

August 30, 2020

Dear Countryside friends,

The global pandemic has affected nearly all of us in ways that we could scarcely have predicted just a few short months ago. For me, it started with contracting COVID-19 last March. While the virus had very little effect on me physically, in hindsight it had a dramatic effect on my life's path – which is why I write to you now.

Like many others who have caught COVID-19, the remote possibility that the virus could result in death prompted a significant life evaluation. I felt fine, but I had to ask myself, "If I were to die soon, would I leave with any significant regrets?" (The average length of time between onset of symptoms and death at the time was just 17 days.)

Mostly, my self-analysis was a happy one, but I did uncover one significant regret that bothered me deeply: I realized that Melanie and I would never have had our opportunity to return to our native Pacific Northwest and live closer to our family. As many of you are aware, my brother and mother live in Oregon. Melanie's sister and father also live in Oregon, and her brother lives in Washington. Our children plan on eventually locating to the Pacific Northwest as well.

Curiously, within a few days after uncovering this regret, I was contacted by First Congregational United Church of Christ in Portland, Oregon, asking if I would consider submitting my ministerial profile for their ministerial search. My first response was, "Of course not. I'm far too happy at Countryside." Looking over the church's profile only confirmed my assumption. Like many mainline, inner-city churches, the congregation has experienced a precipitous decline in membership over the years, with barely 200 members remaining on the rolls. It seemed a bit like being invited to step into a burning house in a burning city.

Nevertheless, neither Melanie nor I could quite shake the "coincidence" of timing. We decided to update and submit my profile (which had not been updated since coming to Omaha nearly 13 years ago), and pray that the Spirit make it clear whether this was a mere "coincidence" or a true spiritual Call.

To make a long story short, over the last several months and countless hours of prayer and discernment, it has become clear to me and Melanie, and to the Portland congregation, that this is a true Call. Last Monday, the congregation voted overwhelmingly to extend the Call to me, and I have accepted it.

On November 30, 2020, I will be relinquishing my position as Senior Minister of Countryside Community Church to become the solo Minister at First Congregational United Church of Christ in Portland. My last preaching date will be November 15, with the following two weeks devoted to creating a smooth transition between here and there.

I wish that circumstances allowed me to make this announcement personally to each one of you, or at the very least to say our goodbyes with less "social distancing." To try to make this announcement a little more personal, I have created a video which you can find at www.countrysideucc.org/future.

You have meant the world to me and my family for nearly thirteen years. In fact, I have never gotten over the awe and wonder I feel to be pastoring a congregation full of so many incredible, inspiring people. Please know that I am resigning with absolutely no ill will toward anyone, and only a deep and abiding sense of love and respect for Countryside's amazing membership and superb staff, and the ministry we have done together in Christ's name.

A Transition Leadership Team will be formed by the Church Council, which will meet in Executive Session on September 1, to help make this transition go as smoothly and painlessly as possible. They will be in close contact with the UCC Tri-State Conference and other entities to secure a well-qualified Interim Minister and help facilitate ways of saying our goodbyes as best we can, given the limitations of the pandemic. Later on, a Search Committee will also be formed for your next Senior Minister. Happily, Countryside is in a position to attract the very brightest and best ministerial candidates from our denomination, many of whom already consider our setting on the Tri-Faith Commons to be among the most attractive places to do ministry in the country, if not the world.

My family and I thank you from the bottom of our hearts for the many ways you have blessed us, prayed for us, and enriched our lives since coming to Omaha in 2008. You will always hold a special place in our hearts.

Grace and peace – and much love,

Eric