

EBENEZER SUNDAY TESTIMONY, January 2, 2022
Pastor Michael Schuelke's retirement announcement

In my last year of ministry as associate pastor of Westminster Church, 1992, a member came into my office and told me in a forthright manner that I needed to go. I was shocked. I wondered what I did that upset him. He then explained himself. "You have matured as a pastor and it's time for you to pastor a church of your own." So, I began looking for a church with an open pulpit. We do this through the PCA Committee on Administration. Pastors submit a ministerial data form, and churches needing pastors file data about the church with the same Committee on Administration. I sent out resumes along with data forms to about half a dozen churches, three of which were in NJ.

I was impressed that Fairfield Church was near water. When I received a request for sermon tapes, along with that request came the book Larry Roff wrote on the Fairfield Presbyterians. After reading the book, I thought such a prestigious church, the oldest in the PCA, wouldn't call me as a pastor. I was intimidated and sent off sermon tapes anyway.

We were not pursued by other churches, but gratefully received the invitation to come to Fairfield and candidate for the pastorate here. Elder Art Lewis was our contact; he was the pulpit committee chairman. This was the start of a long and precious friendship. When we drove to South Jersey, I marveled at the beauty of the land and the tidal estuary and realized it was the garden part of the Garden State. I was surprised at how rural it was. We were surprised by the fact that we would pick up mail at the post office, take our trash to the local dump, drink well water for the first time, and had to have the septic tank pumped when it was full.

During our initial visit as a candidate, we realized how warm and gracious this church was. I led the worship service and preached the Gospel, and I was elected and called to be the pastor of Fairfield Presbyterian Church in October 1992. We were welcomed to a church with an amazing history and felt privileged to be called as the pastoral family.

We came to a manse which had been newly spruced up, painted rooms, new kitchen tiled floor and sod in the yard and gravel in the driveway. It was comfortable house with plenty of room, we all adjusted well to rural living.

Our salary was reasonable for our first solo pastorate, benefits included the manse with utilities paid. I would take men out to lunch or breakfast, and they would fight for the check. I told them that I had an expense account that the church gave me straw to make bricks; I was buying the meal.

The church provided us with help to pay for our children to attend Christian School. This church has demonstrated their support for us in many gracious displays of generosity.

Over the years we have been thankful for the upkeep and improvements in the manse which became the office and Get-it-yourself B & B in June 2004 when the congregation approved the purchase of the new manse next door. Improvements in the church building include: painting, pew pads, new carpet, structural repairs, complete renovation of the fellowship room downstairs and a new restroom with the old bathrooms remodeled. We purchased the bank property which became the Men's Ministry building, now razed and a parking lot has been created in its place. And in memory of a member taken from us in an untimely manner, Ken Hildreth, a beautiful space has been created.

Over the years attendance grew. 122 was our average attendance one year. We had a vibrant Pioneer club for the youth. A youth group was started with teens from the community coming on Wednesday evening. We had up to 25 or 30 coming to this group. This was outreach to our community. A changing local demographic and a few difficult discipline cases saw Fairfield Church with a diminishing attendance. COVID-19 has brought stress to the congregation as well. There are people still uncomfortable to be present in the sanctuary and some have moved on for good, a fact all churches have experienced. As we weathered discipline cases, I have always been thankful for the elders who were humble before such cases and sought God's wisdom and grace to deal with these situations. Fairfield Church has experienced ups and downs, but the Lord has always been gracious to us.

This year is our 30th year of ministry at Fairfield and after much prayer, Susie and I believe it is time to retire. We will do so beginning the first of September. This is not an easy thing for us to do. It would be easy to remain at a church that has loved us very much. However, we believe it is time for a new pastor to come and accomplish things we have not been able to do. The elders and deacons have known for some time of this announcement. Todd Jorgenson will undertake the task of setting up a pulpit committee and begin the search for a pastoral family.

This is the time for the Lord to show us His power and His love for His Church, this church. I trust that you, God's people will trust the Lord and step up to see this congregation through this transition to a new pastoral family. You may be discouraged, but I challenge you to step up to see this beloved congregation through this transition.

This congregation has been known for being a warm and friendly group of people. This reflects the grace of God at work in your hearts. The Lord will use this to bless this

Church. We do not intend to coast to next September, but to press on in preparing this church for a healthy transition. We hope to see new officers nominated, trained, and elected as elders and deacons. I will continue to teach the Scriptures with passion and want to see younger men disciplined in the faith once and for all delivered to the saints. Thank you for loving this pastor and his family graciously, faithfully, and generously.

We ask you to pray for the ministry of a new pastor and family. Walk by faith and not by sight, step up in your service to the Lord and this church. It is Christ's Church; trust Him to see you through this transition. I leave you with Paul's admonition to the Philippian Church: **Philippians 4:4-7**—*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. 5 Let your reasonableness⁴ be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; 6 do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*