

Here We Are! Here We Go!

Holy and gracious God, may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts and the actions of our lives be acceptable to you, and be a part of your in-breaking realm. I ask this in the name of the Christ, the One who brings me Life and offers Life to All. Amen.

As I said in the September Parish Notes, I feel blessed to have been appointed to Newark United Methodist Church. I also believe that Newark United Methodist Church is uniquely gifted to minister to/with/in the current culture of the world. I have been here a year. We have celebrated, laughed, cried, struggled, and journeyed together as we have moved into God's future. I have heard about the past. I have heard about dreams for the future. Members have died, left, returned and new ones have joined. There have been weddings and baptisms and baptisms and funerals and baptisms. Did I mention there have been baptisms? Maybe I should ask, "Is there something in the water? Anyway, it has been a delightful year for me personally. And on top of it all, I have seen God moving in this congregation!

But I also know that things are not rosy for mainline churches in the United States. Reggie McNeal, in his book, *The Present Future: Six Tough Questions for the Church*, starts the book with the following paragraph.

The current church culture in North America is on life support. It is living off the work, money, and energy of previous generations from a previous world order. The plug will be pulled either when the money runs out (80 percent of money given to congregations comes from people aged fifty-five and older) or when the remaining three-fourths of a generation who are institutional loyalists die off or both.

Now, please note he says church culture, not the church. Huh? Reggie McNeal believes that God will keep "church" alive. What the "church" looks like and the practices of the church may be very different.

Let me try a different quote for you. "Today, people hunger for meaning and direction as perhaps never before, yet the assurances offered by traditional religions and philosophies have become hollow for many." That is Doctor Larry Dossey, author of numerous books linking spirituality, prayer and healing; in his review of Kent Ira Groff's book, *What Would I Believe if I Didn't Believe Anything?*

"Church" today is having a hard time connecting with the people in the world today. In general, mainline churches and now some non-denominational churches are declining. They are full of aging members. The difficulty is what these older members represent. They represent the bulk of financial support in churches. Boomers and younger generations do not give at the same level. The older congregation tends also to be the workers. They have always given graciously of their time. But they are starting to get tired or literally unable to volunteer. The younger generations find other time commitments keeping their church involvement less. The children are in more things and more families have both partners working in full time jobs. So the question is raised, "Who will keep the church going?"

It is not just those who sit in the pews on Sunday morning. The clergy are getting older. The age of incoming clergy has risen dramatically. There are very few going into the ministry right after college. This past year, we ordained 13 men and women as Elders and received them as Full Members of the annual conference. Their average age was 58. Most of them will retire before I do and this is my 21st year since my Elder ordination. It doesn't sound too good, does it?

Here We Are!

What about Newark United Methodist Church? Where are we? This past year I have seen many of our strengths. I think of the hospitality and fellowship of the congregation. The *Community Building Initiative* gave evidence that Newark UMC values the people in the congregation. The ministry teams have gifted people. There are strong ministries that members are proud of, such as: the educational ministry, the music ministry and the outreach ministries. I think of the groups, TNT, YAG, TLC, Sunday morning Sunday School classes, and of course, Mrs. Wilson's Bible Study Group. They are one of the few groups that can displace the staff meeting out of Memorial Lounge. I see as a strength the decision to stay on Main St.

This past year I have also seen the weakness. Let me start with the one no one wants to hear about. I can not talk about Newark UMC's weaknesses without talking about about ... money. There are some who wish to blame this solely on my predecessor. The problem is older than that. This church has little to no real membership growth for 20 years. (Based upon worship attendance) That's right, twenty years. For the past twenty plus years the average worship attendance has been between 550 and 600. Your two highest years were 1994 and 1995. As long as I have been in the ministry, the funds received for ministry has had a direct correlation to the number of people in worship.

