



PEACE
UNITED CHURCH
OF CHRIST
a just world for all

3 April, 2024

Re: Mentor Reflections on Jakob Kröner's Vicariate Abroad

Brothers and Sisters in Christ, grace and peace to you,

I must begin my remarks with a word of deep thanks for your entrusting Vikar Jakob to our congregation for the last year. Also, we thank you for partnering with us in supporting him in this amazing opportunity.

During our time together Vikar Jakob has had an opportunity to partner with me in nearly all aspects of ministry, contributing richly to the life of our congregation. He has preached, spent time doing pastoral visitation in homes and at hospitals, has assisted in a wedding and led a funeral, and has been involved in Faith Formation with children, teens, and adults. It was a great joy to work alongside him both in areas where his skills are exceptional and well developed, and those areas where he challenges himself to be more comfortable. I think this has been particularly true in some of the youth ministry and confirmation programs in which he has been involved. Vikar Jakob had expressed that working with youth was an area where he had limited experience in the past, and so it was a wonderful opportunity to have him not only engage youth across cultures, and church cultures, but also to continue to embrace his gifts for ministering to this age group. He has done a marvelous job of teaching, listening, and growing in these gifts. He was even farther out of his comfort zone with the young children in Sunday School, Vacation Bible School, and during the children's sermons which are a regular part of Sunday worship. Like with all things, he has been a willing and eager learner; working to relate more easily to these age groups and ministering to them faithfully.

He had the chance to participate in a number of retreat settings. We spent a week living, worshipping, and working together as an intergenerational group with Habitat for Humanity. He travelled with another inter-generational group for a weeklong wilderness canoe trip in Canada. And most recently he helped to lead a group of Confirmation students on a weekend Confirmation retreat. In each instance the opportunity was to connect our faith with our experiences in the world and in community.

He helped to gather a group to bear witness to our churches openness to the LGBTQ+ community through participation in a "blessing booth" at Pride Festival and helping organize our presence for the first time in the Pride Parade in downtown Milwaukee. While the wider settings of the UCC have been open and affirming of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations for many years, each local congregation has the choice to accept

or reject this stance. Peace UCC voted in 2019 to declare itself “Open and Affirming” but is still growing into this reality. In the aftermath of the pandemic and a particularly divided time for our nation culturally, we have had a great deal of work to do in embodying our Open and Affirming proclamation. Vikar Jakob has had the opportunity to continue nurturing this rural congregation’s commitment to an extravagant welcome that is at odds with much of our local culture. I believe that he has also had the opportunity to witness the incongruities within individuals and groups within the congregation as they continue growing into what proclaiming their extravagant hospitality to the world looks like.

It has been a rich blessing for our congregation to learn more about the church in Germany, the similarities and differences, and perhaps the opportunities for all of us to be stronger by learning from one another. It’s fascinating to hear about the relative unity among the churches in Germany in their resistance to comingling religion and politics – this is so different from this moment in US history where these things are being used in increasingly coercive and divisive ways. Simple things like Vikar Jakob sharing the communion liturgy in German according to the tradition there, and describing the differences in how this sacrament is celebrated in another part of the Church are gifts beyond measure. Overall, Vikar Jakob is an extraordinarily gifted Pastor for whom we have felt richly blessed to have the chance to share this vicariate year. Now we are grateful to have the chance to continue sharing in ministry with him as he continues in his ordination journey among us. The congregation’s affirmation of his gifts was profound as they energetically affirmed calling him as our church’s half-time Associate Pastor (a position that has been discussed since the 1960’s). Peace UCC is grateful to have him as a part of their ministry team. I am equally grateful for the commitment which I heard from members of the committee in our church responsible for supporting him on his ordination journey as they spoke about the importance of our congregation continuing to support, nurture, and challenge him in ministry with the goal of coaxing the very best out of him for the service of God in the Church wherever his journey may lead him.

God is clearly working through this gifted minister in our midst. I’m grateful to have the chance to continue partnering with him as an extraordinary colleague who will offer great gifts to the Church whether here in the UCC or in Germany.

God's blessings,

Rev. J. Eric Kirkegaard