

Sunday, March 5, 2023

My dear brothers and sisters of Newark UPC:

Please accept this letter as official notification of my resignation as your Senior Pastor effective April 30, 2023.

I know this impending resignation has brought you sorrow and sadness. Over the last year and a half, I have endeavored to walk gently with you in this grieving. I love every one of you deeply. I have previously spoken of the time when I would need to step down as your pastor. Little did I know how many of the sermons I have preached, particularly since 2015, were preparing us for this time. We have chosen to be an Antioch church—a church that sends people as we follow the leading of the Spirit. When I preached “Which Church: Jerusalem or Antioch?” in 2019, I did not anticipate that I would be one of the ones sent out from you. I intended to die as a member of you.

When I left to lead a district Youth Ministry, you were who I came home to.

When I left to pursue a deeper knowledge of Scripture in my Ph.D. program, you were who I came home to.

When I left to help found a graduate school and seminary, you were who I came home to.

When I left to teach ministers of the gospel and future teachers, you were who I came home to.

When I left to lead students through the lands of the Book of Acts in the Paths of Paul, you were who I came home to.

When I left to lead a faculty, you were who I came home to.

When I left to preach and teach the students and leaders of African nations, you were who I came home to.

When I left to attend numerous conferences, you were who I came home to.

When I left to serve the United Pentecostal Church International in numerous committees, you were who I came home to.

When I left on trips and vacations with my family, you were who I came home to.

I always came home to you. I once waited with bated breath for your request that I remain in Newark as your Associate Pastor and then as your Senior Pastor. Just as I once hoped you would ask me to stay, I now ask you to release me, to allow me to leave.

This departure, though painful for us all, is my gift to you. Yes, I am obeying the direction of God, but I am also giving you a future. I wanted to be a part of that future, but over the past two and a half years I have realized that my departure is a gift to you in at least two ways. The first gift is the realization that this church is not a Beardsley church. It is God’s church, and your security lies with God. Over the next decade this truth will become firmly established. The second gift is a sustainable structure. It is not perfect and will require adjustments and refinement over time. But it is a biblically based, scalable (think growth), and ultimately stable structure if you commit to it and tend it. I am firmly convinced that these two gifts that have cost me dearly will accrue to your benefit. Newark United Pentecostal Church as Jacob’s Well will thrive and continue to fulfill its role in the Kingdom until the Lord comes.

On behalf of my family, I want to thank you for your care for us. This church family is where Regina and I birthed, raised, and launched our family. Every child was dedicated to the Lord in your presence. You have embraced my children and given them the space to grow “in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and all the people.” You never asked me to choose between serving you and caring for my family. I am forever grateful.

I would like to conclude this letter with an adaptation of Paul’s final words to the Pastoral Team of Ephesus in Acts 20, my job description taken from Peter’s first epistle, and some of Paul’s concluding words to the Philippian church.

You know that from the day I preached my first sermon until now I have done the Lord’s work humbly and with many tears. I have endured the trials and challenges that came to me. I never shrank back from telling you what you needed to hear, either publicly or in your homes. I have endeavored to faithfully preach and teach to you a consistent message—the new birth experience of repentance, baptism in the only saving name of Jesus, the infilling of the Holy Spirit evidenced with speaking in other tongues, and the never-ending pursuit of holiness.

And now I am bound by the Spirit to leave you. I don’t know what awaits me, except that the Holy Spirit has told me that I have completed my work with you. My life is worth nothing to me unless I use it for the work assigned me by the Lord Jesus—wherever and whatever that work is.

And now I know that the visions I have shared with you will come to pass but I will only see them from afar. I declare today that I have been faithful. If anyone suffers eternal death, it’s not my fault, for I didn’t shrink from declaring all that God wants you to know.

So, guard yourselves as God’s people. Feed and shepherd God’s flock—his church, purchased with his own blood—over which the Holy Spirit has appointed you as witnesses and leaders. I know that false teachers, like vicious wolves, will come in among you after I leave, not sparing the flock. Perhaps even some from your own group will rise up and distort the truth to draw a following. Watch out! Remember the twenty-seven years I have served you—my constant watch and care over you night and day, and my many tears for you.

And now I entrust you to God and the message of his grace that can build you up and give you an inheritance with all those he has set apart for himself.

I have cared for you as the flock that God had entrusted to me. I watched over you willingly, not grudgingly—not for what I would get out of it, but because I was eager to serve God. I didn’t lord it over you who were assigned to my care, but I led you by my own good example.

I have been a constant example of how you can help those in need by working hard. So, you should remember the words of the Lord Jesus: ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’

I love each one of you. Thank you for the privilege of serving you for twenty-seven years. It has been an honor that cannot be measured.

And now, dear brothers and sisters, one final thing. Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise. Keep putting into practice all you learned and received from me—everything you heard from me and saw me doing. Then the God of peace will be with you.

Lovingly submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Steven". The script is cursive and fluid, with the 'S' being particularly large and stylized.

Steven