

March 9, 2020

Dear Central Family,

In a recent sermon, I declared Central to be the best church in the world. I am so grateful for this church community and believe God has His hand on Central. My deep feelings for Central and love for this community make the following announcement a difficult one: I am writing to share the news that my time as the Senior Pastor of Central will come to a conclusion this June. I know that this news will come as a surprise to many; I want to share with you my heart regarding the journey Myndi and I have been on in seeking the Lord and His calling on our lives.

As I hope you have sensed from me over these past 7 years, I love God's church. Many years ago, I dedicated myself to serve God by serving His people. Since then, I have ministered to the church through various seasons in a variety of capacities. Over the past year, I've had a growing sense of a new and deepening burden from the Lord regarding His will for my ministry calling. Through this long season of discernment, Myndi and I have sought the Lord for clarity concerning His purposes for me, our family, and Central. In this time of prayer, God has made it clear that He is calling me to serve Him in a different ministry capacity. I want to tell you about this calling and what I will be doing after I conclude my service at Central.

As some of you are aware, I have been involved with an organization called the Center for Pastor Theologians (CPT) for the past decade. The CPT was co-founded and is led by a dear friend who was a fellow PhD student at Cambridge 20 years ago. Last year, the organization engaged me in dialogue regarding joining the CPT full-time. Though we didn't know God's leading at that time, Myndi and I sensed that God was calling us to pray about this possibility. Through continued conversation and prayer over a period of months, it became clear on both sides that I was being called to join the organization. As a result, the CPT offered me a role, and I have accepted the position of Executive Director of the Center for Pastor Theologians (note: this is a different title than in the letter sent to your mailbox; a slight change was made after that had been sent).

In my role with the CPT, I will serve a network of pastors across the country, seeking to encourage women and men in their calling, and through them to equip the broader church in her mission of being faithful witnesses to Christ. In addition, I will lead the CPT's mission of building relationships with universities and seminaries across the USA, helping to shape CPT degree programs and courses at various institutions, as well as contributing to a renewed vision for theological education. Finally, my role will include writing ecclesial theology through blogs, articles, and books.

While we know that our decision is in obedience to the Lord's leading, that doesn't make this easy for us. Our family cares deeply for Central and we are incredibly grateful for the loving community we have found here. I realize this news may cause sadness, hurt, and perhaps even anger. I want you to know that I have had no interest in looking for another church to serve, nor have I sought out another ministry role. In fact, I want to assure you that I am not joining the CPT due to dissatisfaction or unhappiness with Central. Over the course of the past few years, I have been contacted by a number of churches asking me if I was interested in interviewing for a pastoral role elsewhere. My answer has always been "Nope!" I didn't even have to think about it. There isn't another church I would want to pastor. To leave Central is difficult for us, but we have a peace that this is God's purpose for the next stage of our ministry lives. We are also confident that this move isn't only about God's plans for *our* future but is about His plans for Central's future as well.

News like this can bring anxiety about the future. I want you to know that I believe deeply that Central is firmly in God's hands, and that God has gifted our church with excellent leadership at the Board, staff, and lay level. I continue to be impressed with and grateful for the dedicated servants at our church. Over these past 7 years, God has been working among us, impacting the lives of men and women through the grace of Christ, using Central to be a faithful presence in the Midway, even as the Midway has and continues to undergo tremendous change. I believe Central is poised for an exciting new season of ministry. With 300 new apartments on the way, the development of the area around Allianz Field, the ongoing opportunity to serve those who are struggling, and many who need to know the love of Christ all around us, Central is positioned to continue her mission as a community of faithful presence at the heart of the Twin Cities. I strongly believe that, though I am being deployed to serve elsewhere, under the leadership of a new Senior Pastor, uniquely called and equipped to lead the church in this next season, Central will make a Kingdom impact in the new Midway and beyond.

In the meantime, Central's mission doesn't stop. Good things are happening among us. There may be a feeling that the church should pause in order to wait for the next Senior Pastor to arrive. But I want to strongly encourage you that this is not the right way forward. There are many things in motion right now that should not stop, from growing ministries to exciting building projects that bring tremendous opportunities. I believe that Central is called to continue pursuing the Lord and His will for our church, following Him in faith and confidence, for He is the Pastor of Central. That isn't just something we say; it is the truth. I want to encourage you to look to the future with confidence in Christ and the things He is doing and will continue to do among us.

My last Sunday at Central will be June 14th. Enclosed with this letter you will find a letter from the Board of Stewards sharing the heart of the Board and outlining the upcoming time of transition. This Sunday, I will be sharing more of my heart with the congregation. I know you all may have questions, and we will do our best to answer them as we walk in faith and hope, trusting in God to lead and guide us all on our journey with Him.

May the peace of Christ be with you all,

Pastor Joel