



## **Valley Ministries MCC**

### **Ministry Proposal - Senior Pastor**

### **October 2024 - December 2025**

May the peace of God be with you all!

We are near the end of our interim work. Over the course of a year and half, we have successfully completed the assessment, preparation, and visioning phases. We've done outstanding work developing and adopting our identity statement. It is a compelling description of who we are and who we want to be.

Now it is time for a major shift in our focus.

During our interim time, we have been focused inward. It has been a time for clarifying our identity and values, for figuring out what our church wants to be in the world. Now that we've completed that work, it's time to shift our focus outward. It's time to take our message out into the world and make our dreams a reality.

Many church members have expressed their hopes that I will stay on as Valley Ministries' long-term, settled pastor. I would like to explore that possibility with you. As part of that exploration, I have put together a proposal for my ministry as senior pastor during October 2024 through December 2025. As Valley Ministries moves from the inward focus of our interim time to the outward focus of making our dreams a reality, some of the responsibilities of its pastor will change. I think that it's good for us to discuss what this might look like so we have a clear understanding of my new role if the church does decide to call me as its long-term, settled pastor.

As with the work that we did on our identity statement, my hope is that we will have many conversations about this proposal and that it will change as a result. I hope that you will contribute ideas and insights that will make it stronger, clearer, and more robust.

### **Social Context**

In considering our future ministry plans, it is important to look outside our church at the wider social context to see what is working, and not working, at other churches.

Some of what we'll see is unsettling. When I served as Treasurer of the Northwest District of MCC in the early 2000s, there were sixteen MCCs in what we called Region A. Now there are only six MCCs in the same area.

Church closures are not limited to Metropolitan Community Churches. At this year's Annual Gathering of of the Northern California / Nevada Conference of the United Church of Christ, the Conference Minister reflected on the fact that 20% of the conference's churches have closed in the last nine years. The story is the same for every denomination. It is a daunting time to be a church.

There's also some good news out there. Rev. Dexter Brecht, our interim supervisor, says, "There are some congregations that are thriving in MCC. My observation is that they generally have one or two things in common that include a dual focus of outward and inward facing ministry, intentional innovation, and embracing digital technology as a ministry tool."

Over the past five or ten years, Valley Ministries has experienced a loss in membership similar to that of most other churches. But I believe that we can become one of the thriving MCC churches that Dexter Brecht described. To do this, I believe that we will need to try some new patterns of ministry.

## **Areas of Focus for the Senior Pastor in 2024-2025**

As a pastor, I have many areas of responsibility: worship, preaching, congregational care, etc. My board reports over the last year and half list more than fifty different categories of work that I have done over the past year and half with the church. During the rest of 2024 and 2025, I will continue to have many areas of responsibility, but there are nine areas where I would like to put a special focus:

- Special sermon series
- Expanding our virtual outreach
- Involving virtual participants in worship
- Speaking engagements and in-person outreach
- Setting goals for our shared ministry
- Updating our website
- Recruiting for the Food Pantry
- Adjusting my preaching schedule
- Restructuring my work schedule

Each of these areas is described in more detail in the sections below.

### **Special Sermon Series**

I would like to do three special sermon series each year:

- A transgender sermon series
- A non-binary sermon series
- A series on "Feminism in a Non-Binary World"

The idea behind each of these series is that we would take one month of the year for each series and dedicate it to outside preachers from a particular background.

This follows a pattern that we started at MCC San Jose, where we had a transgender sermon series each year in 2007, 2008, and 2009. Each Sunday of one month we'd have different preacher talking about their experience and theological insights as a transperson. This helped raise our profile in the community.

The videos from the transgender sermon series were quite successful. Valley Ministries' videos currently get engagement scores of around 20 per video. I don't have access to the exact numbers, but I remember one of our transgender sermon series videos from MCC San Jose got around 12,000 views. Another got around 900 views. I believe that we can increase our audience if we are willing to have sermon series that are unique and interesting.

To do this, the church would need to commit some money towards these sermon series. For UCC churches in our area, the standard honorarium for guest preachers is \$250 per sermon. For the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, it's \$275. I don't think we should offer less than \$250 per sermon. This would work out to a total of \$3,000 per year.

I think we should also budget some traveling money for preachers who are coming from a distance. It's about 80 miles from San Francisco to Stockton. Mileage reimbursement at the standard IRS rate would be about \$100 for someone doing the 160 mile round trip. I think we should budget \$1,200 per year for travel expenses so that we can defray the costs for preachers who are coming from a distance.

I believe that it is important for us to spend strategically to further our ministry goals. We have sufficient money in our cash reserves to cover these costs.