It's no wonder that you had committed to paying half of your Conference Connectional Ministry Funds in 2005. The lack of stewardship and growth in the congregation became a reality. While we are committed to meeting the Conference obligation in full this year, it has meet that some ministries are not happening because there are no funds. And we are using accumulated designated monies to help fund ministries this year. These funds will be available only this year. Thankfully we had them. When spent, they will be gone.

It's no wonder that while we are in this historic building, there has been a lack of preventative maintenance, so we are often forced to deal with the next emergency. Like right now. The steeple needs major repair. I mean major repair. The trustees have shared a preliminary plan with Church Council and Finance and you can read about it in the October Parish Notes. I will say more on this late in this sermon.

Money is not the only weakness. The ministry teams have no clear unifying church vision. So, they often appear as an independent entity with little or no coordination between them. Because of that I have had a feeling of the teams competing for resources, both money and space. While there are strong ministries, some are weak and there are some that do not exist. And small groups. While the groups Newark UMC has are good groups, we have no real "Cell" Group ministry. What do I mean by Cell group ministry? I mean small groups that meet once a week for discipleship and growth that constantly split and or birth new groups so they do not become cliquish and exclusive.

*You were all called to travel on the same road and in the same direction, so stay together, both outwardly and inwardly.
Ephesians 4:4 The Message*

So how do we all travel on the same road, staying together both outwardly and inwardly. Let me first start with a story.

A family that wasn't in the practice of going to church attended the large, formal wedding of a friend. The family's youngest child, age three, sat perched on his father's knee watching all the comings and goings with great interest. There came a time in the service when a hymn was to be sung, and the organist crashed confidently into the opening chords of the song, putting the "pedal to the metal" in order to make a really good show. Immediately, the little boy cringed in terror and threw his arms around his father's neck pleading, "Daddy, make them stop the spooky music!"

In May of 2005 before starting here, I received an email from a member of Newark UMC. The content was basically, "When can we start a contemporary worship service?" In my mind, I am thinking fall of 2006 or later. After arriving here it became apparent that was not soon enough. SonSpirit started January 2006. There were people willing to make it happen.

In June of 2005, a member talked to me about Congregational Care Team. I'm thinking I would really like a year at the church before starting new ministries. After arriving it became clear that a year was too long. Congregational Care Team is going strong, thanks to the people who are willing to be part of this important ministry.

What I am saying is that we must learn to be flexible, adaptable, and quick responders. As a common vision comes to Newark, we can give permission for small ministry teams quickly. We will learn to let ministries end naturally when leadership is no longer present. Those who are using their gifts in a ministry about which they are passionate will staff the teams.

This past year we, the staff and team leaders, have begun to strengthen overall cohesiveness. We have meet together for getting the "big picture." We have lifted up the importance of stewardship, especially as it relates to our membership vows of prayers, presence, gifts and service. Notice that the membership list is an "and" list not an "or" list. Every member is expected to contribute through all four categories. We have tried to make the budget transparent so all can see how we are in ministry.

Jim and I

Professional Goals for this current appointment year

Jim: Continue to work with the Homelessness Coalition, Develop contacts into the local community, start a Taizé worship service.

David: Continue to work in strengthening the stewardship of the church, Lead the church through the Natural Church Development, and to work on a Doctor of Ministry in Preaching.

Here we go!

Several years ago, in Darlington, Maryland, a mother of eight walked into the house and found five of her youngest children huddled together, concentrating with intense interest on something. As she slipped near them, trying to discover the center of attraction, she could not believe her eyes. Smack dab in the middle of the circle were five baby skunks. She screamed at the top of her voice, "Children! Run!" Where upon, each child grabbed a skunk and ran. What I am about to say may sound a lot like "Run, children, run!" But let's be sure to leave our smelly skunks behind as we move into God's future.

Here we go! Funding! Newark UMC should be running a budget of 1.5 million dollars. We are currently at 800 thousands dollars. I can hear your thoughts. "No way can we support a million and a half dollar

budget.” Yes and no. That is true with our current giving patterns. I happen to believe that God has bigger desires for us. There is a voice on Church Council that speaks up every so often. It normally is heard in this order. We will hear how we are managing to spend under our budget. Comments are made about trying to see how little we can spend this year. Then the voice comes in, something like this. “Maybe not spending our budget in full means that we are not doing the ministry that God desires of us.”

