As I sat to write these few paragraphs I realized that I first met the Clarkstown congregation just twelve months ago. In ministry we speak of being “called” to areas of service. Well, Larry Essick called me on a Saturday afternoon in late April 2007 to ask if I could lead worship the following week. Five weeks and five worship services later I bid you farewell. Two days later I was off to the annual meeting of the RCA’s General Synod and a full summer schedule. I assumed the new friends Marcia and I had made during those weeks in Clarkstown would soon be only a memory – a brief immersion into the current reality of one of the RCA’s congregations for a “once upon a time pastor” turned church executive.

Immersed is a funny word to use for that experience. It’s a term we use most often in church circles for baptism, not our practice of pouring a bit of water on the brow, but the full dunking most familiar to those from the Baptist tradition (but permissible and growing in use among Reformed congregations). In that sense, I’ll stick to the term. I was “immersed” into a calling I’d left years before. And, if not like being born anew, it was a rediscovery of aspects of ministry I didn’t know I missed so deeply – leading worship, celebrating the sacraments, teaching, and preaching, praying with you, hearing your prayers and the stories of emerging and deepening faithfulness, and simply being among a congregation learning together what it means to follow Jesus in these days.

That is a lot of words to say to you, the Clarkstown congregation, “thanks.” You have been for me, and for Marcia, a gracious, hospitable, and deeply caring community of faith. You have been gentle and kind with my tendency to slip into “church executive” mode assuming I’m talking with “my” staff instead of God’s called out ones. You’ve been gracious and accepting of a couple of new ways of doing things (who moved that communion table anyway?) and mostly gentle in suggesting that some ideas may not have been from God after all (it was hard to pull those pieces of bread from the hard crusted uncut loaf wasn’t it?)

Following one of those Sundays I worshipped with you in May 2007 I told a colleague about you. We spoke of your worship attendance (more than Jesus’ twelve but lots of room for growth), of the congregation’s grieving what had once been its central role in the life of the community, its former stature as a large “program” congregation, and its continuing grief over the death of the Rev. Parsons. I told my colleague, “there is a vibrancy and a spirit in the place that keeps pulling me in and I can’t explain it except to say the people I am meeting are deeply faithful and are craving to engage more fully in God’s mission.”
A year later that sense of who you are has been confirmed. God’s mission is before us and tugging at us, calling us to where God intends for us to go and to be what God intends for us to be. Our faithful legacy is distinctive and to be celebrated. Our future is to be prayed for, discerned, and stepped into with bold faith. We’ll stumble some. We’ll hit some walls; we’ll get annoyed at ourselves and each other. We’ll be impatient. And, there are some among us thankfully who will always be ready to give a word of blessing, and patience, and peace.

The statisticians can look back over the past year and report that there are signs of new life among us. Worship attendance is up a bit. We just baptized our fourth infant, an amazing number when we look at our average age! Our confessing membership has grown and our losses are zero. We’ve made fresh commitments to support the wider mission of Christ’s church in the world. Almost half of us gather each week before worship to study scripture or converse about issues before church and world. A faithful group of us gathers on Mondays to pray. A growing group of adults gathers on Fridays to reflect on God’s Word to us and to speak honestly of our own faith (even sometimes our doubts). We have begun a new children’s ministry that is shaping young lives with the stories of scripture. We have called out and commissioned a pastoral calling team to extend God’s mercy and the prayers of the people to any with need (that would be all of us). We’ve taken steps to communicate among ourselves more fully and to extend the hospitality of Christ to the wider community with a revised occasional newsletter and an active website and electronic calendar.

Yet, the life we have together is not about statistics. It’s about faithfulness, a tougher matter to quantify, but the core of whom we are and who God calls us to be. The words at the beginning of this report from the Acts of the Apostles have been stuck on replay in my brain since we read them in worship a few weeks ago. Finally those words are all that need be said about God’s faithful ones. If we attend to the apostles’ teaching, embrace one-another and those who come to be with us in honest and caring fellowship, break bread together in liturgy (and informally whenever and wherever we gather) always mindful of God’s grace in our lives, and if we pray for and with each other and for the world God so deeply loves and for whom our Lord gave his life that we might have life – if we do all of these things from the deep faith that is within us, the Clarkstown Reformed Church will be a blessing among the people whom God is calling it to serve.

Grace to you and peace,

Rev. Kenneth R. Bradsell