

Congregation Assembly Minutes—Sep 22, 2024

1. Governance Board (GB) Chair, Todd Wegman, opened the Congregational Assembly on Sunday September 22, 2024 at 1:00pm
2. Head Elder, Rene Stein, led the opening devotion and prayer.
3. **Attendance:** 57 attended in person. Quorum required: 44 voting members present (20% of 217 voting members). Quorum achieved.
4. **Minutes** from the June 2, 2024, Congregational Assembly were provided online. Cheryl Lee suggested John Ndambuki was not included as part of the education team. Minutes amended to include John. Cheryl Lee moved that the minutes be approved as amended. Motion seconded. No further discussion. Motion carried by unanimous voice vote.
5. **Vision and Ministry Action Plan.** Todd Wegman led the assembly participants in reading the OSLC Vision Statement as a reminder for what we are here for. He gave thanks to the Pastors and staff that have served during the vacancy. He also acknowledged the work of the Elders, Governance Board, Call Committee and HR Team led by Lee Bodden. He gave special thanks for the work of Rachel Clark-Afina for her service as the Director of Children's Ministries during the last three years and presented her with the Our Savior cross. He then reviewed the target areas that were approved for FY 2025. He reminded us that we are a vibrant community of believers, and we have many ministries but one mission-- to serve God in sharing the Gospel through worship and service.
6. **Pastor's report:** Associate Pastor Flahn provided an update about his work with the staff and lay leaders in various ministries, especially highlighting three of our six target areas for this year: stewardship, prayer and small groups. He first spoke about the stewardship emphasis that is planned for the month of November with preaching and teaching on the subject. During Advent the focus will be a preaching series on the "Word Became Flesh." A new member class will be offered on both Tuesdays and Sundays beginning Oct 1st and 6th. He then discussed the congregational prayer initiative. A monthly congregational prayer gathering is scheduled for the first Wednesday of the month beginning October 2nd from 6:00pm-6:50pm. Finally, he discussed the expansion of our small groups to build community within our congregation. The first small group leader training occurred on Sep 14th. Next sessions will be Oct 26 and Nov 9. Pastor Flahn also challenged us to pray about our outreach to Spanish-speaking people.
7. **Open Arms.** Becci Stewart provided her report indicating that there are currently 115 children enrolled. Participation always declines as the school year begins and school-aged children return to school. The summer program was great as the children enjoyed a variety of activities including VBS, which is always wonderful. This year instead of a whole week of teacher training we had three staff development days and will have a couple more during the school year. Becci then thanked the congregation for all their support of teacher appreciation week. The staff felt loved. Finally, she shared that Open Arms staff is working toward being a Maryland EXCELS level 5 school the highest rating that Maryland gives. OA is currently a level 4 school and the only one in Laurel. The higher the level, the more scholarships are available to parents to help pay for childcare costs.
8. **Facilities.** Dave McGuffey reported on many facilities projects that have been completed and some that are still to be done. These include HVAC rebalancing; thermostat replacements that are digital and tied to the Breeze calendar. He reminded everyone that if you want heat or AC you must be on the Breeze calendar. We will be receiving about \$60-70 credit monthly for our solar panels once we have them connected to the BGE meter. Security cameras are being installed in the Way for

monitoring people entering the building. The fire alarm voice fault has been repaired thanks to a special designated gift. The prayer room and teacher-break-room floors have been replaced. We give thanks to volunteers for their time and installation efforts and the special designated gift that paid for the replacement floor. The sign is not repairable, and a team is evaluating replacement options. The telecom room has a lot of equipment that requires more cooling than was originally planned for the space, so a mini split AC unit will be installed soon. Again, a special designated gift has paid for this. Drinking fountain in kitchen hallway is non-operative and will be removed. Women's toilets down same hallway have pipe clogs—working on solution. If anyone has a property concern or suggestion, email propertysupport@oslclaurel.org or fill out form on Tom Moser's door. There was a discussion about sound system in sanctuary—contact Joe Hoolihan.

