

June 2024

My dear siblings in Christ,

I began writing this letter while on vacation, with a view overlooking the Austrian Alps, thinking about Psalm 121. "I lift my eyes to hills, from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth."

In a few days, I will meet up with my mom and sister for an adventure in Iceland, a trip I have wanted to do for years and years. For the moment, I am just outside of Innsbruck, visiting the tour guide who led our Faith group in Germany, May 2022. I am reflecting on the fact that this is the first vacation in almost three years that has not been accompanied by deep grief or imminent death. Each trip or vacation time since Sept 2021 has been swathed in grief, death, or dying with the advent of multiple family illnesses and deaths. It feels like a relief to just...rest. To read, to write, to have clarity of thought, and to let my nervous system settle. It's an odd feeling; it feels foreign.

June 13th will celebrate my 14-year ordination anniversary. As with all pastors who are around that mark, we think about a time of Sabbatical and what that would celebrate. My ideas around Sabbatical have changed over the years. I was supposed to have received a Sabbatical after my first 5 years in ministry but, for differing reasons, it did not happen. At Faith, we began discussing a Sabbatical policy before Covid and then it got pushed to the back burner as our whole world and my personal life shifted.

As things have begun to solidify and settle in life and ministry, the council again began discussing a Sabbatical policy. My original plan was to apply for a Lilly Foundation Grant. This grant can only be received once in a career, usually used to fund more grandiose sabbatical plans for a pastor and congregation. If granted, it would be effective for 2025. I accidentally missed the application deadline and truthfully, I was not upset. The thought of planning something bigger and more involved was not comforting or fun. Doing a "big event" sabbatical is not what I want or need right now. What I need is rest. What I need is free play. I need time that doesn't have a full calendar or expectations fulfilled. I need time to play with my dogs, wander in beautiful spaces, and visit family and friends. I need time to just 'be' without everything revolving around grief or grief recovery. I recognize that I have sadness about the Sabbatical, for Jeremy and I had plans, ones that had started to be specifically formed a few years ago. This is another 'something' to reimagine. But...I'm focused more on reimagining, rather than the loss.

When I asked for a leave of absence in May 2022, the Council, without hesitation, granted it and insisted I begin as soon as possible. While in Iceland I reflected on that time and ended up sharing the story of my leave on social media and in a sermon on June 16. It was good to reflect on then and now.

Huge progress has been made and I'm proud of myself. I'm proud of all of us as we truly show what it means to accompany one another in all stages of life. I'm proud that we have trust in ourselves as a community, one who bonds and bands together for a greater purpose, understanding that we each have a role to play. I'm proud, deeply proud, that we have focused on the collective ministry without judgment but rather with love and support. I am grateful for the patience, support, and encouragement of the congregation and our continued partnership in ministry. I enjoy my work; it is life-giving. I love our congregation. I am proud of the hard work of our community and how we continue to follow the calling of the Holy Spirit.

It is also time for me to properly rest, renew, and engage in a time of Sabbath, as intended in ministry and life, for all of us. (See Genesis and Exodus ☐) The Council and Personnel committees have encouraged me to take this Sabbath time soon, as there is no particularly good reason to wait. We have strong leadership. We have a well-designed plan for the Fall. We have people who are

passionate and engaged. All the foundations are well laid and the structure will come together by July.

Personally, I don't have a clear direction for my own Sabbath time just yet, but I will. I do know I will start off with extended time with my sister. I will lead two Wid Grief backpacking weekends with teens. I want to spend time with my girls--the dogs, and the girls--my good friends. I want to be outside. I want to visit my nieces and nephews. I want to write more and organize the writing I have done over the past few years. I want to sit in the 3rd anniversary of Jeremy's death, which will fall on a Sunday this year, and let whatever I feel come and accept it with grace. I want to enjoy my beautiful home and the comfort it brings. I want to laugh and read and eat good food and visit the Farmer's Markets.

We are bravely led by the Spirit. Following the Holy Spirit involves trust and bravery to step forward into unknowns, to take on new roles, to have an open heart and an open mind, to not let fear overwhelm or overtake us. We bravely step into the leading of the Holy Spirit in worship, service, leadership, and love for one another. We are led bravely by the Holy Spirit with celebration and joy over where we are and who we are. We bravely open ourselves to the possibilities and the giftedness we have collectively.

I lift up my eyes to the hills—  
from where will my help come?  
My help comes from the LORD,  
who made heaven and earth.  
--Psalm 121:1-2

We are in this together. Together we are bravely led by the Spirit. Together we engage in the Sabbath mindset of rest, renewal, and rediscovery of who we are as individuals and as a community of Christ believers. We continue forward in ministry and life together.

With deep gratitude and sabbath peace,

Pastor Shannyn

P.S. If you have questions about the Sabbatical policy or process of the next few months please contact:

Council President, Mark Strom

Personnel Committee Chair, Amy Barone

Personnel Committee Member and Sabbatical Policy editor, Eric Lansverk