

Lay Leader's Final Report: A Look Back and a Look Ahead

Longs Peak Church Family,

This month marks my last as Lay Leader here at LPUMC, and with a new phase of my life about to begin, I wanted to take a few moments (or pages) to reflect on where we've been over the last three years together, and what the future might look like as LPUMC continues to do the critical work of being the hands and feet of Jesus Christ in our community. I hope you'll forgive me as I indulge a bit in one final, characteristically long-winded, goodbye.

Just as I did when I wrote my welcome letter to you three years ago, and in other letters since, I want to make it abundantly clear that everything I've written here is not necessarily the opinion of LPUMC, Rev. Jeremiah, or anyone else in leadership. Rather, I wanted to offer my earnest and heartfelt reflections on the time I've put in and do the best I can to frame some of the things that lie ahead of our congregation. I appreciate being able to share my thoughts with you. If you have questions, comments, joys, or concerns about anything here, I would ask you to take them up with me, not with Rev. Jeremiah, our staff, or anyone else.

First and foremost, I wanted to say thank you. Serving my church family in this capacity is something I never expected to do, but it's been truly one of the most rewarding experiences I'll ever have. That, in large part, is thanks to this remarkable community of faithful servants of the Lord who make Longs Peak the special place it is. I want to express my heartfelt gratitude to all of you for supporting us in our mission and specifically helping me through these tumultuous last few years. I was just 24 when I took this position and had a great deal to learn about the operations of our church, the ins and outs of the Mountain Sky Conference, and the roles of all the amazing volunteers and staff that help keep the wheels moving around here.

I specifically want to thank Robyn Morgan for keeping me on track and grounded in moments when my emotions and passion for this work would get the best of me, Roger Wisehart and Greg Kittilson for helping us navigate very difficult waters during the darkest days of COVID and beyond, Barb Huner for leading us in bold new directions since taking over as council chair, Rev. Steve Reinhard for helping me learn the role and guiding me through my transition into it, Rev. Jeremiah Harris for all his support and help and remarkable leadership over the last two and a half years, Katie Pekarek for being a great sounding board and an invaluable resource for our church, as well as Alex Anderson, Parker Steinmetz, Kay and Gary Lloyd, and Paula Muncy for being part of the best staff of any church in our district.

I owe a special thanks to my family. My wife Becca, in particular. She sacrificed countless nights alone while I was off at Nominations, SPRC, Church Council, Finance or some other meeting or event doing this work. She has made me better, and having her as a sounding board when it was possible has been a true blessing. Family has always been what Longs Peak is about, and it's the reason I wanted to take on this role in the first place.

A Look Back

The memory of my late grandma Mary Gregory has sat at the forefront of my mind for the past three years. When Roger first approached me about being his successor as Lay Leader back in 2019, I initially had little interest in doing it. At that time, for those who remember, the church was in fairly desperate shape. We were struggling with declining attendance, a lack of strong pastoral leadership, and in serious financial trouble. Insolvency was on the table as we struggled to balance our budget amid declining giving and a lack of missional focus. However, the prospect of Longs Peak closing its doors was simply intolerable, especially for those of us for whom Longs Peak is part of our identity.

I grew up in this church, roaming these halls, going to “Wonderful Wednesdays,” and finding my faith through fellowship, drama camps, VBS, and sermons from three different varieties of “Steves.” Longs Peak is simply part of my story--as it is for many of us. My grandmother loved this congregation. Those who remember her can attest to that. When I was considering whether or not to take this on, I couldn’t stop thinking about how much she loved this place and how badly she would want to see LPUMC carry on its mission. I took on the work hoping to make her proud and promising her that I wouldn’t be the last Lay Leader at Longs Peak. I’m happy to have kept that promise.

Reshaping the Mission in Early 2020

These three years have been a trying time for our church. The first meeting I had as Lay Leader was an emergency session called to cut \$30,000 out of our payroll budget to dramatically restructure our staff as the looming financial insolvency question reared its head in January and February of 2020. Through the course of just a couple of weeks of hard, tense, back and forth discussion about our staff and our future and one marathon SPRC meeting that lasted until one o’clock in the morning, we were able to find a staff structure that met the needs of our church, and one that is still largely in place today.

That wouldn’t have happened without faithful servants looking to do good for our staff, our congregation, and our church. That happened thanks to people like Roger, Robyn, Ginny Walker, Lyn Dines, and Dale Sherrod, all of whom were on SPRC at the time. Dale, especially, is a hero to so many of us. He has only endeared himself even more in my eyes since I started as Lay Leader. His kindness, patience, and understanding are extraordinary. He’s a true Christian leader, and if we could all be a little more like Dale things in this world might just wind up being okay. Through those hard conversations in early 2020, we established the need to focus on outward facing ministry and mission work and added a key word, “Outreach” to a staff member’s title for the first time. Katie Pekarek has done great work in that space ever since.