9. **Call Committee Update.** Robin Miliner reported that Pastor Browning declined the Call we extended and told the congregation that the Call committee will begin asking for a new list from the SED and nominations from congregational members. Two members of the Call committee have dropped out—Ben Nold and Wilhelmina Davis. One of the alternates, Nolita Dinally, is stepping up to serve. The HR team is evaluating our benefit package offered to employees. This was one of Pastor Browning's concerns. The issue for us is that the LCMS Concordia plan is very expensive because it includes all staff who work 20 or more hours a week on both church staff and Open Arms staff. Pastor Jon Diefenthaler, SED President emeritus, former OSLC senior pastor and current member offered his thoughts, guidance and recommendations.

Pastor D first encouraged the congregation by stating that the Call process revealed some areas that need to be looked at seriously as we seek God's direction in finding a new senior pastor. There are often financial challenges during a pastoral vacancy as attendance and contributions tend to decline. He also emphasized the need for stewardship education as is planned for November. The congregation needs to step up to support ministries and staff not only this year but in years coming up. Stewardship happens not just from preaching powerful sermons but by talking to one another within households and with trusted friends. His other concern is the decline of our average worship attendance. Is this a reflection of COVID? Partially, but not the whole answer. The average attendance 10 years ago was 300. 5 years ago (pre-covid) it was 250-275; and now we are averaging 175. The challenge for us as a congregation is to rebuild and we need a pastor who will do that. There is a certain amount of urgency to get someone here as soon as possible, and this needs to be a seasoned pastor who can rebuild the congregation. This is where the concern with not offering the Concordia retirement plan plays a role in his opinion. When he arrived at OSLC as the senior pastor, he had 25 years of vesting in the Concordia retirement and health plan and because OSLC offered it at that time it was not part of his call consideration. If it had not been offered, that might have made a difference to him as it has with Pastor Browning. One of the great things about our congregation is that during previous financial challenges the people of OSLC have always stepped up. He indicated that if this congregation wants to seriously pursue, he too will reconsider his tithe which goes to other organizations as well as OSLC. He will personally redirect more to OSLC.

Many questions were asked about Concordia plans or alternatives. Lee Bodden, the OSLC chair of our HR committee shared that there are other approaches that might be more feasible and more advantageous for all our employees; so rather than just Concordia Plans the HR team will continue

to look at other options. Lee also said the HR team is moving forward to support all our employees but no matter what we do it will take money.

Tina McGuffey shared the details of the Concordia Plan. In a nutshell, the Concordia retirement plan offers a defined pension based on average top 5 years for called workers that is totally funded by the church (no match, or employee contribution required). Non-called workers are offered an “account plan” that functions like a 401 (k) that is also fully funded by the church or Open Arms with no employee contribution. Both require vesting—5 years for called workers and 3 years for non-called staff. If an employee or called worker departs before vesting and does not move to another LCMS Concordia plan participating church, they lose any contributions made to the plan as does the church as these funds are then absorbed into the Concordia plans. Non-called workers who do vest can move their accounts to another qualified retirement savings plan; or for called workers, their benefit will be retained until retirement when they will then receive their pension. In FY 25 the church contribution for called workers is 9.7% of salary, which increases to 10.7% in FY 26 and 11.7% in FY 27. The first year of the non-called worker plan is free. In FY 26 it is 3.4% and 3.5%. After 6 years the payment is increased to 6 plus percent. In FY 26 the retirement plan would increase our budget by about 100k and this would increase every year. All staff who work 20 hours per week for 5.5 months a year must be covered, no exceptions. To enroll in the Concordia Disability plan workers must be enrolled in the retirement plan, adding another 1.5-2.5 % of salary to the premiums. To enroll in the Concordia health plan (which would be a little cheaper than our current plan) the church must participate in the Retirement plan.

Becci Stewart, Director of OA, shared that she would love to offer a retirement plan for her teachers and if OA achieves EXCELS level 5 it would likely be affordable as more scholarship money would come in and likely an increase in enrollment. However, if a Center receives 2 non-compliances it is immediately dropped back to EXCELS level 1 and must earn its way back up losing the additional scholarships, so there is always a risk that the funding would not be available. She also mentioned when asked that turnover is not a big deal for OA as 3/4th of the staff has been there more than 3 years.

Art Marshall reminded us that God has shown us repeatedly that this is God’s house and God’s ministry and that we need to trust Him and stop worrying. “God’s got it.”

10. Financial Report (See separate detailed PowerPoints.) Expenses still exceed giving but are less than the expense budget. Cash on hand covers any shortfalls.