This church, in order to be great needs to cultivate, nurture, teach, educate, instruct, and develop healthy stewardship. We need to identify church benefactors, those with the spiritual gift of giving, who can give in significant ways for emerging ministry and building needs. We need to develop the understanding that we give so that God can be recognized and not us. I do not believe in memorial and honoring plaques for gifts given. It’s not about us! We need to develop a true unified budget and not accept designated gifts if they do not fit with our present goals and needs. And when they are accepted, the giver needs to be told that if the amount given is over what we have budgeted for, the excess will be used for other ministry needs.

Do you realize there are churches our size and larger that are running budgets significantly large than we do and they don’t worry about money. Some of them even have to scramble after the annual pledge drive to decide how to spend the excess financial commitments.

Here we go! Building needs! Listen carefully to the next three words. “Renewing Our Foundation.” The trustees are working on a capital campaign called renewing our foundation. They are planning to have all the systems of the physical plant evaluated, a master plan drawn up, and then present to the congregation a challenge to step up to renew our foundation. Why? First because many systems have not had the attention they need. Second, they need a good assessment to determine what is REALLY the highest priority. This means renovation bathrooms may not be first on the list, even though that sure would be nice. Thirdly, they are looking to renew our foundations because I have challenge them to get this current physical plant in good shape in the next five years so that we will be ready for what God desires for Newark UMC. I believe that if we are faithful to God’s spirit working in our midst we will be ready for a MAJOR capital program.

If we are going to be a great church, we must be keeping our house in order so that we are ready for where God leads us. Currently we are land locked. We have options before us. We can do nothing and plan for nothing, thinking this physical plant for our ministry is all we need. Or we can start today, having the conviction that God is going to do something great with us which will require a change. Maybe we will be lead to add a major addition to the back of the church as someone proposed as an idea. Maybe we will be lead to develop a second campus nearby. Or maybe we will be lead to birth a new church, offering up resources, people and funds to see new life.

Here we go! Diversity! We need to openly embrace diversity. We can start by recognizing different kinds of diversity; racial, nationality, family, sexual orientation, economic, theological, and others. **Diversity can lead to either a splintering of the community - or a binding together of the body of Christ. I believe that Newark UMC can be a body of Christ with even greater diversity that we enjoy today.**

One ministry program that could help us achieve great diversity is called; World Café. The book that talks about this process is subtitled: Shaping Our Futures Through Conversations that Matter. That was what was partially attempted through the Community Building Initiative last fall. This program can help us to talk openly and honestly with each other while still embracing one another as brothers and sisters in Christ and being willing to work together under the name of Newark UMC.

For Paul the distinctiveness of the Christian life was not in nit-picking doctrinal beliefs or punishing wrong doings, but living together with diversity and being loving and gracious while doing so. It was the early church's way of life that attracted so many into the faith not a set of beliefs. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul ends the great chapter on diverse gifts in the church with the words; "And I will show you a still more excellent way." He then moves on to the chapter on love. In our text today he says we are: *[12] to train Christians in skilled servant work, working within Christ's body, the church, [13] until we're all moving rhythmically and easily with each other, efficient and graceful in response to God's Son, fully mature adults, fully developed within and without, fully alive like Christ. [14] No prolonged infancies among us, please.*

Here we go! Ministry Needs! We are currently in a process to assess our strength and weakness as a whole church system. In fact, we have just received our first results. We are using a process called:

"Unleash All of the Potential of the Spiritual Gifts of the Congregation
to Achieve God's Vision and Mission for NUMC"
(Mission statement of the Vision Team)

"Natural Church Development." *"Oh no! Another external program that tells us what we are doing wrong and what we need to be doing."* No. This is a process of assessment; finding the right passionate people for a particular ministry area, strategize how we think we could improve, implement what we have developed, and then assess again to see how we have done.

