

A (longish but heartfelt) Letter from Pastor Matt

December 5, 2018

The Holy Spirit said to the church in Antioch, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them" (Acts 13:2).

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Stone Hill Church has always been a sending church. Like the church in Antioch, we have responded to the Spirit's prompting over the years. At great cost, we have set apart for His new work dozens of people who have been central to our faith community. I think, for instance, of early 2017, when we released the Bellamy's, Clark's, and Richardson's to plant Transformation Church in Trenton. Each of those families had huge impact on Stone Hill, and sending them out was a felt loss. But it has become an incalculable blessing to so many more! In less than two years, Transformation has born gospel fruit in people and neighborhoods across Trenton. Or again, back in 2015 we set apart Carine Toussaint. Those of you who know Carine would agree that she overflowed with high energy, inspiring vision, and unmistakable joy in her position of Missions Director. But in response to God's call, we commissioned her to serve with American Bible Society in its Trauma Healing ministry. Today, Carine is bringing gospel healing to people across the globe. Hallelujah! All praise to the Living God for prompting such blessed sacrifices. All praise to His Spirit for threading into our church's DNA the value of sending. All praise to His Son who shows us that it is never foolish to sacrifice what you cannot keep to gain what you can never lose.

The blessedness of sending is very much on my mind as I approach retirement. For those of you who don't know, in early November I turned 66. Honestly, I don't feel nearly as old at this age as I thought I would back when I was 31. I totally identify with Caleb who, in Joshua 14, asked Joshua to give him a particular area of hill country as his family's inheritance: *Behold, I am this day 85 years old. I am still as strong today as I was in the day that Moses sent me; my strength is now as my strength was then. So give me this hill country.*

Karen (who is by the way younger than I ☺) and I have talked a lot about this verse. And while it's both true and comforting to think that I have as much vision and passion for God's work today as I ever did, still, my body is aging. And for me as your Senior Pastor, handling aging and retirement can never be simply about me. It's about all of us. It's about realities much bigger than our private lives. For instance, at the macro-level my aging is part of a bigger transition taking place across America. Baby-boom leaders are transferring power to younger leaders, to Gen-Xers and Millennials, either by force and accident or by intentional prayer and planning. In the former case, succession happens TO you; in the latter case, it happens THROUGH you. So a big part of my thinking around retirement has in mind the transfer of pastoral power to a godly, experienced, and gifted younger leader, one who can carry forward the tradition at Stone Hill of long stable pastorates across a generation. Or again at the macro-level, my aging is part of a

bigger movement of the Spirit as He prompts retiring leaders to use their final decades to train younger leaders locally and worldwide. I say “amen” to that. I would be thrilled if God were to maximize the benefit of my accumulated experience and wisdom through such mentoring.

Let me share a bit of relevant history. By God’s beautiful grace, I have been privileged to serve as Senior Pastor of Westerly Road/Stone Hill since August of 1985. Early in 1985, when I was asked to submit an application for the position of Senior Pastor at Westerly Road, I balked. I had no real interest. For one thing, I was happily involved in student ministry, content as can be. In addition, Karen and I had just gone through a difficult year of loss as my mother died of cancer. She was relatively young, and the disease had devastated her body. In the aftermath of her death, I had very little interest in any kind of transition. I wanted a peaceful year.

But Karen appealed to me to pray about the position. And I did. And she did. And after a month of prayer, reflection, and input from others, a strange thing happened. A new call of God emerged. I became deeply convinced that God was asking me to transition into the pastorate, whether at Westerly Road or elsewhere. And so here I am, 33 years later, still delighted to be a pastor, still delighted to be the Senior Pastor of (now) Stone Hill Church, still delighted to be leading, loving, and serving such a dynamic and committed body of believers.

