

The Rev. John Sampson, Pastor
Glen Ridge Congregational Church
Sunday, May 3, 2026
John 14:1 - 14

Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable to you, our rock, and our redeemer.

Amen.

So, here we are. It's decision time. The time for this congregation to decide if you would like me to be settled in this pulpit, if you would like me to be your spiritual leader, if you would like me to be the one to help you hear God's invitation to the future, and help you respond to that call.

I have been your designated pastor for just about a year now, and what an amazing year it has been. Many of you will know that in my first year I made a conscious decision to hold back from starting much that was new, because I wanted to learn who you are, what the traditions of this church are, the places in the life of our community that hold great joy, and the times in which we experience a lack of patience with each other.

And you have come to know me. You've heard me preach, seen me participate in the meetings of this church, you've walked with me on our pilgrimage to Delaney Hall, welcomed me into your homes to share meals and comfort you in challenging times, and you've seen me grow peevish when you've locked me out of my office.

We've seen each other in the great times, and the not-so-great times. And that's how it should be.

But now, knowing what we know of each other, we wonder if there is a greater future being offered to us. We have begun exploring the possibility that I will not just be your designated pastor, but that I may become your settled pastor. So, it's only right that today you ask me like Thomas asked Jesus in the reading we just heard, if we go with you where are you going to take us? You say that in God's house there are many dwelling places, but what does the dwelling place of our shared future look like to you?

I could respond like Jesus, although I am certainly not Jesus.

I could respond, "have I been with you all this time...and you still do not know me." But in this moment, that kind of response seems insufficient. You deserve more than that from me.

So, today I will share with you a vision of the place I understand God calling us to travel to together. It is a call that God is offering to us based on you, and the traditions of this church. It is based on me, my own sense of faith, and all of who I am.

Here is my dream. Here is my prayer. Here is my response to you. And here is my response to God.

- First and foremost, I know that God is not done with Glen Ridge Congregational Church. Period. Full stop. And because God is not done with us the future of this congregation is bright and full of hope. Christ's light in the world is not only something we need, it is a light that is needed in our community, and in the wider world, now more than ever. How could we be anxious about our future as long as we are committed to doing God's work? That being said, we need to

commit to becoming the church of the future, honoring our history, but not being held back by it.

- As your settled pastor I will not be your CEO. I will be your spiritual leader. I will help you discern what God's Spirit is inviting you to become, and support you in discerning how we will build consensus to get there.
- My ministry will always be founded on encouraging us to remember, and to live more deeply into the central value of Christ's kingdom: to love God with everything we have, and to love our neighbors as ourselves, even when we might call our neighbor "enemy".
- It is my vision that worship will continue to be central to why we gather, and will always help us to feel God closer and more palpable in our lives. And it is also my vision that in worship we all feel less like passive recipients, and more like active co-creators in our praise of God.
- I pledge to work with Tom to support an amazing music program that helps us continue to experience God's presence in worship, and find opportunities to use music in new and exciting ways.
- I pledge to support and deepen the church's covenant with our members, friends and neighbors to continue to be there for every step along the journeys of our lives: from birth and baptism, to confirmation and marriage, and when the day comes and we die that this will be the place all of us want to have our lives celebrated.
- I will also challenge us to live more profoundly into the values of our Open and Affirming covenant, which offers a broad vision for welcoming all people in their unique particularity, even if it means we might have to change who we are.

- I commit to supporting and expanding a Youth Ministry that meets the spiritual needs of our youth, and their families, helping them to grow in understanding what a holy gift they truly are.
- I completely support the rolling out of our Safe Church policy as a reflection of our commitment to keeping our youth safe, and as a blueprint for how we covenant to gather as a community.
- As I commit to our youth I also commit to serving our older members, and those who find themselves in difficult situations. Pastoral care is central to my sense of ministry.
- I will challenge us to more explicitly respond to God’s original charge to humanity to care and nurture this Creation.
- Faith is a lifelong journey of experience and learning. It has been exciting to share with you opportunities to learn and reflect and grow spiritually. And I pray that we can become a place of further exploration, for ourselves, and for the wider community.
- One of the strengths of our congregation is the opportunity to come together with others in fellowship, whether it be in Coffee Hour, or sorting Rummage, or singing in the choir, or going on a field trip to see images from Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel. I will always work to support opportunities for us to be in community with one another, and to find new ways to be together.
- I have a dream that all of our neighbors, especially the ones who don’t come to worship, say to themselves, as they pass our building, “that is my church”.
- It is my dream that our church creates an internal culture where we always begin from “yes”, instead of beginning from a position of “no”.

- It is my dream that when we think of our church one of the first words that comes to mind is “fun”.
- I will work with our staff, our ministries and our Church Council to find ways to run this church more efficiently, so that more of our collective time can be spent on worship, ministry and community instead of administration.
- In my role as Staff Supervisor, I will partner with the Church Council to make sure that all of our staff believe this is a great place to work, and that it will be.
- Our church knows great financial stability, but I challenge us to put our finances on even firmer ground, not just for this year, or next year, or the next pandemic. But for 100 years from now, or 200 years from now.
- It is my dream that our church engages more inventively and flexibly with social media, and technology.
- I fully believe that if we commit to realizing this vision, that we will grow. Because there are people searching for God right now, and there are people looking for a road back to us, and there are people who don't yet know that we even exist.

This is my vision for my ministry, should I become the settled pastor of this church. This is my starting point. It won't all be done at once, and the particulars need to be fleshed out. There are years' worth of work in this vision, which will need to be prioritized, and funded.

But more importantly, it will need your commitment and support. To embrace this vision is not simply to choose me as your pastor. It is to

raise your hand and say “yes!” I want to be a part of this, and I am willing to participate, and share of the gifts God has blessed me with to help bring it to life. And most importantly, I believe this is a vision that will help me, help us, and help the world feel closer to God’s presence and life among us.

Amen.