One of our peer churches was Many Journeys MCC of San Mateo, California. They were founded around the same time as Valley Ministries and closed in 2023. When they closed, they had around \$100,000 in the bank which they gave away to local non-profits. Similarly, the March 2024 newsletter from the MCC Governing Board reported that The Rock MCC of Chattanooga, Tennessee and Holy Redeemer MCC of Maryland both closed, giving \$418,300 to our denomination to further its programs. I don't know all of the details about these churches, but this tells me that churches can run out of people and energy before they run out of money. I don't want us to end up in that situation. At this point in the life of our church, I think we should use some of our financial reserves to try new things to strengthen our ministries.

## **Expanding our Virtual Presence**

I would like to see us expand our virtual presence by making our videos available on more platforms. I would also like to see us do shorter videos.

I believe that we can get a much wider audience if we take the time to create short videos that don't require a substantial time commitment. These videos could be short extracts from our services or they could be independent videos that we create as stand-alone projects. Our average Facebook Live video is about an hour long and gets about 20 views / engagements. But last year we did a short YouTube video that was only 90 seconds long and got 51 views. Even with our current audience, shorter videos get more views.

This is consistent with what I saw when I was at MCC San Jose. Our most popular video was about ten minutes long. But our second most popular video, with more than 3,000 views, was only 81 seconds long.

Another key to the success of MCC San Jose's videos was that we worked in partnership with other organizations to promote many of our videos. Our most popular video was promoted by UFMCC on its website. Our second most popular video featured ten different faith leaders expressing their opposition to Proposition 8. Our third most popular video featured a Mormon talking about his experience as a transman and was featured on a website for LGBT Mormons.

At Valley Ministries, I would like to see us create videos that are short, interesting, timely, and unique, and promote those videos in partnership with other organizations.

## **Involving Virtual Participants in Worship**

Recently we've been involving virtual participants in worship, with readings from Jim S. and Kelly F. done as part of our worship services. Our virtual participants seem to enjoy getting to be a visible part of our services. I've also heard from people in our congregation who have enjoyed getting to see some of our remote members during service.

I would like to see us expand this so that we have a larger pool of virtual readers and a virtual reader as part of every worship service.

## **Speaking Engagements and In-person Outreach**

In addition to virtual outreach, I would also like to do some old-fashioned in-person outreach.

I would like to continue and expand our partnership with SJ Pride Center. I would also like to continue developing our relationship with other faith communities, including local faith communities, other churches in our denomination, and other UCCs in our conference. We have the beginnings of relationships with University of the Pacific and Delta College, I would like to expand upon those.

I would like to seek out and develop opportunities to speak or teach at other organizations and faith communities.

I believe that by developing strong partnerships with outside organizations we can increase the impact of our ministries.

## **Setting Goals for Our Shared Ministry**

I think that there a clear consensus that our church should grow. In every area of our ministries, having more people would be a good thing.

With this in mind, I want us to set some goals for our church vitality and growth. How many members do we want to add in 2025? How many people do we want in our sanctuary on Sunday mornings? How many people online? How can we work together to reach those goals?

It's important to note that these are not just goals for the pastor. In clergy circles there is a clear understanding that churches grow when the whole congregation works together on growth. It doesn't work when congregations expect their pastors to grow the church by themselves.

I want us to have goals for growth for our church which will be shared by the pastor and the entire congregation. Since the goals are shared with the congregation, I feel that the entire congregation should be involved in creating them so that our goals are realistic and appropriate. I would like to have a Town Hall or two in late 2024 where we will set some goals for 2025 and discuss how we want to work together to achieve those goals.

I also would like to see us do regular check-ins during 2025 to see how we're doing with our goals. Are we making progress? Are there things that we need to adjust in order to achieve our goals?

I think having a clear and achievable set of goals will help keep us focused and motivated. I think that having regular check-ins about our goals will keep us on track throughout the year.

## **Updating Our Website**

When I first came to Valley Ministries, our website was far out of date. A hacker had compromised our web and email hosting and gotten access to our former pastor's old email account. I changed our web and email hosting and created a new, simple, up-to-date version of our website. Our new website is adequate, but it is not as good as it could be. It should be upgraded, perhaps with the help of an outside consultant.

## **Recruiting for the Food Pantry**

Our Food Pantry does amazing work. This July, we served 280 grocery bag clients out of the church. That's four times many people as we served in July 2023. This is awesome, but it puts a strain on our existing volunteers to do four times the amount of work that we did last year.

We need to recruit volunteers from outside of the church, perhaps by partnering with social service agencies that help volunteers find places where their skills can be used.

## **Adjusting My Preaching Schedule**

My current agreement with the church requires me to preach an average of three times a month. This has meant that Scott and Leanna have each had eight preaching slots per year. This doesn't leave any room in the schedule for any other guest preachers, which means we wouldn't be able to do the special sermon series that I've described above.

I would like to reduce my preaching commitment to an average of two times per month. This would open space for us to do the sermon series that I've proposed above and it would still leave room in the schedule so that Scott and Leanna can each preach eight times per year. For most months, I will still preach three Sundays a month, but during our special sermon series I won't plan to preach at all.