Natural Church Development has identified eight vital characteristics of healthy and fruitful churches. Let me briefly share them with you.

Empowering Leadership- "Empowered leadership" could imply that there is one ingenious, multi-talented leader with great vision, who needs volunteers to help him turn his vision into reality. "Empowering Leadership - They equip, support, motivate, and mentor individuals to become all that God wants them to be. Some of these individuals may even be led in a different direction than their leaders. Empowering leaders can rejoice about such a situation with all their heart because they know that God has a unique calling for every individual."

Gift-Oriented Ministry - "God has already determined who should assume each ministry within the church. The role of the leadership is to help its members identify their gifts and find or create ministries that match them. When you live in harmony with your spiritual gifting, you are no longer ministering in your own strength, but the Holy Spirit is working in you. Thus, even though you may be an ordinary person you can accomplish extraordinary things."

Passionate Spirituality - "As far as church growth is concerned, our research indicates that the important thing is not a church's style, but the degree to which faith is actually lived out with commitment,

passion, and enthusiasm. Word-based, Spirit-directed, World-focused. The secret is to strive for a radical development in all three directions: fully Bible-centered, fully Spirit-filled, and fully ‘worldly.’”

Functional Structures - “The most important criterion for church structures is the degree to which they fulfill their purpose. Whatever doesn't measure up to this requirement (e.g. demeaning leadership patterns, inconvenient worship service times, or programs that are not effectively reaching their intended audience) should be changed or laid to rest. Through this process of constant renewal, traditionalistic ruts can be avoided to a large extent.”

Inspiring Worship - “The question is not whether a worship service targets believers or non-believers; whether it is loaded with Christian symbolism or strives to radiate a secular, business-like atmosphere; whether the worship follows a formal or a more free-flowing style. The key criterion is something else: Is the worship service an inspiring experience for those who attend? It is this aspect that clearly distinguishes growing churches from non-growing ones. And since different people experience different forms of worship as "inspiring," there is no right or wrong when it comes to the various models of worship services. We need different churches with different styles to minister to the large mosaic of different people that makes up today's world.”

Holistic Small Groups - “Growing churches have developed a system of small groups where individual believers can find intimate community, practical help, and intense spiritual interaction. In these groups, people not only discuss biblical texts and listen to their leader's interesting explanations, but they apply biblical insights to the questions the participants have about everyday life issues.

Need-Oriented Evangelism - “There are some people who feel evangelism works best when you push people to commit their lives to Christ. Some don't even shy away from manipulative methods to reach this goal. Since this image of "effective evangelism" is so widespread, it is no wonder that many Christians feel a strange sensation in their stomach when they hear the word ‘evangelism.’ Of course, they want people to find a personal relationship with Christ. But what they don't want is to copy these pushy methods that have been inseparably connected to the term ‘evangelism.’ (The) secret is to share the gospel in a way that answers the questions and meets the needs of non-believers.”

Loving Relationships - “Authentic love endows a church with a much greater magnetic power than all the marketing efforts in the world. At best, marketing the church can be compared to artificial flowers: they may look real, but they have no fragrance. Real love, however, spreads that mysterious scent that few can resist.”

Churches work on strengthening the weakest are while striving to maintain the strengths. NCD has found that as churches develop all eight vital characteristics they become healthy in God and robust in love. Gee! That sounds familiar!

I believe that Newark United Methodist Church is a lumbering giant, full of untapped potential!

Christ keeps us in step with each other. His very breath and blood flow through us, nourishing us so that we will grow up healthy in God, robust in love. Ephesians 4:16

The How

Far away there in the sunshine are my highest aspirations. I may not reach them, but I can look up and see their beauty, believe in them, and try to follow where they lead. Louisa May Alcott

Kent Ira Groff, in his book entitled: The Soul of Tomorrow's Church: Weaving Spiritual Practices in Ministry Together talks about the current crisis of churches today.

