

THE STATE OF THE CHURCH
JULY 7, 1985
Ephesians 3:7-21 Mark 6:1-6

Today marks the beginning of the third year. Two years ago Glenn and I were appointed by the Bishop to serve as your ministers. What has happened these past two years and where are we headed? Let me share with you my perceptions of the state of the First United Methodist Church of Palo Alto.

The two Scripture lessons for today provide an interesting backdrop for this sermon. From Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus, we hear lofty theological language describing God's mysterious plan which, hidden for ages, has now been revealed through Jesus Christ. God's plan--to unite all things and all people in him--will be accomplished through the church. That's the vision.

The gospel lesson, on the other hand, brings us back to earth as it confronts us with realism. Jesus, in his home town, achieved few results. Even Jesus was thwarted, blocked, prevented from achieving his best. That's the way it is. That's the state of the church, the state of your life. We have a vision but are often blocked and thwarted.

Let's see where we are. If you would like to turn to #829 in the hymnal, you will see in the opening statement that we believe God created the church for the conduct of worship and the due administration of his Word and Sacraments, the maintenance of Christian fellowship and discipline, the edification of believers and the conversion of the world.

First, "the conduct of worship." Over the two-year period, average attendance at Sunday morning worship has increased approximately 21%. We have six vocal choirs, four handbell choirs, an orchestra, and a Family Orchestra, plus the frequent appearance of community groups. The excellence of our music is often taken for granted by long-time members. You need to worship in other places periodically in order to appreciate the caliber of music with which we worship God. Several weeks ago a visitor from the east coast asked me, "What will your members do when they get to heaven and discover the music isn't as good as their church?" We involve children and youth regularly in the leadership of worship through singing and ringing in choirs, lighting candles, leading in prayer, and special presentations. We set high standards for preaching and seek to preach the very best we are able to do. A long-range goal is the improvement of the acoustics in this sanctuary. A committee is at work.

Second, "the maintenance of Christian fellowship and discipline." During the past two years, we have organized three new fellowship groups: young marrieds, young adults (ages 18-30) and Pathfinders for single persons. The ministers place a high priority on pastoral calling. The United Methodist Women has organized a

Visiting Circle to keep in touch with shut-ins and elderly members. This group of women is doing an outstanding job. They even do grocery shopping on a regular basis for one couple. A long-range goal is the establishment of a shepherding system whereby we can put our members in touch with one another and provide a network for caring and communication. A committee is at work. Another goal is the organizing of more small sharing groups where members can relate to one another on a face-to-face basis.

Third, "the edification of believers." A long-range goal is the hiring of a full-time trained person for children and youth ministry, but in the meantime our part-time staff persons are doing an exceptional job. Perhaps you have noticed or have participated in Market Place:29 A.D. Children, youth and adults are dressed in clothes of 29 A.D., studying, singing, dancing, cooking, eating under a tent on the lower level. This fall we hope to reach more families for our Sunday School as we will offer children and youth vocal choir rehearsals on Sundays.

A new program for adult education, unique to our church, is in an experimental stage and it might not succeed. I'm afraid it is such a new concept that you are not yet relating to it. We have entered into an agreement with the School of Theology at Claremont, the only United Methodist seminary on the west coast, to conduct classes in our facility. The first class is scheduled for Monday through Friday, August 26-30. So far, only two registrations have been received. The purpose of the program is to bring seminary professors here to provide opportunities for you--our lay people--to study. How many persons get a chance to study theology with a seminary professor? You may audit for \$55 or take it for seminary credit for \$155. Brochures are available in the narthex, library or church office. If this experiment succeeds, we will eventually offer evening classes for a longer period than one week. Please look at your schedule and consider this unique opportunity. We hope that Claremont at Palo Alto will be the foundation of adult education.

Fourth, "the conversion of the world." A church exists to spread God's word throughout its community and to the world. There are no boundaries, no fences. The world is our turf. For the first time in several years, our membership in the first six months of this year has shown a net increase! Only one, but it is a net increase and for that we rejoice. A long-range goal is a full-time trained staff person or minister in the area of membership development and assimilation. The staff person only helps you the members do the work of evangelism, however. No one person can do the job alone. God calls each of you to witness, tell of your faith, reach out to your neighbors, and invite persons to this church.

Our church is concerned with God's mission. Our people help staff the Urban Ministries, Ecumenical Hunger Project, Food Bank, Salvation Army, etc. We receive many offerings for mission, and respond quickly to world hunger and disaster relief. This year we

are now paying 68% of our conference apportionments for the work of our denomination, and are on schedule to reach 100% in two years. Our present financial situation is sound, thanks to special sacrificial contributions by our members to wipe out the accumulated deficit. Next week, we share-a-dollar to increase our missionary support of Lillian Wallace, missionary to India. By the way, Lillian will be in our church on August 4.

That is a brief sketch of where we've been, where we are, and where we are heading. Now, why aren't we there? The first reaction of the home town folks to the ministry of Jesus was astonishment. They were amazed at his wisdom and impressed with his mighty works; or rather, they were impressed with the reports of his wondrous works because he could do no mighty works in the home town. Why? He was discounted by folks. They had known him since he was a little boy. He was the carpenter, son of Mary. His brothers and sisters still lived there. They were too familiar with Jesus and his family. They knew the boy Jesus, but they didn't want to know the man Jesus. They had no faith in him.

We know the church as it was, or always has been. We remember the church as it was when we got our feelings hurt, or when we were a youth. Often we won't let the church grow up, or change, or be what it could be. We are often hung up on our perceptions and fail to see the vision. Jesus said he could not achieve mighty results in his home town because of their unbelief. A church is often hindered, thwarted, and blocked because the members have no faith in the future of the church.

Brothers and sisters, let us see the First United Methodist Church not just as it was, and not just as it is now; but as it could be. Catch a glimpse of the vision that God has for our church.

I see a church that worships God with its best. It offers to God the finest music, not to entertain people or impress people, but to worship God. I see choir lofts full, orchestra playing, bells ringing, and a congregation of singing, praying, joyful worshippers; not a church of spectators but of worshippers--involved, grateful, joyful, open to the Spirit, committed to Jesus Christ. I see a church with joyful worship.

I see a church rich and deep in Christian fellowship, where people eat, meet, share together; a church where all people--regardless of age, race or nationality--feel at home; a church where you can relax, take off your shoes, unwind, let people see you as you really are and know that you are accepted, loved and appreciated. I see a church with warm fellowship.

I see a church where people are nurtured and trained for mission. I see a church that loves children and youth and does its best for them; a church where adults study, grow, stretch, and train for mission, not just for their own enlightenment but in order to do God's work. I see a church learning.

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I see a church reaching out, where its members care deeply for the folks next door and are ready to address their needs, willing to witness and to share what Jesus Christ means to them, so that the neighbor might find a better way. I see a church concerned about peace, the environment, hunger, justice in our community and across the globe. I see a church in mission without geographical limits.

Will you see the vision? Will you pray in faith that the vision will come to pass here in our midst? Will you commit your life wholly and completely to Jesus Christ and pray that God may use you in the ministry and mission of the First United Methodist Church of Palo Alto?