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Pittsford neighbors

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A PROCESS OF
DISCERNMENT:
The Rev. Aaron Neff
and his family make
their new way at First
Presbyterian Church

Cover photo by Keith Bullis

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Gabriel (still in Laura's lap), Esther and Clara

A process of discernment:

The Rev. Aaron Neff and his family make their new way at First Presbyterian Church

By Rob Price | Photo by Keith Bullis

Before the Rev. Aaron Neff joined Pittsford's First Presbyterian Church in May as its pastor, he visited the church to meet members of the congregation and deliver a sermon. The face-to-face visit was part of the formal interviewing process for most Presbyterian churches. After such visits, members of the congregation decide on whether they want to "call" the candidate, install him or her as the church's formal pastor.

Aaron's introduction to church members – his on-campus interview, in a way – was held on March 15, only days before New York State ordered churches across the state to cease in-person services. The visit went well; he is now the new pastor of First Presbyterian Church, located at 21 Church St. in Pittsford. He oversaw his first service and preached his first sermon as the church's pastor on May 31.

By that time, services at the church were entirely online. The Rev. Neff would not stand physically in front of his assembled congregation until Sunday, Sept. 13, when New York's declining COVID 19 numbers permitted the reopening of churches across the state. That last Sunday in May also marked the opening week of the Christian Pentecost season, which celebrates the miraculous descent of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus' disciples in the weeks after his death. In the New Testament account of the miracle, the disciples begin speaking in different tongues.

Members of mainstream U.S. Protestant and Catholic churches tend to distinguish their own celebrations of Pentecost from those of more evangelical (or Pentecostal) Christians. Mainstream Protestants and Catholics in the U.S. generally don't talk in tongues. The Holy Spirit, the third part of Christianity's Holy Trinity, is viewed more as a source of spiritual formation and community empowerment.



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The Pentecostal spirit, however, plays an important role in mainstream Christian life through the idea of discernment – a word the Rev. Neff used in his May 31 sermon on Pentecost Sunday. As he explains it, discernment is the process through which people open themselves to the Holy Spirit.

“Discernment is a total self-experience. It’s spiritual, it’s also physical, it’s also practical. It’s logical. We would say the Holy Spirit works through all those processes. God has given us discernment as a gift that we put to use in our collective ministry.”

Discernment also involves a journey, both interior and outward. It implies the process, sometimes slow and plodding, through which an individual or group of individuals employs rational powers within the penumbra God’s will. It implies the good balance between God’s will and self-will. A church’s search for a new pastor involves the process of discernment, Aaron points out. Members of Pittsford’s First Presbyterian Church went through a formal process of discernment before inviting him to join them as their pastor.

“We are starting this journey together,” Aaron says.

Joining a new church as its leader is never easy, but Aaron and his wife, Laura, had the advantage of having lived and worked in Corfu, NY, where he was pastor at the United Presbyterian Church. Corfu is part of the Genesee Valley Presbytery, the regional assembly of Presbyterian churches that includes Pittsford. Presbyterian churches operate individually when electing their pastors, but they also operate within the network of other Presbyterian churches in the same Presbytery. There are nearly 60 Presbyterian churches in the Presbytery of Genesee Valley. Aaron and his wife, Laura, were familiar with the territory as they began considering a move from Corfu to Rochester.

Laura was especially familiar with the territory. She had grown up in Springville, 30 miles south of Buffalo. In Corfu, she supported Aaron’s ministry, running a playgroup for children, volunteering in the church, helping with Bible studies and church dinners.

“I come from a churchgoing family,” she says. “I grew up in the Presbyterian Church.” She studied at Wheaton College, in Illinois, an academically rigorous Christian college where her classes included study of the Bible and Christian theology. Her summers included a trip to Israel and following the Apostle Paul’s journey as a missionary.

She and Aaron met at Wheaton, where Aaron was studying for his Master’s degree in Biblical exegesis. They met at a Christmas party, started dating, and, as Aaron explains it, just kept spending more and more time



with each other.

Laura studied education and taught elementary school children until the birth of their second child. (They are the parents of three children: five-year-old Esther; Clara, 3, and Gabriel, 1). As a cradle Presbyterian – and Wheaton College graduate – she enjoys working with Aaron as he thinks his way through issues like the proper wording of a Sunday sermon.

“We talk through ideas or illustrations that might work. That’s a way we strengthen each other. I think it’s helpful for him that I have some theological training. I can generally understand what he’s talking about, but I can also sense what a lay person would think. So, I can say, ‘That’s too technical,’ if he begins sounding abstract or academic.”

And the Rev. Aaron Neff is an academic: a scholar of the Bible, Biblical languages and ways of interpreting Biblical scripture. After receiving his MA in Biblical exegesis at Wheaton, he and Laura moved to Princeton, NJ, where he studied at the Princeton Theological Seminary, assisting a critical edition of the Sectarian texts of the Dead Sea Scrolls, drawing on his background in Biblical languages, which include Hebrew and Greek. As a student of Biblical exegesis, or interpretation, Aaron works to understand the original intent of the writers’ who transcribed oral traditions into what is now the Bible.

It’s a can of exegetical worms once you step into it. Jesus, he says, probably spoke in Aramaic. The gospels, which tell the stories of his life, were written in Koine Greek, the lingua franca of the first century after Jesus’ birth. That language eventually was translated into other ancient languages and then, for modern purposes, English and other modern languages. Trying to figure out original intent, starting with a modern edition of the Bible, is like looking into the past through wavy windowpanes.

“You get into the nuances of the Biblical languages,” Aaron says. “You also have to focus your effort on learning about the cultures of the religions and the civilizations of the people who lived among the writers of the Bible. You try to put the Bible in its context in order to try to understand the



intent of the writers. Basically, you try the best you can to understand their original meaning, while relying on the Holy Spirit to make the text come alive for today.”

No real journey is easy. Moving to a new church in the middle of a worldwide pandemic is particularly difficult. The Neff family has been finding ways to enjoy themselves at a time when emotional connections between people are limited through social distancing. Aaron says Pittsford reminds him of Princeton; there are fun places to eat, the children really love Pittsford Dairy, he likes bicycling along the canal; the family enjoys trips to places like Lollypop Farms, but a full-blown immersion in the life of their new church has been limited by a virus no one can even see.

The social and emotional limitations forced on congregations by the COVID virus are immense. The First Presbyterian Church, for example, is holding services with limited attendance and reduced elements of worship, while also continuing to livestream a separate service. “We’re in a little bit of a holding pattern,” Laura says. “We’re looking forward to better times.”

And no one knows how long that will take. Reflection, meditation, prayer are all part of the toolbox in the discernment process. “When we celebrate Pentecost today, we reflect on how God is continuing to be with us,” Aaron says. “As a pastor and as a person of faith, I believe that God remains with us and remains good no matter what we encounter. That is the story of God we encounter in scripture. Faith involves waiting and trusting and watching for the doors God will open as well as having eyes to see the doors God has already opened for us.”