From there, we continued our focus on mission work by establishing a campaign we called, “LPUMC Focus 2020.” The goal, or so we hoped, would be to refocus our missional “why” and understand exactly where we were in the life cycle of a church so that we could better serve the needs of our congregation and community. This campaign included a prayer vigil, visioning sessions, and other important work. In

February of 2020, we held a large church-wide meeting led by church council chair Greg Kittilson where we asked hard questions about what our focus should be, which ministries of the church were working, which ones needed revitalization, and which ones it was time to say goodbye to. It was a hard, but important discussion, and it set the groundwork for what we all hoped would be an important year ahead.

Then March 2020 happened.

Surviving and Thriving During COVID

In one fell swoop, what we had hoped would be a year where we could focus on revitalization and renewal became all about survival. When COVID landed hard in Boulder County, I found myself on a call with Pastors Steve and Phil, Greg, Roger, Katie, and other members of staff making the tough decision to cancel in person worship with less than 48 hours' notice. We wouldn't meet again in person for months, and would not have another in person worship service under the leadership of Pastor Steve.

It was a scary time for all of us, and with so much uncertainty about our church's future already circling around everything we did, I wondered whether COVID and the accompanying restrictions, decline in giving, and other challenges would simply be too much for LPUMC to overcome. Today, I'm so glad to be able to say my fears were unfounded.

Thanks to the generous nature of our congregation and the incredible work of our staff, especially Katie Pekarek and Pastor Phil Rogers, Longs Peak didn't just survive, we thrived.

While so many churches struggled during COVID, Longs Peak actually grew. Attendance through virtual worship held steady online. We met via zoom for fellowship and necessary administrative meetings of the church. In the second half of 2020, our giving stabilized and our finance team, led by the great Terry Larsen, was actually able to more accurately understand our financial future and help us take necessary steps to survive. Simply put, we found a way to continue doing the necessary work.

More importantly, though, I saw the true spirit of LPUMC come back alive during those tough times. We organized phone pools led by Pastor Phil and volunteers to check in on members just to make sure they were okay. We did honk n' waves outside of local hospitals to show our appreciation for frontline health care workers at the height of the shutdown, we even celebrated members of our congregation's milestones like graduations by organizing caravans with cars and balloons and regalia to make them feel special at a time when their traditional ceremonies were canceled. I'll never forget having two dozen cars filled with LPUMC members pull up in the Howe Mortuary parking lot next to my apartment to congratulate me on my college graduation.

Perhaps best of all, we continued to be the hands and feet at a time when our community desperately needed us. We made cloth masks and gave them out across the community, we held socially distanced gatherings with members who needed community most, and we even continued to feed food insecure members of our community by bagging up meals at the OUR Center each and every month. The mission

work we did in 2020 helped not just keep us afloat, but it reconnected us and refocused us on our mission more than any meeting or visioning session ever could.

Welcoming Rev. Jeremiah

Of course, I'd be remiss not to acknowledge the biggest game changer that occurred during the past three years: the arrival of Rev. Jeremiah Harris as our lead pastor. Pastoral change is one of the biggest challenges that comes with the connectional nature of United Methodism. When a pastoral change happens, it occurs at a level well above the local church. In fact, most of the time local churches have little to no say at all in whether a pastor stays or goes, and even less of a voice in who their pastor winds up being. Sometimes the Bishop and the conference get it wrong. In 2020, they got it absolutely right.

Rev. Jeremiah arrived at Longs Peak at a time where leadership was needed above all else. We needed a pastor who didn't just preach and didn't just serve, but *led* our congregation and our staff. From day one (and even a bit before), Jeremiah set out to lead our congregation with grace, integrity, intelligence, strength, and dignity. Working with him and learning from him has made me not just a better Lay Leader, but a better person and a better Christian. I've been lucky to know him, and I have very little doubt that his appointment is among the top reasons we've been able to turn things around.

However, the point of frequent pastoral change in the UMC is so that no one person or pastor can be above the congregation. Ultimately, our survival and success during COVID and since is a credit to our congregation, our church family who stepped up to volunteer, give, and get involved in the life of the church. There are so many incredible people who make us the faith community we are, and the future is big and bold and bright because of them.

A New Normal

In 2021, we continued to settle into a new normal. We returned to in person worship, and began live streaming services for those who weren't comfortable or able to come back to church yet. That live streaming piece was something that had been in the discussion long before COVID as the need to reach the broader community outside our walls became evident. As it often does, necessity became the friend of progress in that regard. All of us are incredibly thankful to Roger Wisehart and Tom and Thomas Chuang who have been steadfast in their commitment to serving our congregation in the tech booth. Without their work putting together services and livestreams, we never could have made it through these last two years of change and transition in how worship is presented.

