

Northern Illinois Conference 2023 One Matters Award

First United Methodist

Church Belvidere, IL - Prairie North

So far in the Charge Conference year, we have received 6 professions of faith and celebrated one baptism. Last year we baptized 5 and received one profession of faith. Our church membership hovers at just under 300.

These numbers are only the tip of the iceberg. When Sr. Pastor Jim Bell was appointed in 2018, we were anticipating a Special Session of General Conference and the turmoil that continues to this day. Congregational redevelopment was high on our profile list of needs, but we agreed that he would not engage in traditional methods of instructing new believers and new members so as not to be divisive. The redevelopment began right away, was challenged by COVID and is accelerating as society reopens. Currently, our in-person worship attendance is 22% greater than the year I arrived and 8% greater than pre-COVID. Our online audience seems to outnumber our in-person, and a third of our in-person congregation was not here 2 years ago.



To what can we attribute these developments? First, to the grace, mercy, and favor of God, who has not left us, forsaken us, or abandoned us. The answer always begins with God, and there are specific ways God has shown up and shown out in Belvidere. At the

same time, we all recognize that there is one God over all the earth and all the congregations of the UMC

There is a genuine desire in the congregation for the things of God. When Pastor Jim was appointed, the DS told him that the congregation was "hungry". They showed up in increasing numbers to check out the new pastor, stayed, told their friends, and signed up for discipleship groups before any of those things became an active strategy. He had received condolence calls from colleagues when the appointment was announced. We had a reputation for

truculence. This is mentioned because many congregations are perceived as not having the seeds of vital growth when in fact, those seeds are dormant close to the surface of the soil and ready to respond to Gospel leadership.

We engaged in a capital campaign to eliminate the debt against our building. We are grateful to Generosity Group for their leadership. Strategically, we included a provision that 20% of offerings to the campaign would be directed to mission work benefitting “children in our community and their families.” Spiritually, the campaign was themed from Romans 13:8. “Leave no debt outstanding except the debt of love.” For three years leading into COVID, we developed a reservoir of resources, directed our efforts to meeting community needs and emphasized the obligation to act in love. This was formative for our outlook as a congregation, our reputation in our community, and seems to have enjoyed God’s blessing as we indeed paid off our debt and continued to receive contributions for capital and mission work.

We are also participating in the coaching cohort “Inviting New People” with Paul Nickerson as our coach. We formed a commission comprised of our Lay Leadership Team with a matching number of strategic folks from our congregation. We have been working on ways to extend invitation and ways to inspire our congregation to become involved in actively inviting. The result was the largest Easter attendance in recent history, with the bump from Palm Sunday to Easter being 2 ½ times the average for the last 4 years (not counting 2020). That group will continue together past the end of the coaching commitment, become part of our leadership structure with representation on Council, and continue expanding our vision toward our unchurched mission field. Virtually all our growth to date has been church people who have liked the invitation, welcome, and experience here.

It is important that our outreach efforts have been supported by an expanding discipleship program. The number of participants in Disciple has tripled, and participants are among the leaders of the efforts mentioned above and innovators of new ministries. Short-term studies have been well-attended and have introduced people to the process. Our women are on fire, with new fellowship and prayer groups including folks and activating them in the ministries of the church. Topical preaching series have covered Adaptive Leadership (Acts), Prayer (Old Testament and New Testament), and Suffering (Job). More of the preaching has been expository, with long journeys in Romans and Matthew 1-12 grounding us in Gospel.

We have every expectation that the growth of the last 5 years will continue. The addition of Associate Pastor Heysang “Jay” Shin is beginning to bear fruit in redeveloping our children’s and youth ministry, which has lagged behind church growth. We look for an increasing number of confirmations in years to come. As we cast our vision toward the unchurched folks who make up the vast majority of the mission field, we will experience more life changes and resulting professions of faith, which will themselves provide a motivated group of ambassadors and will inspire the current family to consider the difference the Gospel makes. We praise God and look forward to new mercies that are yet waiting for us and the field we serve.