

Dear St. Luke's friends,

As you saw earlier this morning, Bishop Scott Jones has announced that The Story Church will charter as a separate congregation and relocate its main worship center by the end of this year. While the decision to launch The Story Church as an independent United Methodist congregation seems abrupt to the broader congregation, it is important to note that the launch of The Story is the culmination of conversations and events over a long period of time, all of which led to this decision as a natural conclusion, one that allows both congregations to fulfill God's specific mission best for them. The decision was made by Bishop Scott Jones, in consultation with the leadership of both St. Luke's and The Story Church. In the interest of providing our congregation with the best information possible, I have done my best to describe the rationale and context for the decision in four areas.

An increasing movement toward autonomy

When St. Luke's launched The Story Houston, it was the intention of the planning team that The Story would remain a part of St. Luke's indefinitely. We would have separate worship experiences with different styles, and The Story Houston would develop an independent discipleship model for adults, with a higher level of expectation of participation in discipleship. The facility would be shared with our 8:45 contemporary service. The staffs would be integrated – a single staff community – and student ministry, children's ministry, and all other administrative functions would be integrated. However, as the ministry grew and became more fruitful, Revs. Eric and Geovanna Huffman sought more autonomy from the rest of St. Luke's. At the time of completion of The Story facility, at the Huffman's request, St. Luke's leadership made a decision to allow The Story exclusive use of the modern worship building on the south parking lot. As time went on, and for the sake of its mission, The Story developed The Story Kids as a separate children's ministry, and then The Story Students as a separate student ministry. For the sake of its mission, The Story believed it was best for them to keep their own database, rather than integrate to St. Luke's database. The Story staff often did not participate in St. Luke's staff meetings, as the subject matters did not seem relevant to the activities at The Story. Throughout this time, these decisions toward autonomy may have benefited The Story, but increased distance from the remainder of St. Luke's ministries, and it is apparent that The Story is thriving with its increased independence.

Overtures from The Story and the Texas Annual Conference for an independent congregation

On November 14, 2019, I received an email from Jesse Brannen, St. Luke's District Superintendent, asking to meet to discuss the launch of The Story Houston as a new congregation of the United Methodist Church. I was surprised by this email, as I knew nothing about Eric initiating conversations with anyone at a conference level about this. I immediately asked Eric about it, and stated that I was not supportive of this at this time. Eric let the District Superintendent know that we would not meet.

On May 8, 2020, I received an overture from Bishop Jones, indicating that he would like to help us work through the important and difficult questions that go with launching The Story as a separate congregation. I subsequently received an outline document on May 13, and shared this with St. Luke's Executive Committee, and we agreed this was not the time to begin to move toward separation. I shared with Eric and Bishop Jones that we could talk about it when the pandemic was over.

On March 5, 2021, I spoke on the phone to Elijah Stansell, St. Luke's new District Superintendent, and he indicated that Eric was once again interested in beginning talks to move toward launch. Once again, I

was surprised, and stated that we were in the middle of a capital campaign and I absolutely did not want to distract from that mission, and that we would work toward beginning discussions in June. No specific timeline was identified for that launch.

Cultural differences between two congregations

St. Luke's is a church whose culture is built around gathering diverse people together to grow in Christ and focusing our energies and resources on making a real difference in God's world. We are an inclusive "big tent" congregation. Despite many differences – political, theological, economic – we work together side by side and strive to nudge the world just a little bit closer to the Kingdom of God that is growing in our midst. At St. Luke's, we have pastors, staff, and leaders across that spectrum, all seeking to understand the teaching of Holy Scripture, interpret it for our situation and time, and follow the Jesus that scripture reveals to us. Understandings regarding human sexuality are a part of that diversity. The Church Council of St. Luke's does not believe that those differences in understanding warrant division between The Story and St. Luke's, as we are all seeking the Holy Spirit's guidance through the issues of our day. The leadership of The Story has expressed their resolve for independence based on their understanding of how Holy Scripture is to be interpreted.

At St. Luke's, in the midst of those differences, we strive to treat one another with respect, not malign the character of one another, and believe the best about the motives of our brothers and sisters in Christ. As the rhetoric around issues of human sexuality has become increasingly toxic, Bishop Jones has stepped in at the request of St. Luke's to help address those challenges and agreed to St. Luke's Executive Committee's request for an accelerated launch of The Story.

The importance of a St. Luke's congregation that reaches new people

As The Story Church makes plans to launch as an independent congregation, St. Luke's leadership believes it is crucial that we provide a St. Luke's congregation that reaches out to those people traditional church does not attract. Visitors to our campus, as well as our students, families, and children, should expect all of our worshipping congregations to be a part of St. Luke's when they arrive. We will move with both urgency and thoughtfulness toward a new faith community to meet that need.

Over the past seven years, the St. Luke's community has invested time, talent, and treasure into the success of The Story Church, and supported The Story as it has grown. St. Luke's will continue to do so as The Story prepares to launch, continuing our support by providing space and support services without charge through December.

St. Luke's has a history of launching other successful ministries, such as CCSC, Amazing Place, ReVision Houston, and others. We are so proud of what God is doing in and through all of them. While there is grief in the departure of The Story from our Westheimer campus, there is great pride in the incredible work being done there under the gifted leadership of Revs. Eric and Geovanna Huffman, as well as excitement at the new thing that God will do as part of St. Luke's in the days ahead.