

United Church of Fayetteville
310 E. Genesee Street
Fayetteville, NY 13066

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For Reflection:

"It can be said that the church does not have a mission, it is mission."

John H. Westerhoff III

RENEWED IN THE SPIRIT: ACQUIRING SATELLITES
(Isa. 58: 2, 6-9a; Lk. 4:16-20)

As we explore what's in our closets at UCF, this sermon series is attempting to illuminate the realities of being the Church in a changing world, the large and wide vision of UCF, and its members' commitment and generosity, -- as well as the complexities of life together, and the intense and prayer-filled conversations of the Board over the last year. Even if sermons were twice as long, and the volume of documents increased, there would be questions and details yet to emerge.

None-the-less, before turning to this week's mission closet, I'd like to respond to a question that arose last week: "Why does a vital congregation reduce its budget?" At the risk of mixing metaphors, a congregation goes on a fiscal diet for the same reason a person goes on a physical diet -- to improve its current quality of life, to gain energy and enjoyment, and perhaps most importantly to extend its healthy life far into the future. It's not about dying; it's about living a longer happier life. Like a physical diet, it takes discipline and change, but is understood to be a short-term sacrifice with long-term gain.

The other important thing to know, is that the Board took a realistic look at what UCF can expect her membership to give and what are the limits on increased giving. The budget reflects hope and expectation that pledges and committed giving will continue at current levels with gratitude increases, rather than increasingly sacrificial offerings on the part of our current membership. The budget's reduction in projected income comes from: necessarily conservative estimates of interest income; discontinuation of fund raisers for budget balancing; the absence of last year's \$11000 special offering; and anticipated adjustments because of those who have moved or will be moving away. The Board felt it would be unreasonable to ask current membership to make up those differences through their pledged giving. They budgeted accordingly.

But, and this is probably the most important "**but**" in the entire sermon series -- this budget reflects not the Board's vision for the future of UCF. Rather a necessary first step in moving toward a vision of indeed greater health and vitality. The next step is looking in our mission closet. We'll find both affirmation and change already at work in our midst.

You don't need me to tell you of UCF's abiding interest in issues of social concern -- reflected in its involvement in abolition, women's rights, hunger ministries, refugee resettlement and inclusion of those with disabilities, or others often outside the circle of Church hospitality. Through our adult education programs and a variety of special offerings, we respond to natural disasters; CROP Walk serves the hungry in the nation; and the Food Pantry, those in need locally. We provide funds for peace making efforts and support fair trade practices for workers and care for the environment around the world. Mostly, we do that through informed voting, other decision making and with our dollars. Those are extraordinarily important and valuable. They also leave something to be desired.

One thing that should not be underestimated, is that there is very little psychic income, (i.e. emotional reward) provided by check-writing and listening or reading. They provide little or no concrete experience of serving. For example, while I understand the efficiencies of scale in food pantries doing the purchasing, there is a big difference between letting a child bring in a few pennies, or regularly choose a can of food for someone who is hungry (or deciding what someone can eat who has neither a can opener nor a kitchen.) There is a big difference between writing a check and going through the grocery store, buying “one-for-us, one-for-someone else” as Thanksgiving approaches.

Check writing and education require little or no interaction with the people with whom we serve -- as methods they do not provide for relationship building. Two activities people still talk about as being fun and helping them get to know others are putting insulation in Jubilee House and scraping mold out of the choir space. (Folks, let me tell you, if you have fun doing those things, there is way more fun in ministry awaiting you.) Those were good and important things - concrete examples of activities people can do together. They also happened to be things we did here at home.

--Which brings us to the third limitation of our predominate forms of mission – they do not bring us into contact with our neighbors. We don’t get to know them or they, us. We know the transforming benefits for neighbors and church alike when we listen to our youth talk about their mission experience. We heard adults who were transformed not only by their contact with neighbors, but by youth with whom they served. Making special offerings and education the predominate forms of our mission, deprives us of those joys and allows us to be accidental tourists of mission work, never leaving the comforts of home.

