
*A New Year's Message
from Pastor Rockford*

Greetings McFarlin,

Jan. 5, 2021

It is good to stand together on the front porch of 2021 welcoming the dawn of new year! We've all been through so much, and I am wholly convinced that "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, God's mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is God's faithfulness" (Lamentations 3:22-23). I pray that you'll hold tight with me to that fact.

This New Year's letter will take about 10 minutes to read, and I appreciate your investing time to reflect on 2020 with me and to look ahead with hope to what God plans to do in and through McFarlin this year.



Whirlwind, perfect storm, the year of Zoom, and the year of our discontent are just some of the descriptions we might apply to the year 2020. It included the Covid-19 pandemic with all its effects; historic political division; deep racial strife; an early and devastating Oklahoma ice storm; and many, varied challenges and losses particular to each person and family among us.

I find myself filled with compassion for each of you, for the many ways 2020 has created tension, uncertainty and loss for you. And I ache for our church family as a whole — for the physical separation we've endured, the spiritual isolation some are experiencing, for the mental health challenges aggravated by our circumstances. At the same time, my heart marvels at the steady faithfulness of God which is so evident in your amazing faithfulness as people of God, as the living body of Christ.

Thank You, McFarlin

Elizabeth and I count ourselves profoundly blessed that in 2020 our story began to merge with the story of the good people of McFarlin. As she and I searched for housing, unpacked box after box, and entered into ministry with you during a pandemic, we found that the stresses of the situation were lightened by the wings of your warmth, grace and hospitality. You have been patient and welcoming as we have been getting acquainted on little screens and through telephone calls, emails and letters. Your patience endures as we remain eager to meet many of you for the first time or to meet you in person. Even across six-foot spans and through three-ply masks, our faithful God began weaving strong, beautiful ties among us.

The Spirit is helping us form relationships grounded in our love for Jesus and our shared calling to be people of light and hope. Thank you, McFarlin, for being a resilient community of believers serving a steadfast God whose spirit flows in and among us. We can remind one another of all the wonderful ministries and relationships that we share and encourage each other with grateful hearts and loving faith.

You've Shared Your Hearts

I've found great encouragement in the history, identity and vision of McFarlin which you've shared with me. Since joining the staff in July, I've met with Sunday School classes, leadership teams and small groups to listen and learn, to discover what makes the heart of this great church sing and what are the key aspects of life and ministry here. Some of the things you've told me about McFarlin are:

- Worship is vital and vibrant, with beautiful music, inspiring settings, heartfelt prayer, and proclamation.
- Key to McFarlin's identity is a passion for caring for vulnerable and deprived persons through local outreach and global missions.
- The lives of McFarlin's people and ministries are rooted in a deep love of God and the way of Jesus.
- Growing in our practice of discipleship is a priority — McFarlin's people continually seek to be formed to act like Jesus.
- You strongly desire to maintain and enrich the unity and harmony of God's church.
- We share a deep, hopeful, sometimes painful, longing to return to pre-pandemic normal.
- We are a community blessed by our faithful history and energized by a forward-looking trust in God's call.

Thank you for sharing your experiences and vision of McFarlin with me and for welcoming me to walk forward with you in the way of Christ. Together we build the future upon the strength of the past. For almost 100 years — through the Great Depression, World War II, the tumultuous 1960s and the Vietnam era, the crisis and tragic moment of 9/11, numerous pastoral and staff changes, and other challenges large and small — God has been moving in and through McFarlin and now is leading us onward.

Crisis has Magnified McFarlin's Creativity

Thanks to those who served and guided this church in prior years, McFarlin was well-positioned to not only weather 2020, but to flex and expand our ministries, serving more people in more ways and with greater creativity. By the grace of God, our ministries, lay leadership, volunteers and staff spun on a dime to adapt again and again. We've welcomed new members via Zoom, formed digital choirs from individual recordings, offered countless prayer shawls and care for the hurting, ministered to children and found fellowship with our students online, offered safer and creative ways for older members and outreach ministries to connect and serve, and have reconfigured worship services more than once. Even when change has been hard and quick, I've seen people approach opportunities with openhandedness, faith and trust in God's leading.

Indeed, the power of God's love and wisdom is equipping us and carrying us through, helping us emerge from challenges with greater strength and creativity.

Three Ways We are Moving Forward in Faith

Along those lines, I want to tell you about three specific plans that are in the works to help McFarlin continue to move forward faithfully, boldly and effectively. In coming weeks, Pastor Wendi, Pastor Trey and I will be telling you more about each effort and what to expect, but I wanted us to begin by looking ahead together.

First, one result of the pandemic has been a swift shift to digital ministry. Even though there is no replacement for being together in person, we know that increasingly there are people to be reached, care to be offered and holy creativity to be found in the digital realm. Identifying ways McFarlin can employ technology to strengthen and broaden our ministries and enhance our connection with God's people is a growing priority. Some folks even call this expanded model the "phygital" church — having both physical and digital expressions of the body of Christ!

Second, as you've seen in recent months, we've been taking stock of our resources and aligning the gifts, interests, and experience of our staff with the shifting needs of God's church. With a forward-looking mindset, we've reassigned some staff to new roles, such as Pastor Wendi to Senior Associate Pastor and Scott Meier to Missions; we've welcomed several staff members who bring advanced digital skills to our mix, including Pastor Trey, Meagan Barr in Communications and Kaitlin Kendal in Operations; and we're set to add a full-time digital media strategist early this year. We are not shifting away from our earlier priorities, but we are equipping the staff team to use a wider range of tools and methods for ministry and preparing to emerge from the pandemic experience with strength and excellence.

Third, let me share with you a Scripture that will guide all that we do in 2021: ***"If we walk in the light as God is in the light, we have fellowship with one another ..."*** (1 John 1:7a). Here, "fellowship" refers to the church living intentionally in the light of God, with genuine love and respect for each person and for our church as a community faithful to the way of Jesus. Through prayerful conversation and exploration with both lay leadership and staff in recent months, we discerned that God is calling McFarlin to designate 2021 as **The Year of Authentic Community: Living in the Light of God.**

We identified this emphasis knowing that the pandemic would continue into the coming year and that 2021, like all years, would bring its own challenges and opportunities. We also discerned that we can best serve God's mission as defined in Jesus by functioning as a truly authentic community of faith. Living authentically means living in the light of openness, genuineness, unguardedness — being willing to let others know who we are and welcoming one another in the fullness of love. We are called to live in such a way, modelling healthy, crucial conversation; open dialogue; mutual respect; and constant, genuine love. We can practice this way of life through worship, scripture, spiritual formation, study, common mission adventures, prayer, and the work of the Holy Spirit. In 2021, we can grow more authentic, kind, and open with one another, embracing whatever tensions may arise and working through them in the bright light of God's wisdom and love.

 *God Goes Before Us, Calling "Come, follow me!"*

I know this is a lot to digest, but I couldn't let the new year begin without reaching out to you and letting you know what is in my heart. You and yours have already become dear to me, and I feel overwhelming gratitude to be part of this McFarlin family, even during these difficult days. And as we struggle together, let us also hope together. In the darkness, we have an opportunity to be agents of the light of reconciliation and hope for one another and for the world.

So McFarlin, let us rely on one another as we were meant to, and let us look together toward all that lies ahead — the good and the challenging — reminding one another that God is ever present, ever faithful, and ever calling us to a holy mission according to the Way of Jesus.

Praying for the light of God to shine upon you and bring you peace,



Rockford Johnson
Senior Pastor