This year has been about still more transitions. We said goodbye to Kay and Gary Lloyd, who had been just as much a part of LPUMC's identity as the brick and mortar itself, as they began a new chapter in their lives. The process led by SPRC to both properly celebrate Kay and Gary while simultaneously working to hire a suitable successor who could carry on Longs Peak's long history of outstanding music ministry was truly incredible to witness. While I won't (and can't) divulge all the details of that confidential process, suffice it to say it was a true testament to God's power and graceful Christian

discernment and leadership. Dave Monhollen, Susie Sisson, and Robyn Morgan are owed a special debt of gratitude for their leadership through that. The process, of course, ultimately led us to hiring Parker Steinmetz as our new music director. Since starting this past summer, Parker has done an outstanding job and I'm excited to continue to see him grow in his role. He's just one of the countless wonderful things ahead for this congregation.

A Look Ahead

I'm endlessly proud of what we've done together over the last three years. We've grown financially and in membership at a time when other churches have faltered. We survived and actually thrived during a global pandemic. We navigated a pastoral change during an unprecedented time in our church's history. We restructured our staff and right sized our church and have since been able to restore and actually raise staff salaries. We've done awesome stuff.

However, I'd be lying to you if I said there weren't some questions that I'm leaving on the table as myself and a number of other leaders in the church move out of leadership in an official capacity.

In January, Roberta Shanahan will be taking my place in the role of Lay Leader. She's an exceptional pick with a long history in our congregation and a great understanding for how God's hand guides our work in the local church. I'm excited to see the ways God leads Longs Peak under the direction of Rev. Jeremiah, our staff, Roberta, Barb, and our new SPRC chair Susie Sisson. It takes a great team to lead an organization of LPUMC's size, and they'll be a great team, which is important because there are a number of challenges in front of us that I felt it's important to be transparent about.

Simplified Accountability Structure (SAS)

First, is the ongoing conversation surrounding moving our church's governance from the traditional committee model to the simplified accountability structure (SAS). Barb Huner and council have been doing great work on this over the last year, and I'm excited to see where they go. Currently, our church is made up of a number (five to be precise) administrative committees. These committees are prescribed by the UMC's *Book of Discipline* and they handle the internal processes of our congregation. They include the Finance Committee, which handles the money and manages the budget, the Trustees, who are the legal arm of the church and handle the management of our physical assets, the Staff-Parish Relations Committee, who act as a pseudo HR department and support the needs of our Pastor and staff, and Church Council, which is the overriding governing body of LPUMC. I'd be remiss if I didn't also mention the Committee on Nominations and Lay Leadership whose job it is to select excited (or sometimes not so excited) volunteers to serve on these committees and work their way through discipleship. It is, in fact, the committee to choose who serves on committees.

In all, this means that Rev. Jeremiah and our lay volunteers spend hours and hours in meetings focused solely on managing the internal workings of the church. In fact, it's extremely common for myself or Rev. Jeremiah to have to have four separate meetings on the same topic. For example, let's say we

wanted to get a new nameplate for one of our staff members to put on the door to their office (this in reality works much more simply, but let's just use the example). For that nameplate to be hung, we'd first have to get a meeting put together with SPRC to confirm that the staff member understands their title and that the proper title is on the nameplate. Then, once SPRC approves it, it has to go to finance to make sure we have the money in the budget to order the nameplate and pay for it, then it has to go to Trustees to actually order the nameplate and figure out how we're going to get it hung, and lastly it has to go to council for the overriding governing body to approve all the decisions that have been made by lower committees. Needless to say, the current structure is cumbersome, overly bureaucratic, and doesn't serve the needs of our church in a fast moving world. A more relevant real world example came during COVID when it took several months and three different rounds of funding, not to mention countless email chains and four different committee meetings for LPUMC to receive a PPP loan that kept us financially afloat during that period

Under the SAS structure council is currently exploring, the decision of whether to order and hang a new sign on the door or apply for a PPP loan could be made and approved by one body in one meeting. This isn't just important because it cuts down on the number of meetings, though. It's important because of all the time and energy that is spent by members of our congregation in internal matters in those committee meetings that could be better spent being out in the community doing the outward facing mission work that helped our church thrive and grow during COVID.

The current structure of our governing committees is making us a less effective church. Reform is necessary, but it's critically important that each and every member of LPUMC who cares about how we function and serve the community has a say in this process.

For many of you, this conversation is either confusing or simply feels unnecessary. I've had more than one member of the congregation tell me, "Well, the pastor is for it and it feels like it's happening so just do whatever you want," or something along those lines. On my way out, I want to caution, in the strongest possible terms, against that kind of thinking.