Like many of you, I have a GPS system. Whenever I turn on the car, before I can type a destination, the screen messages me that it’s “Acquiring Satellites”. The system has an interesting limitation. No matter how long I sit in the garage waiting, it cannot acquire a satellite. To get guidance from above and move toward a destination, I have to leave the garage. The church is like that. We can be sent forth from this place to do mission, but we can’t do it all in here.

The Board realized that we need to be moving among our neighbors to acquire the satellites for living and serving in God’s ever-evolving world. We, who are called to serve the world, especially a changing world, need to be in it more. We need to be in it more as a church. We navigate the world in our daily lives, liking some changes, not others, but nonetheless, adapt our lives to it – to our benefit and the benefit of our households. Yet, somehow we often forget, that it is through that same regular interaction with our world that UCF will hone and prioritize its vision for service; get to know our neighbors and they, us; build relationships and have fun in ministry. These are skills we have. We just haven’t used them much lately.

So, through the Mission Committee, we’re tweaking our model of service, and the budget provides some small portion of seed money for our moving into the world, acquiring satellites. Mission work is not for youth alone, nor need it require a week’s vacation or a summer out of school, or even extraordinary fundraising efforts. Everyone can do it. Kevin has already talked about the help we need for redoing one room in the Food Pantry, as a starter project. We need help sorting and delivering the clothes we’re collecting for our neighbors in Syracuse. It can be done on your own schedule – if you are having a meeting, spend half an hour talking and sorting. It will be done in no time.

We’re committed to finding projects appropriate to our size that do not require long-term commitments, so that our neighbors might be served and all of our lives and spirits are enriched without us feeling overwhelmed. There is something else about this kind of outreach to the community that is critically important, and especially important to UCF as we look toward the future. As Christians, we are called to serve the world. We are not called to grow the church. But a curious thing happens when the church is serving the world. More often than not, it grows. Mission is the new evangelism and is especially critical in a diverse world and for a

liberal community that is uncomfortable talking about its faith, uncertain of its welcome. We can be assured service is welcome, relationships of depth and breadth are welcome and people having fun together is welcome and needed in an increasingly grim world.

We have great stuff happening inside these walls, but no one will know unless we tell them about it or show them or give them a reason to come in here. Such mission involves not only doing different things, but doing some of the things we already do differently. Today, for the first time, as far as I know, when UCF-ers walk in the CROP Walk, they'll be walking together under a banner that says where we're from. Laughing, talking, comparing blisters and if someone asks, "Where is UCF?" "It's the church with the tall brick steeple." That's evangelism.

We have a two week event here beginning tomorrow night about creating a healthy environment for our children and our community, making people safe from emotional abuse. How many of us have handed the brochure to a fellow teacher, to a neighboring parent, to a neighbor we don't even know, saying "I see you have children in school and thought this might be of interest to you?" In that simple act we have done two things: We've indicated that we are people who notice those around us, have an interest in what their needs might be, and have subtly communicated that our congregation cares about the community. That's evangelism.

How many folk doing Dinner with Friends are intending to invite a neighbor or co-worker to dinner where they can simply meet other people? That's evangelism, ladies and gentlemen, and it doesn't hurt or embarrass. It's evangelism that does recognize the universal human need for relationship and for service to others – that an extraordinary number of people have something to give and ache for the need of giving it. It recognizes our neighbors may be in need of what we have here, without being in the least bit judgmental about how they live their lives.

So, through its look in our Mission closet, the Board has determined gentle means to acquire the satellites to guide us through the years ahead, connecting with our community in new and old ways, enriching our relationships and stabilizing or growing our membership. It's looking for other ideas, for thinking outside the walls and for people who want to make something happen. It's looking for flexibility, a sense of humor, a willingness to try something, and an understanding that we're not starting the first annual anything. It's a chance to be playful and experimental for the sake of Christ and our congregation.

And, undoubtedly, just like the GPS system, which utters the annoying word, "recalculating", when we've gone off course, we'll also do further tweaking to keep us moving ever toward God and God's world in Christ's service. In such ways, we will be renewed in the Spirit – the Spirit of God that guides and refreshes, lifts us up on the wings of hope and carries us into a new day.