

Presbytery Meeting – Westminster/Marengo Agreement – June 13, 2017

My name is Steve Kannaka, a member of First Presbyterian Church in Marengo, along with Ray Charlette, who is a Session Ruling Elder, and we were asked to discuss briefly our relationship with Westminster of Rockford that you may not be that familiar with or know little about, or be interested in an update. This is a message from Marengo, although being heard from my lips.

First Presbyterian Church of Marengo has a current membership of approximately sixty (60) members of which half worship each Sunday, comprising an average age of over seventy (70), no children, and functioning with a deficit budget each year. This may not be so unique with other churches in the Presbytery, but for us this reflects a finite period of existence.

A decade ago our church was much more robust with double the membership, an active Sunday school, a Latino program, choir, etc. Due to a number of reasons causing division within the congregation and more recently a lack of ministry leadership, our church has declined and lacked direction. The congregation did attempt to conduct the “New Beginning” process but admittedly did a poor job in doing so, but discussions did result in an overwhelming desire to remain in our facility as our church home.

It is important to note that two years ago I was not a member of First Presbyterian Church nor even a worshipper, and Ray and his wife had one foot out the door.

Luckily, a few energetic members of the congregation desired change and took the reins of leadership over a year and a half ago and set out to give an “all in” approach and attempt to give the church a vision and a hopeful approach for the future. The part-time pastor contract at that time was terminated and we explored for a number of months how we wanted to move forward, utilizing the pulpit supply resources. The approach taken was that the past was the past and we needed to look forward for answers and determine our own destiny.

It was evident from the feelings of the congregation that First Presbyterian was going to live or die remaining in our beautiful church and using this asset as a means of providing mission programs for the community. Nearly one year ago, the Session of First Presbyterian Church asked the Presbytery to approach Westminster of Rockford on whether they would be interested in providing a pastoral support relationship with us. With some surprise, but also with extreme excitement, during the course of literally only a couple of meetings, an agreement on a partnership relationship was finalized with Westminster and Marengo.

This agreement is now in its second six-month timeframe and has proven to be truly God’s blessing for us, as we have come to rely and appreciate the pastoral leadership and services provided by Westminster while still maintaining our autonomy. The agreement provides administrative oversight, consistent preaching rotation of pastors on Sundays and other worship service needs, hospital, homebound and non-active member contacts and visitations, Session and Committee participation, involvement

with community outreach programs and most importantly in a common focus in growing First Presbyterian Church so as to be a viable church home within the Marengo community.

Over the last two calendar years, First Presbyterian Church has initiated the following examples of programs that illustrate and highlight our combined efforts:

- The addition of ten new members.
- A Stone Soup Program providing free soups to the community one day a week with an average of 150 members from a broad cross section of the community attending.
- Early after-school childhood craft classes are being provided for the community averaging over ten students each.
- A community Friday night “movie” this past spring and “Open Mic Night” over the summer providing community events for children and residents.
- Mental health group sessions for those being treated in the area are conducted in our chapel on a weekly basis.
- Guitar instruction to children under the “Free Guitar for Future Stars” program for disadvantaged youth.
- Structured worship service sermon topics and weekly Bible Study classes.

The purpose of these and other programs is to energize the congregation, open our facility and publicize to the community our presence and hopefully attract community residents to the welcoming sanctuary of our church and introducing them to the loving God that we worship.

The success to date is the result of a continued dedication of an active Session at First Presbyterian Church but also to a willing and supportive partner at Westminster of Rockford to allow us to be a mission program of theirs. We cannot thank enough Reverend Bill Ward, our Moderator and Pastors Tanya Muzzarelli, Barbara D’Souza and Gretchen Hammeke who are commissioned to Marengo.

We surely have a way to go and progress will not be fully achieved in the short run, but we feel that we have begun a path and vision that has the opportunity for success.

We feel strongly that this contractual relationship between Westminster and Marengo be considered a model for the Presbytery to fully embrace, understand and adopt where similar opportunities exist. In following the proceedings of the Presbytery, it seems there has been little done to publicize, support and applaud this relationship and we are here to strongly suggest that this type of relationship between churches can be extremely valuable.

I hope this would encourage other struggling churches to consider reaching out while other churches open their arms in support. The Presbytery has the means, as well the need, to orchestrate and mentor such relationships.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today.