

Keeping the Faith: New pastor tends to St. Helens congregation

By Shari Phiel News@thechronicleonline.com | Posted: Sunday, February 16, 2014 3:22 pm

For the past two months, parishioners at Plymouth Presbyterian Church have had a new voice delivering the Sunday sermon from the pulpit. Pastor David Hutchinson joined the church on Dec. 15, replacing Marilyn Allen who served as pastor for nearly two decades.

Hutchinson himself has been a pastor for the past 22 years, serving primarily at two churches in Portland. With his previous work, he spent much of time focused on administrative responsibilities, something very different from his role in St. Helens.

“It was a very programmatic job, very administrative. I liked it and I did a lot of good things there and left on good terms but it was time to do something different,” he said. “I was looking for a whole different thing and this is a whole different thing. It’s apples and oranges. It really isn’t even the same job.”

Originally hailing from the heartland (he was born in Minneapolis, Minn., and raised in Iowa) Hutchinson arrived in Portland in 1995. There he served as pastor of church with around 100 members, much the same size as Plymouth Presbyterian. He stayed there for 7 ½ years before moving on to become Associate Pastor at Westminster Presbyterian Church, also in Portland.

“I was at Westminster in Portland for 11 years. That’s about a 700-member church with 12 staff and four pastors,” he said. “My main focus was planning the education program for adults, doing outreach to new members, working with youth and children program directors, that kind of thing.”

Along with his role at Westminster, Hutchinson also began teaching at the University of Portland.

“It was really too much to do my job at Westminster and do the teaching. I planned adult education for 30 to 100 people each week – so I had as many people showing up for adult education as we do for the whole congregation. It was a big job but I loved it,” Hutchinson said. “I like the teaching aspect of it but I was doing a lot of the programmatic, administrative stuff and I wanted to get back to preaching.”

Hutchinson says he was mulling over an offer to take on more teaching jobs with the university, but wasn’t sure he wanted to continue his work at Westminster.

“I was thinking about it and then I heard about Plymouth. I had known Marilyn, who was here for 17 years, and I liked her. Other people had told me about Plymouth, people I knew from the area, and it’s a great church,” he said.

Hutchinson says the decision to take on the new role at Plymouth has proven to be the right one.

“You never know, because it is new. Until you’re there, you never know. Would it really be like I thought it would be? Would people really be as friendly as I thought they were? I don’t see any reason why I wouldn’t stay for five or 10 years.”

What does he find appealing at the St. Helens congregation?

“They have a lot of good energy. I know a lot of congregations this size and smaller that struggle. It’s hard to be a church now. It’s not about any particular church doing the wrong thing, nobody knows what to do. The culture is different, the world’s different, everything’s changing and people are trying to figure out how to be the church,” he says.

Although it’s only been two months, Hutchinson also ready seen the kind of focus on ministering to others he hoped for. During the recent snowstorm, church volunteers kept the warming center – the only one like it in the county – open throughout the entire event.

“We had people here all through the snowstorm. We didn’t do worship on Sunday but we were open for the warming center. People stayed overnight, the whole thing. I love that about our church,” he added.

Mission work has been a big part of Hutchinson’s life in the past. He has been chair of a mission committee, been to Cuba, brought others to the U.S. from international destinations and has been involved in Habitat for Humanity.

“I just love mission work, outreach, doing service, putting your faith into action. And this church is about that,” he said. “For a church this size, the church has a ton of energy. They have people who want to do things, they have engagement and involvement, people are showing up, attendance has been consistent, if not higher, since I came. I think the church has a strong core and could even grow.”

His congregation appears to be equally pleased.

“Pastor Hutchinson is someone to share and we are blessed to have him available at Plymouth Presbyterian Church,” said church member Kathleen Dinwiddie.

Not that ministering in the 21st century isn’t without its challenges. The advent and dependence on social media, the Internet, smartphones, tablets, e-readers and the like have changed how we interact with each other, including parishioners. But Hutchinson says this provides more opportunities, not less.

“I think we have more to offer than we used to. I think part of what social media emphasizes is that people want connection. Social media connections are only authentic if they’re based in face-to-face,” he said. “I’ve done courses where I’ve done work with people all across the country and what makes them work is that we have a week-long face to face intensive where we get to know each other. Then when you go online or go to a chat room, it’s somebody who

means something to you. If you have completely non-local community where there's no face-to-face element, it's a lot harder to make it authentic.”

Ultimately, Hutchinson says, people are looking for connections and that is what the St. Helens church is all about.

Plymouth Presyterian is located at 2615 Sykes Road, in St. Helens. Sunday services are at 10:30 a.m.