

February 27, 2024

Dear Members of St. Mark's Lutheran Church,

The Discernment Team's role is to listen, seek, and pray so that we can make a recommendation concerning the pastoral staffing level (one or two pastors) and the direction God is calling the people of St. Mark's to carry out God's work locally and in the world.

We intend to make a recommendation to Church Council concerning the call process at St. Mark's; however, before we make our recommendation, we want to ensure that the congregation has a chance for review and to provide input for our further consideration. This letter will outline what brought us to this point (why we are discussing a call process), our current situation, the Discernment Team's current recommendation, and the process for additional congregational input.

What brought us to this point:

Our Senior Pastor, Rob Spicer, left St. Mark's in February of 2023. Pastor Robin was serving as Associate Pastor. The official Synod record needs to be updated to reflect the desires of the Congregation of St. Mark's regarding the number and the role(s) of any officially called pastors here at St. Mark's. Further, after many months of listening, observing, asking connection card questions, and praying through this process, the team feels we are ready to make a recommendation to Council.

Our Current Situation:

When Pastor Rob left St. Mark's we had just embarked on a rare time period where the church had two full-time pastors – a senior pastor and an associate pastor. While we have had this situation in the past, this was certainly not the case in recent history. Our most recent Associate Pastor, prior to Pastor Robin, was Associate Pastor Darrell Cousino who served from 2008-2011 and prior to that, Associate Pastor Chris Young who served from 2003-2007.

As an alternative to officially calling associate or part-time pastors, St. Mark's has often relied on a variety of staff positions who have assisted with outreach, Christian education, youth programs, visitation, pastoral care, and Saturday evening services. Recent ordained staff who have filled some of these roles include Pastor Melanie Haack, Pastor Jim Budke and currently, Pastor Ken Pollitz. While our part-time pastors are ordained and are on the NWOS (Northwest Ohio Synod) roster of ministers, St. Mark's has been able to hire them as part-time staff. A call process has not been required.

Associate Pastor Robin has served St. Mark's in a variety of roles, starting out as our Director of Christian Education. Feeling called to more, she began serving first as a Synodically Authorized Minister (S.A.M.) and then with the completion of Seminary training through the TEEM program, as a Vicar where she continued to preach and minister to our congregation. She became ordained in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA) and was called to St. Mark's in September of 2022 as Associate Pastor. Since February of 2023, Pastor Robin has been our lead pastor (in spirit if not officially in synod paperwork) and has committed herself to preach the gospel, support the congregation, and lead St. Mark's in immeasurable ways. We believe that Pastor Robin should continue to lead the congregation of St. Mark's. Pastor Robin has a lifetime of experience in Christian education, leadership, and service. She has a passion for her job that is obvious and contagious. D

Further, we believe our part-time ordained but non-rostered staff have served us well and will continue to provide flexibility and expandability in a variety of areas. Pastor Jim Budke will remain with us in a limited but vital role of nursing home visitation. Pastor Ken Pollitz, a recently retired pastor with over thirty years of experience, will lead the Saturday evening services, and has an interest in exploring “alternative” worship experiences. He is also assisting periodically with Sunday morning services, pastoral care, and assisting Pastor Robin throughout the week. No longer considered in an “interim” role, he is now a part-time pastor here at St. Mark’s.

Other staff on board to assist, lead, and grow the congregation include two vibrant, and knowledgeable team members who recently joined St. Mark’s. Stella DeWitt is the Director of Christian Education/Youth ministry and Josh Billnitzer is the Director of Music and Communications. Additionally, Christy Brewster is our preschool academy Director. This faith based Montessori preschool – St. Mark’s Lutheran Academy – is off to a good start and is exposing younger families to St. Mark’s. Finally, providing excellent administrative guidance and support to the staff and congregation is our experienced and stable parish administrator, Mike Schroeder.

This team, along with our volunteers and lay leaders provide support to the congregation and community through the Wednesday night meals, campus ministry, a new ministry at the Juvenile Detention Center, and many other existing ministries. Attendance and giving remain strong.

We acknowledge the Synod’s estimate of two years or more to find and call a new pastor. Shortages in candidates are unfortunately well documented. While the process can be lengthy, we do not believe St. Mark’s requires additional rostered clergy at this time. We would encourage as much notice of a planned departure as would be possible to the Council and congregation.

Preliminary recommendation:

Due to the Synod technical requirements, we recommend that Pastor Robin Small be offered an official call as the Pastor of St. Mark’s Lutheran Church at our next regularly scheduled congregational meeting (June 2024). Further, it is our recommendation that a call process is **not needed** at this time and that our current pastoral and non-called staffing level is sufficient and appropriate.

Congregational Input process:

If you would like to comment on the proposed recommendation, you may contact any member of the Discernment Team. We will also be holding a meeting for anyone interested in providing feedback on the recommendation at **9:30 a.m. on Sunday March 10 and 17 in the sanctuary**. If you are unable to attend either meeting or reach one of us, you may send your comments to Discern@stmarksbg.org

All comments and suggestions will be utilized by the discernment team for further consideration and prayer. The final recommendation will be presented to Church Council.

Sincerely,
The Discernment Team

Tim Billnitzer (419.392.6562), Brian Bushong (419.308.8490), Craig McKibben (419.439.5966), Amy Schroeder (419.575.4766), Martha Woelke (419.601.0655)