My contracts with MCC San Jose and with College Heights Church in San Mateo both called for me to preach an average of two times per month. That worked well at those churches. They enjoyed the diversity of voices that came from having guest preachers at church.

## **Restructuring My Work Schedule**

I was hired by Valley Ministries with the agreement that I would work three-quarters time, averaging of 30 hours a week (130 hours per month). My agreement with the church allows me to work more hours some weeks and fewer hours other weeks in order to maintain the average of 130 hours per month. Up until now, I have consistently exceeded the 130 hours per month target. For the months from February 2023 through June of 2024, I actually averaged more than 160 hours per month, working 30 hours per month over what's specified in my contract.

Our denomination recommends a \$60,000 per year salary for a full-time pastor in our area. Based on this standard, the church is currently paying me roughly half-time wages, but my agreement with the church specifies that I will work three-quarters time hours and my actual hours worked have been close to full time.

I have been glad to put in all of this work for the church, but I need to change this pattern if I am to stay here. I like being generous with the church. I hope that the church will be generous with me by allowing me to restructure my schedule so that I can continue to work three-quarters time for the church while also having more opportunities for time off.

Thus far, I've tended to work five days a week, every week, averaging more than six hours per day. While I have taken some time off, this has usually just meant that the hours that I would have worked during my time off have just been pushed to the surrounding weeks, so at the end of the month there hasn't been any "time off" in terms of my overall hours worked.

Here's how I would like to change things:

- My contract currently allows me to take 4 Sundays a year off for vacation time and another 2 Sundays a year off for denominational commitments. This has felt very confining. I've generally been reluctant to take a Sunday off in case I wanted to that day off later. I would like to change this so that I can take an average of one Sunday a month

off (twelve Sundays per year). This is a common practice at other churches such as MCC of the Redwood Empire in Guerneville and the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Stockton.

- I currently work 30 hours per week, 4 weeks per month. I would like to change this so that I would work 40 hours per week, 3 weeks per month, with the fourth week being a light week or time off. A light week is a week when I maintain a light workload and attend church on Sunday. Time off would be a week when I take a Sunday off. From past jobs, I know that I do well when I work intensely for a while and then take a break. This schedule would give me the opportunity work hard for the church, hit my hours target, and then give myself a much needed break.
- In May of 2025, I would like to take the whole month off. In my year and a half at the church thus far, I have not managed to take any of my vacation time. Taking some time in an extended block will help me bring things back into balance.
- There are certain things at church that I do every week: the Pastor's Pen, updates to the website, the worship program, music planning. I think that it is unhealthy when there is only one person in a church who can do certain tasks. Leading up to May of 2025, I would like to train others to do the Pastor's Pen, update the website, prepare the worship program, and plan the music. I think it would be much more healthy for our church to have a group of people who have experience doing these tasks. My taking a month of vacation will help us better distribute these responsibilities.

So how would this work out? I have created a draft schedule of what 2025 might look like under this new pattern. Under this draft schedule:

- I would preach 28 Sundays during the year
- I would be at church 16 Sundays when I am not preaching
- I would take 8 Sundays off for vacation, including all four Sundays in May
- I would have 35 heavy weeks (40 hours), with the rest of the weeks being light weeks or time off. When my vacation time and holidays are included, this would put me at an average of 135 hours per month, which is more than my target of 130 hours per month (three-quarters time).

You might notice that this under this draft schedule, my planned work actually exceeds the commitments that I've set out above: preaching 28 Sundays when only 24 are required, taking only 8 Sundays off when 12 are allowed. My goal is to work more than our agreement requires, while having the flexibility to adjust my schedule if something unexpected comes up.

I feel that this proposal is generous to the church. It allows me to work three-quarters time for the church at a pay rate that is substantially less than what our denomination recommends. At the same time it also allows me to take some much needed time off and maintain a good work-life balance.

## **Final Comments**

Pastors have a wide range of responsibilities, but they can't do everything. I didn't include fundraising or church social events in my proposed area of focus for 2024-2025. I do expect to help in those areas, but I need someone else to be the key leader / organizer for those activities.

This proposal describes where I'm hoping to put my focus during the fifteen months from October of 2024 through December of 2025. For 2026, I expect that I will have a new set of focus areas based on the needs of the church at that time. It is my hope that work that we do together during 2024 and 2025 will set patterns that we will want to continue during 2026.

This is a bold and ambitious proposal. It asks us to try a lot of new things. But as per Dexter Brecht's comment at the beginning of this document, the MCC churches that are thriving are the ones that are willing to innovate. I would like us to be one of those churches.

I hope that we will have many conversations about this proposal and that it will change as a result. I hope that you will contribute ideas and insights that will make it stronger, clearer, and more robust.