

## Senior Pastor's Written Report

Every year brings new themes for ministry. Two years ago, I described the beginning of the Next Level Innovation process as a season on discernment for St. Matthew's Church and for me personally as we explored the possibilities for ministry and God's guidance for the next season of our lives. As I wrote in last year's report (for the 2017 Charge Conference), the year of discernment would be followed by a year of change (in 2018) as we would be implementing the NLI recommendations related to vision alignment, discipleship, worship, communication, and stewardship. As of November 2018, St. Matthew's Church is actively working on the assigned innovations with meetings, listening sessions, working teams, life groups, and stewardship classes (Financial Peace University.) I am grateful for the faithful members of the St. Matthew's Church family who are leading these efforts. The State of the Church report details these and the many other programs that are accomplishing the mission of the Church.

But the implementation of NLI recommendations and the needed changes in ministry are not complete. The next year, will bring continued changes, and as a result, it will be a year for decision-making. Some of the innovations require significant decisions which will impact St. Matthew's Church for many years to come.

In addition to NLI-related decisions, St. Matthew's Church will, like all other United Methodist congregations, be impacted by the results of the called General Conference in early 2019. No matter what is decided at General Conference, congregations and individuals will be making decisions about how to move forward in ministry in the midst of conflict and division over issues related to human sexuality.

For my own benefit, and to prepare myself for the challenges ahead, in January 2018, I attended a two-day Arbinger Institute Workshop on *Developing and Implementing an Outward Mindset*. Later in the year, the Church Council read and discussed Arbinger's book, *Anatomy of Peace*, in hopes of improving our ability to make decisions and work together in the midst of challenging times.

Unfortunately, over the past twelve months. St. Matthew's Church has experienced a decrease in average worship attendance and financial giving. There are any number of reasons for the decline, and I am aware that St. Matthew's is not the only church in our area going through this, but the situation requires our attention and will require important conversations and decisions about the church's vision for the future and how to live into that vision.

As I reflect on the decisions faced by the church, I am in my own season of discernment, change, and decision-making as I consider how I might best serve the mission of the church. Earlier this year, in consultation with the SPRC, I set goals that included: learning to use coaching techniques as a leadership tool; improve the

quality and impact of my preaching; and practice better self-care. To those ends, I continue to focus attention on preaching as a priority in ministry; I hope to take a course in coaching for clergy in 2019; and, Anne and I are planning a trip to England in May to visit family and friends.

As I wrote last year, I believe God is calling St. Matthew's Church to be a missional focus community, to focus its attention beyond its walls, especially as the NLI recommendations work to strengthen St. Matthew's programs and ministries for the Church family. Some of the most my rewarding ministry experiences have included helping to lead the KAMP program for 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders during VBS, participating in the spring service day at Weyanoke Elementary School, and helping package meals for Rise Against Hunger in partnership with the Arise Campus at George Mason University.

In addition to serving St. Matthew's, I continue to be the chair of the Alexandria District Committee on Ordained Ministry and participate in a clergy peer learning group with the other NLI pastors.

In the midst of ministry challenges, changes, and critical decisions, there are blessings in ministry at St. Matthew's, primarily in the relationships with colleagues and partners in ministry like Grace Han, Nickie Moreno Howard, Bill Moberly, and St. Matthew's staff, congregational leaders, and the St. Matthew's Church family.

Most importantly, I have been blessed by the continued opportunity to work side-by-side in ministry with my wife Reverend Anne Hough. Her support and encouragement is one of God's greatest gifts to me.

Neil R. Hough  
Senior Pastor