

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

--James 1:27

Dear Church Family,

If you were tuned in to worship last week, you might have felt or heard something of the Spirit stirring in the waters of our baptism. Here is a summary of what I have seen and heard thus far...

Last Friday, Jennifer Myrick and I, along with a handful of interested persons from the community and congregation took a tour of a particular facility that has recently come on the market for sale.

https://www.realtor.com/realestateandhomes-detail/19570-County-Road-33_Fairhope_AL_36532_M92319-41494

Our purpose in doing so was to consider the feasibility of utilizing this as a resource for future ministry as an emergency homeless shelter, along with the potential of other needed services for Baldwin County.

To assist us in the visioning process, I invited Ms. Kate Carver, Director of the Dumas Wesley Community Center in Mobile, to join us. Dumas Wesley is one of our most vital United Methodist mission agencies here in the Alabama West-Florida Conference. You can find their work at www.dumaswesley.org. Of particular interest to me initially is their work through the Sybil Smith Village.

Let me summarize by saying that the tour of the facility exceeded our expectations. Located 5 miles east of the church, it is literally "turn key ready" with full furnishings included. It is a former memory care center (Oakland Place), whose owner and chief operator lives on the adjacent parcel. Several of us met with the owner and found her to be very enthusiastic about the prospects of this kind of ministry happening on the property. In fact, she went so far as to say that the day she closed the memory care center, a man came and prophesied that a homeless shelter for women and children would come to follow. *I kid you not!*

So we talked and we prayed together in her front yard, and she encouraged us to make an offer. The property is listed for \$899,000.

Following the tour, we reconvened at the CLC for early lunch and further consultation (1/28/22). Kate was there with three members of her team, and we were there with ours. Together, we spoke about our assessment of present needs, characteristics of a successful program, staffing and implementation, and general operating costs. Through this time of discernment, I observed a feeling of consensus on many factors, but especially the following points:

1. We are dissatisfied with the current limitations of our care for those who need us most (Mt. 25:31-46). The need is growing. Therefore, we would like to find a way to acquire this property for use as an emergency homeless shelter for Baldwin County.
2. We believe it will do the most good for Dumas Wesley to own and manage the property and to utilize their strengths in implementing what is a proven blueprint for this transformative ministry.
3. We believe that Fairhope UMC is called by God to take the initiative in helping to provide the resources to make this dream of a "family village" in our area a reality. We are the "go to" for many agencies in the county already...so by all means, *let's go!*
4. How we choose to do that may require great faith, creativity, and generosity.
5. We need to cover this endeavor with fervent and consistent prayer.

Last Sunday, your pastors introduced this development in worship with a call to prayer. *Let us lift our requests to the Lord!* Thank you for your faithfulness in doing so.

As for this Sunday, I have invited Kate Carver to join us for a Q & A discussion as we work to sharpen our vision for how we might best respond to our sense of God's call at this time. She gladly accepted.

Therefore, I invite all who are interested to join us for one of two options: in the Sanctuary at 9:35am for a brief discussion and then again in the CLC Fellowship Hall immediately after our 11:00 worship services.

I hope you can hear my excitement for this prospective project. There is nothing more energizing for me in ministry than coming together around our missional priorities. Lord knows, it is always fun to dream new dreams!

At a time when so many lives are fractured, isolated and fearful--when bones feel dry and separated from the joy of home--imagine what it would mean for us, the body of Christ here in Fairhope,

to be grounded in scripture as a loving, invitational community...
to offer ourselves as a prayerful, hopeful refuge...
to rise up with courage, as visible agents of lasting change...

such alignment of heart, soul, mind and strength is a powerful force for good! Glory to God in the highest!

The bottom line is that I want to be a part of whatever God is up to here. Thank you for joining me in this holy conversation.

For Christ,

Darren