“The new crisis I see is this: Ministry itself is getting in the way of re-presenting Christ in the world. It is a desperate call to restore the soul of the church. When I speak of soul, I am lifting up three positive qualities related to serious needs of the church:

Integrity – We illustrate this crisis of integrity when we talk love while speak despairingly of others. The soul of ministry together is about practicing what we teach. Embodiment.

Passion – Doing it with passion. Leaders and seekers confess that church is often boring, lacking energy, like salt that has lost its taste. In words reminiscent of Kierkegaard, this age will die, not from sin but from lack of passion. But passion also means suffering. To discover the passion of Christ in church structures will be as painful as old wine skins burst on their way to restoring the integrity and joy of soul.

Wholeness - John Donne's "Anatomy of the World", 1611, that begins with those famously foreboding words, "T'is all in peeces, All coherence gone;" The soul of ministry is about healing personal and social fragmentation, finding simplicity in complexity, it is about defragmenting, as when my computer reunifies scattered information.

Integrity. Passion. Wholeness. What would happen if these became “core values” of our life together? I believe we would be living with a Great Commission Orientation. First, people would not call us hypocrites. They would see and experience people who lived what they said they believed. We would not be inviting people to our church; we would be going out to them. Coming to church would be about getting equipped for our passion, a particular ministry in the world. Our going out would be about equipping people for life. Helping them find wholeness. Interesting word, wholeness, in Greek, the word that can be translated as wholeness can also be translated as wellness, which is also translated as being saved.

A Great Commission Orientation would prod us into good questions for our ministry

- Who are our neighbors? Take this literally. Who lives next door, down the street, across the back lot and around the corner? Just as importantly, do they know you?
- Where do our teen-age kids hang out? If it's at a nearby mall, the church should have a presence there. If it's in a local park, the church should have a presence there.
- Where is the greatest number of third-age (55-75) people concentrated in your community? Is it in a certain neighborhood, or an apartment complex, or an organized "community" for seniors? Do they need their lawns mowed, chores done, a "gofer" they can depend on?

Hospitality - Being "friendly," in case you've forgotten, means extending yourself, going out of your way, showing interest in others and their interests, even when they're not interested in you. Being "seeker-friendly" often means that you become the seeker -- moving out from behind church structure and facilities and into the community.

Here we are! Here we go!

I hope to have many years here. But more importantly, I hope that my ministry will help this church move from being a good church to a healthy, vital, fruitful congregation. To that end I will strive.

One of my strengths is being futuristic. Seeing what can be. Looking at the aspirations high above that God sets out. It can also be a weakness for me. So let me end with one more story.

Dr. David McKechnie is pastor of the largest Presbyterian Church in Houston. One Sunday afternoon, he and his wife Linda were late for a luncheon, so he started pressing the pedal to the metal, as the saying goes. Soon he heard a siren behind him, and he pulled off to the side of the road.

"Are you familiar with the speed limit in this area?" the officer said through the window.

"Yes, sir, I am," replied McKechnie.

"What is it?" the officer demanded.

"Thirty miles per hour."

The officer said, "May I see your driver's license?"

McKechnie reached into his billfold and pulled out the driver's license and the insurance certificate for good measure. Since the car was leased for Dr. McKechnie by his church, the owner's name on the insurance papers was Grace Presbyterian Church.

Seeing this, the officer asked, "What do you do for a living?"

"Normally, I'm delighted to answer that question. But in this case, I'm embarrassed to say I'm the pastor of Grace Presbyterian Church."

The officer quickly answered: "Reverend, there must be a parable here somewhere."

McKechnie answered: "I'm sure there is."

To that the officer said, "How about 'we can't have the shepherd outrunning the flock?'"

I will try to stay with you, and not outrun the flock. All I ask is that you join me on this journey and not keep your cars parked. God has moved in this congregation through the centuries. God is moving in this congregation today! Let us run and dance with God as we become robust with love.

Amen.