



Dear Riverside Family,

This is an especially important letter, so I am asking you to take the time to read through the entire document to make sure you are getting all the crucial information I need to communicate. Thank you Riverside family!

For many years (including before my tenure began at Riverside in 2003) I have reminded myself, staff, elders, fellow pastors & leaders, and the churches I have had the privilege of serving that Jesus is the only permanent Leader of His church, and that everyone else is an interim. As Jesus followers, change is the only consistent experience for all of us as we navigate our lives and faith during our earthly sojourn.

So, the reality is that I am approaching, on September 1st, 2025, my 22nd anniversary as the *Interim* Senior Pastor at Riverside Church!

For the past six years in particular, I have had the privilege of watching other Senior Pastors older than me (many of whom I know personally, and others only from a distance) navigate the difficult decision of when the right time is to transition and make way for a new Senior Pastor to take their place, and what those experiences have been like. Some have had very good and healthy processes. Some have had more complex and difficult experiences. It made me so much more aware of how important it is, especially for a long-term Senior Pastor of a larger church, to take the matter of their transition and succession of a new leader very prayerfully and seriously.

So for a number of years now I have read every article I could find about pastoral succession, read some of the most highly recommended books on the subject, watched interviews of Senior Pastors going through this process, and talked to as many Senior Pastors as I could about their experiences going through this kind of process. I began to ask the Lord to help my last and greatest gift to Riverside Church be a healthy and positive transition and succession.

About three years ago I began to have preliminary discussions about the topic of succession with the Elders, not with any timeline in mind, but simply to bring up the subject with them (it was less awkward for me to bring this subject up to the Elders so they knew it was okay for us to be prayerfully thinking about what this might look like when I had a better sense from the Lord of the timeline for this). We read the book, *NEXT: Pastoral Succession That Works (Vanderbloemen and Bird)* together, which I believe is the best and most comprehensive book on the subject.

And then the Elders made it clear to me: They were in no hurry for me to transition, they were supportive of my staying as long as I believed I could stay and be effective, and they wouldn't bring it up again until I told them that I had a timeline in my mind. You should all be so thankful for the godly Elder Board here at Riverside. They love the Lord and this church so much, are completely sold out for Jesus' mission, and have cared and prayed for me and my family all the years I have served here.

About a year ago I started to have more clarity, I believe, from the Lord, about a timeline. I knew that the Buffalo campus would be up and running by the Fall of 2024, and I was deeply committed to making sure this campus got off to the best possible start and was growing in healthy ways. While I continue to love my calling, love preaching God's Word, still feel that I am being used by the Lord and mostly effective in my responsibilities, what started to be firmly impressed upon me was this:

My entire formal ministry life (46 years so far) I have always been able to look ahead 10 years, and while not knowing everything that might happen and every detail, I have been able to have a vision in my heart and mind for the churches I have served, and this has especially been the case at Riverside. When I first came to Riverside in September 2003, I had a strong sense of what God wanted me to do and what could happen at this church for the next 10 years (and He did above and beyond what I had been envisioning). When my 10th anniversary at Riverside came along, I also had a strong sense of what God might want to accomplish and use me to do over the next 10 years (and He again did above and beyond what I had been envisioning).

It was my prayer in coming to Riverside in 2003 that this would be the final place I would serve as a full-time Senior Pastor, and God has more than graciously answered that prayer.

But what became so clear to me a year ago was that I could not look ahead 10 years anymore. It was pretty hard to even look five years ahead. In June I will turn 68 years old, and while I believe God has given me pretty good health and a generally clear mind (most of the time!), I realized that I was no longer in a position to be the kind of visionary leader I have always been able to be. I simply must be realistic about what my capacity is today and what it will be in the years ahead compared to 10 and 20 years ago.

Riverside needs, and deserves, a Senior Pastor that can be prayerfully looking ahead 10 years from now at what God might want to accomplish here.

When that crystalized in my mind and heart, I knew that God was now leading me to confirm with the Elders a transition timeline. So, the Elders and I have been working on a transition and succession process and we are asking the Lord to bring a new Senior Pastor to Riverside sometime in the next 9-12 months (spring/early summer 2026).

Since it has been 22 years since Riverside has been in a transition process for a new Senior Pastor, and since many of you are also newer to our church and may not know how this works in the Christian & Missionary Alliance (C&MA - our denomination), let me outline for you how this process will be happening, and how you can prayerfully support and engage in this process.

Understand that finding the right new Senior Pastor for a larger, multisite church is a far more complex undertaking than for a smaller church with perhaps just one Pastor. No one in the church is an expert, but we have a plan that includes an experienced guide. After much prayer and discernment, we have chosen to work with N.L. Moore & Associates, an experienced consulting group that specializes in helping churches like ours work through this important season with confidence and unity. Together, we have been working to create the right plan for our church. We will be sharing more details of that plan in the coming weeks.

Depending on your church background, you may have experienced a process of calling a new Senior Pastor, and that can look very different in various churches. Here is some important information that I hope answers some of your questions right now:

- As a C&MA church, the Constitution of the C&MA authorizes the Elders to be the group that calls the next Senior Pastor. So, while there will be opportunities for the members of the church to engage and participate, the final decision will be made by the Board of Elders (just as they did when they called me here 22 years ago).
- There is no designated successor at this point. Both external and internal possibilities will be considered, but the Elders have had a strong sense that the Lord is directing them to be open to whoever the Lord may want to fill this important position, and having the same method for all possible candidates makes this process as objective as possible.
- N.L. Moore also provides for Gwen (my wife) and me the support and coaching we need during this time of transition in our lives as we discern God's next step for us. I have been a Senior Pastor for 43 of my 46 years in public ministry, and I'm realizing that I am becoming more ready to not have the weight of this responsibility on my heart every day. I believe I'm not done in ministry, yet ...what it might look like, I'm not 100% sure yet (God will lead us), but perhaps more of a part-time role is what we're praying about. No matter what, we want you to know that Riverside will continue to be our home church whether in a formal or informal role.
- One of the things we know for sure is that everyone in this congregation is important and we will be inviting you to speak into the process. As one of our initial "next steps" we will be launching a congregational assessment to gather your thoughts and perspectives about our church. This assessment will be available online starting May 18th, and it will end June 8th. More details about this will be coming shortly, but you are invited to engage in this way.
- As time passes, more of the communication about this process will be led by the Elder Board, and especially by the Vice-Chairman of the Elders, Brad Long. It is especially meaningful to me that Brad was the leader of the Elder Board when I candidated here in 2003, and now is a leading person in this process. He and all our Elders are a fantastic group of servant leaders, and I know they will appreciate your prayers for them.
- In the meantime, nothing will be changing immediately. I'm still the Senior Pastor of Riverside Church, and I am praying that God will continue to allow me to serve Him faithfully here, to preach His Word, to see lost people become found people, and to do all I can to make this transition and succession process the most positive and the healthiest final gift I can give to this amazing church. I so desire to finish here well (and hopefully the Lord still has a bit more "free stuff" for me to share with you all...).
- Finally, this is a spiritual journey for us all. Please join us in prayer! God loves this church, and He knows the plans He has for it. Pray with us for His wisdom as we all move into this important season together. Thank you in advance for your prayers and support.

Pastoring Riverside Church has been the greatest privilege of my life and ministry. Thank you all for your wonderful support, love, and prayers for Gwen and me and our family.

The Lord bless you all!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Pastor Tom". The script is cursive and fluid, with the first name "Pastor" written in a larger, more prominent style than the last name "Tom".

Pastor Tom