But our Heavenly Father is consistent in ways that are strange to us. As I approach retirement, the very thing that caused me to serve here as Senior Pastor in the first place, God’s call, is now asking me to be sent out (but not away) from Stone Hill. As early as 2013, around the time we relocated from Westerly Road to Bunn Drive, I began to ask the Lord about the future: in particular, when would He have me initiate succession planning in order to locate and champion the next Senior Pastor of our church. In 2015, I opened up the discussion about succession with the elders and church leadership. In 2017, the Board of Elders and I revisited the ideas and decisions from the 2015 talks and began to plan in earnest for succession.

While all these things were taking place, God’s call for the next season of ministry began to take shape in my heart. I have always believed in the strategy that Paul lays out in 2 Timothy 2:2. “Timothy,” he writes, “raise up dedicated followers of Christ by teaching and modelling Christ to them, so that they in turn can teach and model Christ to others, who will in turn teach and model Christ for still others, who will in turn teach and model Christ to” —you get the point. Personal, biblical, depth discipleship is God’s wonderfully human way of moving His gospel from one generation to the next. During the past few years, this apostolic strategy has birthed in me a profound desire to continue to pastor (that’s who and what I am), but to pastor especially by developing spiritual leaders. In particular, God’s call in the next phase of ministry is for me to train godly, Christ-centered, durable leaders with vision and passion for the local, regional, and worldwide advance of Christ and His gospel. Karen, along with valued spiritual advisors, heartily endorses this calling.

And so, in response to the Spirit’s prompting in my life, and in robust unity with Karen, my family, and your Board of Elders, I plan to retire from my position as Senior Pastor of Stone Hill Church in July 2020. This timing provides a long 20-month runway for your leadership to handle

what will be a major transition for our church. I love this church and I love you way too much to depart abruptly. The timing also fits personally. In July 2020 I will be 67, soon to turn 68, an age which could allow me as many as ten more years of service—Lord willing—to train leaders locally, regionally, and globally, and at a pace that is much more appropriate to retirement!

As should by now be clear, I am not retiring in order to doze in an armchair. I'm way too much like 85-year-old Caleb. *Give me the hill country, Lord.* And I am way too much a child of Stone Hill Church; its sending DNA lies deep in the core of my being. Yes, God is sending me out. I will no longer serve as Senior Pastor. As a congregation, we are again being asked to “set apart Barnabas and Saul.” But God is not sending me away. Given the roots Karen and I have here in Princeton, we are not planning to leave the area upon retirement in July 2020. When my successor arrives, there will be a transitional overlap in which I will be readily available to assist him with understanding the necessary DNA of Stone Hill. After that I will pull back from Stone Hill for a while and attend church elsewhere. It is right for me to give my successor space to settle in as your (and my) new leader. But then, when the time is right, the Elders and I plan for me to come back to Stone Hill with Pastor Emeritus status. I am so very thankful for this, since you are my family, you are my people, Stone Hill is my church.

Along with my dear Karen, your Elders have been faithful, wise, and engaged partners in this process. They have been praying, discussing, and seeking professional advice regarding the implications of this transition. A forthcoming statement from the Board will provide you with an initial glimpse at what you should expect during the 20-month transition and beyond. As for me, be assured that I am working with them closely, serving them in whatever way I can for the good of Christ and Stone Hill Church.

I am sure you have questions. To that end, the Elders and I are assembling an FAQ sheet, which will be released soon. In addition, we are making ourselves available on a personal basis to shepherd any of you who are confused, curious, fearful, or disturbed by this announcement. On Wednesday and Thursday night, December 5 and 6, 7:30-8:45, we will be available in the church office for personal counsel, prayer, and shepherding around these things. Finally, let me encourage you to participate in the all-church daily prayer initiative, 21 Days of Prayer, starting on December 11 and running through New Year's Eve. You can sign up on our website, www.stonehillprinceton.org, or you can call the office at 609-924-3816.

In closing, let me reinforce in all of us the assurance that our church is Jesus' church. He loves it and He loves us more than we can imagine. He will not abandon us, and He does not intend us evil in this major change. So “let us hold fast to our faith” in Christ, knowing that He will work all this for His glory and our good.

May all God's grace and peace in Christ be with all who love His name,

Pastor Matt