

## **“INTRODUCING OUR 2023-2024 THEME: INTENTIONS”**

Psalm 84; II Corinthians 5:11-21

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“I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than live in the tents of wickedness” (Ps 84:10b). When I was about sixteen, someone taught me the ABCD Bible Study method. I think “A” stood for analyze. Did I start the reading in the right place? Who’s talking? What’s the setting? “C” stood for call. What is the text asking of me? “D” stood for difficulty. What don’t I understand? These are useful things I still ask of many a text, but by far, the most useful thing still is “B” basic verse. This is the verse that captures the full meaning or intent of a passage. This is different from proof texting which is using a verse to capture the full meaning of what I want to hear.

I would rather be a lowly servant in God’s house than be admired by those who manipulate the world for their own pleasure. I’d rather pass out bulletins at church than be the life of the party somewhere else, sing in the choir than be a rock star, prepare refreshments for God’s people than be chef at a Michelin restaurant. Not that any of the latter are necessarily wicked, but we are made for God’s glory, not our own; doorkeepers in the house of God. That phrase captures the psalmist’s intention.

Paul imagines a more ambitious position in the household of God: ambassadors for Christ. He is not, however, affirming their rise to such a prestigious position, but describing their work: the ministry of reconciliation. As ambassadors they represent or re-present Christ to the world. God’s intention, according to Paul, is not for the faith community to guard the door, as much as it is to open the door into the house of God.

Both of these scriptures tie in well to our intentions as a faith community. For some of us, worship is the main or most important thing we do. This church has always invested a lot of energy, time, and thought into worship. A number of years ago we added a second service with a more contemporary feel to it. Much of what we learned from that has been taken up into a current worship. The pandemic forced us to make more changes that further enriched our worship. From the people on sound and camera to the musicians and liturgists to the pastors and worship team to the ushers, greeters and coffee plus, we are striving for inspiring worship that refreshes and challenges us while more importantly honoring the God whose love touches us each day. As with the psalmist, our intention is to discover inspiring worship every time we gather in God’s house.

Our theme for this program year, 2023-2024, is “Intentions.” What is it we intend as a congregation? This is about vision, identity, and work. Alongside inspiring worship our intentions include the other core values of compassionate service, mind and spirit, arts and music, as well as earth care. We have structures in place that help us fulfill these intentions in specific ways. The newly renamed Earth Care Team seeks to raise our awareness of environmental issues and offers opportunities to engage the earth in healthy ways. The Art Festival Team reinforces this value while also celebrating the work

of local artists and poets. Virtual technology has enabled us to expand the ways in which we nurture our minds and spirits. Mission team is challenging us to deepen our understanding and commitment to compassionate service. The structures are already in place and helping us to fulfill long held and new intentions.

For over twenty-five years, Westminster has been living out its commitment to peacemaking with its Peace Prize. This year's prize is going to Face-off Theatre, a small group of black actors raising awareness through dramatic presentations and then engaging in conversation with the audience after the performance. This meshes nicely with the intentions of our racial equity discussion group who put together a statement on antiracism adopted by the session within the last year and with our commitment to being a Matthew 25 congregation.

Two new intentions bear mentioning. A task force of the mission team is working on opening a warming center a couple days a week this winter. There are of course many challenges involved, but several of us feel quite strongly that there ought to be a place for homeless folks to warm up for a few hours during the day.

Secondly, we are hoping to hire a new director of communications and engagement early in 2024. We've grown in a number of ways since the pandemic and we need someone with different skills to help us make better use of the new tools we've acquired.

These are a lot of intentions, some general, some more specific. It may seem like a lot for a church this size, whatever that means, to do. There's certainly enough to spend a year talking about. But I want to draw your attention to two documents that I think define quite well who we are as a congregation and what we intend.

After individual listening sessions with participants in this faith community who wanted to participate, the session adopted a welcome statement that says we would not discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation for membership or leadership. We made a commitment to be door openers. We fundamentally want to be a place of belonging. We do so from a conviction of faith, with the belief that this is who God calls us to be. In this way, we try to re-present Christ to the world. This is so important today where so many churches practice exclusion, preaching a message of judgment. The world needs a place to call home, and we can be that place.

The other document grew out of a need to review and rewrite our mission statement. I am so glad we did not call it a mission statement! Mission statements are not so much discarded as they are forgotten. Our intention statement is probably too long, probably not specific enough to our identity as a congregation. The words are not all original, some borrowed from the work of Dorothy Bass on faith practices. But it has worked well for us and kept us focused. At Westminster we live a whole life.... We don't just nurture souls. Today, we'll feed your body, provide opportunities to build relationships, possibly speak some words of encouragement to someone struggling. We'll pray for all kinds of needs within this community and beyond. We have deacons because we care about whole lives.

We challenge minds, engage in mission, talk about issues because our intentions concern all of life.

And we do so in imitation of Jesus who came that we “might have life and have it abundantly... in all its fullness. In doing so we are “ambassadors for Christ”... representing Christ to this world in which we live.

Will you please stand and join me in reciting our intention statement which you'll find on the front of the bulletin? Amen

*At Westminster Church, we live a whole life  
in response to God,  
attentively,  
together,  
engaging the world,  
for the good of all,  
following Jesus Christ.*