While Rev. Jeremiah is certainly one of the instigators of this conversation, this work establishing a structure for an SAS that meets the needs of LPUMC long-term and helps us function more efficiently is critical to our long-term success, and it must outlive Rev. Jeremiah's pastorate. As I've already said, the nature of pastoral changes in the UMC means that our congregation must be bigger than any one pastor. My sincerest hope is that you'll get invested in the work Barb and Council are doing and make your voice heard in this process. Your voice will make our SAS stronger and help ensure its long-term success.

The Global Church and Human Sexuality

During my tenure as Lay Leader, there have been few, if any topics, that that I've been asked about more regularly than human sexuality and the broader church. The issues surrounding the LGBTQIA+ community and how United Methodism handles that topic were among the most challenging questions

facing us prior to COVID, and unfortunately, thanks in large part to the constant kicking of this can down the proverbial road by the global church, the question still remains.

Some of you might remember the long Q&A session and semi-open mic debate held in the sanctuary with our District Superintendent Rev. Tezenlo Thong in attendance. In that meeting, we had a discussion that the Pastor at the time hoped would springboard us towards some kind of action on the question of whether LPUMC wants to become an affirming congregation or whether we will remove ourselves from the UMC should the global church take the step of allowing openly LGBTQIA+ ministers and weddings to occur in our broader global church, which are currently prohibited by the *Book of Discipline*. Instead, my memory of that meeting is that it became heated and didn't drive us towards any kind of unity. Rather, it caused hurt feelings and forced some people further away from Longs Peak.

There are people in leadership at Longs Peak who are far more qualified to talk about the ins and outs of this topic. Suffice it to say, there are a number of competing views within the global church that will eventually be decided at a level far above my pay grade. However, I do believe Longs Peak will have to grapple with this issue in some capacity at some point, if for no other reason than the Conference/Global Church will force us into a position to do so.

My sincerest hope, no matter where your theological or personal beliefs on the question of LGBTIA+ issues lie, is that the conversation on this topic, whenever it happens, will not resemble the conversation that was had in 2019. Rather, this conversation can be held in a rational, practical way with a clear understanding of who LPUMC is and what any decision would mean for us. Longs Peak, above all else, is a church family. We have diverse opinions in our congregation, and many members who are strong advocates on both sides of this issue. For some, this is a hill worth dying on. However, for me, and I believe for the majority of our congregation, this isn't something we want to see Longs Peak torn apart over.

No matter how much some (myself included) would love to see LPUMC eventually become open and affirming, I simply don't believe this is a congregation that will ever be hanging a rainbow flag on the flagpole. That isn't because we aren't a welcoming, caring congregation. In fact, it's *because* we are open and understanding of diverse thoughts and opinions on tough questions like this that this topic is better left handled in a rational, practical manner. I would rather see Longs Peak continue to be a place where everyone in our community, regardless of politics or their positions on these questions, can feel welcome and at home as they come together with others, including those who might not be ready to embrace the same ideas they do, to worship Jesus Christ together and be his hands and feet in our community.

As we move forward as a congregation, we must continue to follow the words of scripture on this topic when, in Colossians 3:12 it says to, "Clothe yourself with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience." I am fully confident Rev. Jeremiah and our leadership team will move us through this conversation, should it be necessary, in a way that does just that.

Final Thoughts

Lastly, as I look back on three years of doing this work, I want to say how much more appreciation I have for Longs Peak as an institution. There are so many amazing things about this congregation that I've had the privilege to witness over the last three years. In that time, I've come to know Jesus and the way he works in my life in a unique and intimate way that could never have been possible otherwise thanks to the inspiration set by this body. I've come to know so many of you more closely, and a part of me feels like I'm saying goodbye to a very special piece of my life. So, thank you. Thank you for sticking with us through hard times, helping Longs Peak continue to grow and thrive, and always asking what you can do to support the mission and ministry of our church. You are truly a blessing to this community.

There will be many more challenges to come over the next three years, whether it's deciding how to properly manage and update the physical assets of our church while balancing the need for responsible financial stewardship or how to better understand our missional "why" and focus, I will continue to pray for Rev. Jeremiah, Roberta, and our whole staff and leadership team regularly as they address these challenges. I will remain steadfast in my belief that God works through the congregation at Longs Peak United Methodist Church each and every day. We've been doing incredible things for more than 110-years, and the best is yet to come.

I'm proud that this is, and will continue to be, my church home, and I'm looking forward to entering a new chapter of my life as I turn my attention to our new baby being born this month (hopefully) and a continue to do what I can to grow in my faith with your help and support.

Merry Christmas, Longs Peak. May the years ahead be filled with joy and faithful work in the name of the Lord. Thanks for giving me the chance to serve.

Best,
Jake Marsing
Lay Leader
Longs Peak UMC