bible study, a book club, and several other 'as scheduled' educational offerings including Three-week Wednesday night study series' and Sunday potluck studies after worship. A collection of annual "Family Fun Days" are hosted at NCC with activities geared for families with children up to 8<sup>th</sup> grade with themes ranging from Trunk or Treat to talent show visits to their shut-in members. In addition to these, NCC offers "The Point," which is their youth and young adult ministry program.

## **The Process: How would we accomplish it?**

*Q: How does Northfield Community Church feel about a proposed merger?*

While it would be difficult, if not outright impossible, to try and answer this for the NCC congregation as a whole, we can share with you some of the discussions we've had with their congregational leaders. From the beginning of our discussions in early 2015, our conversations about the possibilities for partnership have been positive and NCC has been receptive to our inquiries. The correspondence we've received on behalf of their Church Council and Board of Trustees have included numerous suggestions for ways in which St. Peter's history and heritage might be honored at Northfield Community Church, and further incorporated into their own congregational history and heritage. They have been very accepting of our existing fellowships, ministries, and study groups, and have offered us their prayerful encouragement as we continue our ongoing process of discernment. We feel that the goodwill and honest

engagement of NCC's leadership is a reflection of the general spirit of the congregation as a whole, and don't anticipate any real objections to this merger from their membership.

**Q: How we will go about making this decision at our Annual Meeting?**

This is a broad question encompassing three distinct issues that must be addressed: the merger, St. Peter Cemetery, and the Heritage Fund, so we will answer each part individually.

The merger: Our constitution provides us with guidance as to how we go about entering into a process of merger. It is contained in Article XIII, which reads as follows:

Proposals to dissolve the Church, or to merge or to consolidate the Church with another shall only be made at a duly called meeting of the Church, upon the affirmative vote of two-thirds (2/3) of the voting members present at such meeting. The action at such meeting shall be submitted to a second duly called meeting of the Church to be held no sooner than six (6) months after the first such meeting, at which second meeting the action dissolve, to merge or to consolidate shall be approved by not less than a three-fourths (3/4) affirmative vote of the voting members present.

With this as our guide, the Council will present a motion at the Annual Meeting to begin the process of entering into a merger with Northfield Community Church. For this motion to pass, 2/3<sup>rds</sup> of the voting membership present at the meeting will need to vote in favor of the motion. If it should pass, the Council will then move on from exploratory conversations to full negotiations with NCC as to the terms of the merger. Constitutionally, we will have a minimum six-month period in which the terms can be negotiated and finalized before we can hold the second vote required to confirm a merger. Prior to this second meeting, which could be held no sooner than July 31<sup>st</sup>, the Council will continue to communicate updates to the congregation in order to get your feedback on our progress and the terms of merger that we will be establishing. Our goal is that everyone will have been kept abreast and provided opportunities for input throughout the negotiation period so that any final vote will be for a merger that we have all helped design together.

The Heritage Fund: In our conversations with Northfield Community Church we have requested that the Heritage Fund not be a point of negotiation, as it has been the desire of many to see the monies used to further the mission of Jesus Christ in the world. The leadership of NCC has graciously agreed to our request, offering us their prayerful support as we work to find the best manner in which the fund might honor the St. Peter legacy and further the mission of the Gospel. While this offers us the freedom to pursue our own desires for the mission of the Heritage Fund, it does not, however, answer the procedural question. Our constitution contains provisions for the disbursement of assets in the case of *dissolution*, but offers no guidance as to how we should proceed in the case of a *merger*. Article IX (Property), Subsection 3. States that:

Upon dissolution of the Church, its assets and all property and interests of which it shall be possessed, including any devise, bequest, gift or grant contained in any will

or other instrument, in trust or otherwise, made before or after such dissolution, shall be transferred to the Illinois Conference of the United Church of Christ, or its successors.

Therefore, the Council has taken two actions to help determine the future of the Heritage Fund. First, we are presently seeking legal counsel as to the best vehicle for establishing such a mission and legacy, while seeking constitutional clarity as to how the congregation would do that in accordance with our constitution and bylaws. Second, the Council has formed a team that is charged with developing a plan for the future of the fund. This team is composed of Gary Eberlein, Jim Goettsche, and Barbara Balch, and they are reviewing the recommendations that you have offered and considering the legal advice we have received. Our plan is to update the congregation throughout this process, and then presenting a final plan for the future of the Heritage Fund to be approved at a future special congregational meeting.

St. Peter Cemetery: As mentioned in a previous question, we are in the process of negotiating the transfer of our cemetery to the Village of Northbrook. These discussions have already begun and we are hopeful that this transfer will move forward. As with the case of the Heritage Fund, we will be drafting an appropriate plan that will be presented to the congregation to be approved at a special congregational meeting in the future.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

While this document covers a lot of ground with regard to the proposed merger, we recognize that this is just one part of an ongoing conversation about our future together. Should you vote to begin negotiating such a merger, this conversation will continue as we iron out the details for our congregation, the Heritage Fund, and the St. Peter Cemetery. Thank you for taking the time to read this document and be engaged in the work of helping determine the path forward. We look forward to more conversation in person and in writing as we continue to discern God's will for us and for St. Peter Community Church.

We invite you to continue the conversation by contacting us with your thoughts, concerns, or any new questions that may have arisen. Discernment is ultimately a work that we must do together, and it is through this type of faithful engagement that we will ultimately discover the path that God is aligning before us. It is our prayer that the Spirit will offer us wisdom through the words of all of our members, and we hope that you will join us in allowing the Spirit to speak. You can send your responses to Pastor Clint ([clintwcollins@gmail.com](mailto:clintwcollins@gmail.com)) or by calling him at 312-434-7048. You can also submit correspondence to Linda in our office ([secretary@stpeternorthbrook.org](mailto:secretary@stpeternorthbrook.org)) or by calling 847-272-2246.