

State of the Parish Address
March 19, 2023

This will be a unique State of the Parish Address. First, because I've never done this before. And second, because this is a unique moment in the history of this congregation. **The state of the parish of Hope Lutheran Church is a parish in transition.** The last time this congregation was in transition between senior pastors was from February 1982 to January 1983. At that time, Pastor Peter Steinke had taken a call elsewhere. And Hope waited 11 months before a call was issued to Pastor Ralph Hobratschk and he was installed in January of '83. Our current state has not happened for two generations.

Just a quick recap of our recent history: Pastor Ralph announced his retirement in January of 2022. By then, the Board of Directors was already acting as the call committee to call an intentional interim pastor. Pastor Ralph retired at the beginning of May. And a call was issued to Rev. Mark Koch in June. In July, Mark Koch declined the call to Hope, but took a call he had received at nearly the same time to serve as the intentional interim for a congregation in Colorado. During a joint meeting between the Board of Directors and the staff in October, a decision was made to move forward with the senior pastor call process. A call committee was formed, and they continue their work to this day.

So what does this time of transition mean for Hope? It means there has been a loss. With his retirement, this congregation has lost its senior pastor of 39 years. It means grieving that loss and the loss of what once was. And I think we all experience that – each in our own way. The question for us though is this:

are we going to just stay there in our grief? Or are we going to grieve well and move forward? How do we grieve well? We each need to name what was lost. Again, for each of us that will be slightly different. And then we own it. Think about what it feels like now that Hope is different. For me personally, I experience loneliness. Now, many pastors serve a congregation by themselves. But for over 16 years, I have not. I have always had a pastoral colleague. Sure, I have other pastor colleagues out there. But for 16 years I could go to the office next door to talk about Scripture or a new idea or to get advice or just talk. That's gone now. Each of you can name what you lost and can own it. And we grieve that. And you can't make the grieving process go any faster. You can't just say, "I'm done with that now." Grief doesn't work that way. And the last part of grieving well: waiting upon the Lord for the new thing He will do. Waiting is never easy. Today we get frustrated waiting more than 5 seconds for a website to load. Imagine being one of the Israelites waited in exile in Babylon for 70 years for the Lord to act. Waiting on the Lord is a hard thing to do. And changes are also hard for us. But a new beginning is a gift – a gift from God. It can be a rich experience. It can be scary. It can be both at the same time! But the goal is to get to the point where we are prepared – prepared to embrace what God has in store for the future of Hope Lutheran Church.

I would like to take some time to identify some current challenges, but also some current joys and bright spots here at Hope. There may be more, but I currently see two major challenges. The first challenge is Sunday morning attendance. Regular attendance in worship is an issue – particularly for our 11

o'clock service. The pandemic really hurt the habit of regular in-person worship. Our attendance numbers are up slightly from 2021. But that isn't saying much since that was a pandemic year. Overall, we have not returned to pre-pandemic attendance numbers. Yes, everyone has busy lives and schedules. Hearing God's Word and receiving His Sacraments are a critical component of the life of a disciple. Followers of Jesus Christ regularly gather with their fellow disciples to worship their Lord. The second challenge is fulfilling our new mission statement: "Sharing God's Word of Hope with all people." This mission statement was created by the Strategic Mission Plan Committee formed in preparation for the call of an intentional interim pastor. How do we go about owning it, enacting it and fulfilling it? What does that look like in our everyday life and our life together? That's an ongoing challenge for the entire congregation to work on together.

Now for some joys and bright spots. Despite the pandemic and despite the loss of our senior pastor, Hope's total baptized membership at the end of 2022 is 639 – a net gain of one from 2021. We had 10 baptisms in 2022 – 3 times the number of 2021. Hope's total confirmed membership is 554 – a net gain of seven from 2021. Our cadre of Stephen Ministers will be doubling in size from 5 to 10 when our current training class is commissioned in June. A good thing – since most of our Stephen Ministers are currently serving care receivers. Our Wednesday evening gathering of families – Mosaic - has nearly doubled in size to 14 families regularly attending – 45+ people. Hope has a new fellowship event: Lutherfest. Our first annual Lutherfest last October was fantastic! My

thanks to the Fellowship Task force for their hard work making that happen. Hope has a new outreach event in the works: The Community Market and Barbeque. It's scheduled for Saturday, April 22nd. We have some vendors already registered but would love to have more. So if you have any kind of craft or something you regularly sell, please consider putting up a booth. Entry cost for vendors is \$0.00. And ministry leaders of Hope – I challenge you to be creative and think of a way y'all could put together a booth for your ministry at the event as well. There will be Barbeque by the Havard Clan with help from the Fellowship Task Force. There will be truck crawl from Friendswood Fire and Police. And anything else we can dream up as we invite the community onto our campus. In the fall of 2022, Hope “acquired” an existing Mothers of Preschoolers or “MOPS” group. They are now an official ministry of Hope and are doing quite well as they settle in. We have added a class for our Sunday School and our VBS for this already half full.

And I continue to see relationships form and grow across generations. Our children need to have relationships and learn from other adults of all ages. And having surrogate grandparents within your congregation is a blessing and joy. So I encourage all of you to keep on making those connections and building relationships with each other. That's such an important piece of our life together in Christ.

There are probably many more challenges and joys. But those are some highlights. This time of transition for me has been a tremendous challenge, but also a joy. Thank you for your grace, and your patience with me and with the

process as we move forward. I owe a deep debt of gratitude to my fellow staff members. I thank them for their continued dedication to ministry among us and I thank them for the grace and patience and counsel. My thanks also to the many volunteers who serve regularly at Hope. What happens here cannot happen without you.

We have a shared life together as the Body of Christ known as Hope Lutheran Church. We're all sinners. But in Christ, we're all forgiven sinners. Life together as a congregation of God's people is messy. But at the very same time, it's a beautiful thing to see. So my prayer is that, during this time of transition, we wait with eager anticipation for the new thing the Lord will do among us and be ready and willing and prepared to embrace the future He has in store for us.