- **Cash on hand as of 30 August 2024 \$ 675,304** compared to 30 April 24: \$735,325
- **Mortgage balance as of 30 Aug 2024 \$ 1,324,842** compared to 30 April 24: \$1,374,535
- **Church financial activity FY 24: 9/1/23-08/30/24**

General Fund Giving: \$ 779,692

Designated Fund giving \$ 156,148

Total Giving \$ 935,840

General Fund Expenses \$ 940,840

Designated Fund expenses \$ 435,591 (includes HVAC)

Total Expenses \$1,376,431

Net General and DF Fund Activity **\$440,591 FY24** Cash on hand covered shortfalls. Designated funds only expend what is available some funds have been on hand over several years but expended this year such as the piano fund and the HVAC fund.

Open Arms financial activity FY 24: 9/1/23-8/30/24

Tuition/Contributions \$1,784,133

Open Arms Expenses \$1,765,094

Open Arms Balance \$19,039 FY24 Note: This also includes some money owed to Open Arms from the State for scholarships.

- 11. New Business: Circuit Counselor Nomination:** The Governance Board offered the following resolution:

Resolution:

Whereas OSLC bylaws require a congregational vote for any nomination to District office

Be it resolved that OSLC nominates Rev. Peter Schiebel for re-election as the Southeastern District's Circuit 7 Visitor.

Discussion: Pastor Diefenthaler said, "he's doing a good job."

The question was called and nomination seconded and approved with unanimous voice vote.

- 12.** Pastor Diefenthaler provided an additional motion from the floor and moved that we nominate Rev. William Harmon to be President of the Southeastern District and Rev. Lloyd Gaines of Peace Lutheran Church of Washington DC to be Vice President of the Southeastern District. Motion was seconded and approved with unanimous voice vote.

- 13. FY 25 Budget.** Roger Harrison, Vice-chair of the Governance Board, presented the FY 25 budget proposal to the congregation. See attached details. This is a challenging budget that includes the potential salary and moving expenses of a senior pastor. The total \$948,470 church general fund expenses require \$18,239/week but we are only anticipating \$14,259.00 in general and designated offerings based on historical trends, leaving a shortfall of \$3,480 weekly. Any shortfall would be made up with our cash reserves, but continuing those withdrawals will deplete our cash reserves within a few years.

Discussion included Pastor Diefenthaler's reminder about stewardship and the benefit of a new Pastor. John Ndambuki shared concerns that this budget is discouraging, and we need the remedy of more giving. Todd Wegman reminded the congregation that at least for this year because the budget includes a senior pastor salary, we will likely have much lower expenditures but it still presents a forward looking budget that does not include any additional retirement or disability benefits. Vivian Kuawogai expressed concern about our declining attendance and suggested we contact all those members who are not attending, encouraging them to return and check on their wellbeing. Pastor Flahn suggested that many have become comfortable watching church online and the commitment to small groups should be an encouragement to fully participate in the life of the congregation. Pastor D affirmed Pastor Flahn and suggested that Vivian's concern is valid also and now is an important time to clean up the membership rolls. If someone doesn't attend in 6 weeks the chances of their return diminish. All of these things impact our budget. Dave McGuffey also said that during this vacancy there has been a lot of deferred maintenance which has impacted the budget. Tina McGuffey also suggested that we need to plan for capital improvements for the future perhaps setting aside a percentage of our budget. This is something to look for in the future.

Question was called and motion presented:

Be it resolved that the FY 25 Budget be approved as presented to the Congregation at the September 22, 2024 Congregational Assembly.

Motion was seconded and unanimously approved by voice vote.

14. Announcements

- Rev. Dr. Jeff Kloha, former chief curator at Museum of the Bible preaching and teaching on Sep 29th
- Congregational Prayer Gathering 1st Wed. of each month at 6pm starting Oct 2,
- GriefShare begins Oct 7
- Trunk or Treat -- Oct 31st (Halloween)
- Next Congregational Assembly planned for Jan 2025
- Thanksgiving to the Board as well as current staff, finance committee and all our ministry teams and workgroups for their hard work and commitment to OSLC mission and ministries

15. Closing Prayer and Doxology. Pastor Flahn led us in prayer and singing.

Minutes prepared by Tina McGuffey, Governance Board Secretary.