

February 9, 2021

Dear Friends,

February 16 marks five years to the day that Kristen and I arrived at Richmond Hill. We give thanks for the opportunity we've been given to be a part of this amazing ministry. So, it's with mixed emotion that I share with you now that after careful prayer and discernment, we've decided that we will be transitioning out of the community this summer.

Although my departure is not immediate, there are a few things I'd like to express while they are foremost on my mind.

Being a part of Richmond Hill has been immensely rewarding. Kristen and I are grateful for all aspects of our experience here, including the challenges inherent to community life. As a result, I've experienced personal transformation and unprecedented growth. And it's been hard. When Jesus invited us to lay down our lives for our friends, I believe he had something like this in mind. And I say that on behalf of all of us. Your commitment to this place and your support of me in this role has been humbling and inspiring.

I trust I've contributed something these past five years. I think about the evolution of Koinonia, the launch of the Summer Institute and Brother Lawrence retreats, the development of discernment circles, and even things still in the works like an oblate program to help strengthen the relationship of those interested in monastic values but living outside of the walls, with those living on the inside. I cherish living into the experiment of a new-to-Richmond Hill co-pastoral leadership model envisioned to help navigate the transition from a long-term and beloved founder to what is next, initiating a capital campaign that has raised more than two million dollars thus far, adding key additions to our staff, the hosting of countless guests and groups, the development of unique programming, partnering with other like-minded organizations, supporting churches, contending with the Charlottesville tragedy, a national administration that brought racism to the forefront, the unfolding of a global pandemic and George Floyd's murder, and revelations that have unearthed a fuller Richmond Hill story that includes colonialism, enslavement, and a culture of white supremacy. We've been through a lot together in a relatively short time and the importance of Richmond Hill's presence and ministry has never been clearer.

Richmond Hill's commitment to holding space for a unique monastic community is exquisite and, I believe, the heart of what makes this ministry extraordinary. I hope that commitment is never lost. It's ironic because it is so tenuous. But the continual stewardship of the prayers and the ability to provide gracious hospitality depends on this unique monastic community. Without it, Richmond Hill would simply be another urban retreat center. With it, Richmond Hill has a life and purpose that is truly Christ-centered and exceptional.

In addition to my deep appreciation for the residents, I am indebted to and deeply grateful for the staff and volunteers who daily support the overall ministry. As a resident, I learned to appreciate that a life of prayer and service is untenable without the faithful

network of people seeing to it that daily provisions are met so a few can live simply, pray consistently, and be available when guests arrive at the door.

This announcement may appear to come at an awkward time given the recent call of Lisa as our new Co-Pastoral Director. I assure you that working with Lisa has been a joy and highlight of my tenure. She has been very much a part of my discernment in this decision, even in advance of pursuing her unique full-time call to Richmond Hill. I am excited to see what Lisa continues to bring to this place knowing her call to the healing of metropolitan Richmond is firm and clear. She is the right person at the right time, and Richmond Hill will continue to benefit from her many gifts and leadership.

Richmond Hill residency is transient by design, which is both healthy and challenging. I shared residency with twenty-four different individuals during these five years, and only two, DeBorah and Richard, remain from when I arrived. I've been impressed that so many of the folks who have either lived or worked here continue to return in other capacities to lead retreats, seek sabbath, offer or receive spiritual direction, or to simply volunteer. I hope to be among them. Evolving relationship speaks highly of this place, offering stability grounded in long-term commitment, if not permanent roles. I think of Elnora Allen, Tony Martin, Mimi Weaver, Charles Williams, Deborah Streicker, and, of course, Janie Walker, to name a few.

Part of what drew me here originally was a desire to be shaped by monastic community and prayer. That has happened. I trust in the Spirit's willingness to form those of us open to putting ourselves in God's hands, which I've tried to do. I trust that what I've learned will stay with me and continue to influence my ministry, including a clearer call and commitment to the lifelong work of racial healing and reconciliation. I leave a different, more complete person.

Please know that in my remaining time as Co-Pastoral Director, I will continue to serve this community in all ways possible. While there will be things I must let go, I will help Lisa continue to settle into her role, assist the residents in inviting others into the residential community, support the initiation of a search for the next residential Co-Pastoral Director, and do what I can to make this a smooth transition for everyone.

Kristen and I do not yet have firm plans for what is next but we trust the way will be revealed. She will continue her work with Headwaters LLC in support of the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and I am anticipating a sabbatical that will include a deep immersion in nature to help me prepare for the next right thing.

Finally, let me say thank you for the privilege of being a part of this ministry for this season and for the chance to serve as Co-Pastoral Director with you. It's been an experience that has enriched my life, broadened my understanding of God, and strengthened my faith. I am deeply grateful to you for your leadership and stewardship of this extraordinary place and work, the Spirit of our City and our world.

Grace and peace are ours together,

Rev. Joel Blunk  
Co-Pastoral Director