

November 22, 2009

State of the Congregation 2009

Pastor Mike Cook

Fifteen new members, Charles and Dolores Decker, Marion and Jon Garletts, Anne and Jonathon Hutchings, Cameron and Martin Peek, Earl and Bonnie Simpson, Ernie and Peggy Winn, Lucille Walden, Effie Ward and Dani Shelley, along with those who have come forward today, have joined the church since the Thanksgiving Service of last year.

This is largely thanks to all of you, who amazingly give so much of your time, talent and treasure to the ministry of Jesus Christ at Philippi. It is also due to our wonderful leaders, our elders, deacons, committee chairs and officers.

This year, we have said goodbye to members Bob Johnson, Charles Watson and Edwin Wilson as they have gone on to heaven. Helen Ray and Bobbie Johnson, both long-time and well-loved members, have found it necessary to move away and be closer to their extended families.

For the first time in the four years I've served with you, our average worship attendance for 2009 has declined by about 4 percent. By this time last year, our average worship attendance had been 106. This year so far, from January to the end of October, our average worship attendance has been 100. Of course, if a whole lot of people come to church in December, that might change.

Worship attendance statistics are not the only important measure of a church's health, but they are worth paying attention to. It is true that Philippi has rarely in its history averaged much more than 100 in worship per Sunday. It is true that the economy has played a role in the numbers of new people moving into Deltaville and the decline in the general sense of happiness and prosperity. It is true also that an older congregation experiences what I call "aging out," that is, as member grow older and more and more health-related issues arise, their involvement in the church declines.

Another part of the setbacks has to do with the changing nature of our congregation. In the last four years we have changed significantly. About half of our regular worship attendees are new to our congregation, new to the Disciples tradition, and some are even new to the Christian faith. Building relationships casually and informally has been the tradition at Philippi in the past, but that method takes a long time. We have struggled to intentionally connect new members to the congregation.

In reviewing the goals I set for myself last year, I have discovered that I have achieved few of them. In assessing my ministry, I would say that I have been pushing too hard toward the

vision I had last year. In addition, my focus on the ministries of our leaders has left me little time for the development of our new members.

Nevertheless, we have made much progress. The vision team has been doing real and important work this past year and I expect in this coming year it will bring an inspiring and energizing vision for Philippi's future. I am not entirely sure what they will be suggesting, but part of it will be a more gradual and carefully planned movement toward the future.

Some of our leadership development work has paid off in greater accountability, greater transparency, and more direct involvement by the members of the church in its ministry. We are going into this New Year with a group of better-supported leaders and with a budget that is well-considered, carefully-planned and easier to read and understand. We are moving away from a business model of church organization toward a mission-and-ministry model. Our Men's and Women's groups are flourishing. We have had ministries in the past year that were great successes.

I am continuing to grow in unexpected ways. I know that growth and change in the pastor can have different effects on different members. Some will be excited and pleased and others may find it disconcerting. I grow in very large part because I am privileged to pursue my relationship with Christ among you. You have criticized me, encouraged me, supported me and challenged me, and I believe through you, the risen Lord is transforming me.

I will be giving some time in the coming year to developing our ecumenical connections in Middlesex County, with a particular focus on our collective response to poverty in our county. In addition, the Virginia Region has asked me to serve on the Commission for Licensed Ministry to oversee and support lay ministers serving in special calls throughout the region. I will also be serving on the Region's Stewardship and Mission Committee to help our Virginia congregations more deeply commit themselves to effectively sharing resources and ministries in service to Christ.

I am also committed in the coming year to seeking out guidance and training toward improving my skills in relating to people under fifty, and in a wider variety of teaching methods to more effectively meet the diverse learning styles in our congregation.

In the coming year, my goal is to reduce my involvement in the administration of the church's ministries, trusting Christ to continue to grow and develop our leaders and trusting them to be accountable to him, and to all of us, for their work in his name. I hope to free time to give more focus to what I think is the greatest need in our congregation, a focus on our identity as disciples of Jesus Christ. In the vision team's survey of our congregation, we discovered that most of you, thankfully, see spiritual growth as your most important need. I plan to focus my efforts in the coming year on meeting that need.

I believe that our denomination, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), is the best kept secret in North America. Who we are as a denomination, and what we stand for as a denomination, is in my view exactly what thousands, if not millions, of spiritual seekers in our part of the world are looking for: a Christian community guided not by any human authority save Jesus Christ as he is discerned in Holy Scripture, and a church in which one can think for oneself and at the same time be loved and accepted.

Over the next few years, I hope to lead us in reclaiming our identity as a member congregation of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). I'd like to begin this journey today, by reading our General Church's identity statement, along with the twelve principles supporting it:

We are Disciples of Christ, a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. As part of the one body of Christ, we welcome all to the Lord's Table as God has welcomed us.

1. We confess that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, and proclaim him Lord and Savior of the world, requiring nothing more - and nothing less - as a basis of our life together.
2. We hold the centrality of scripture, recognizing that each person has the freedom - and the responsibility - to study God's Word within the community of the church.
3. We practice the baptism of believers, which emphasizes that God's grace demands a response of faith and discipleship, while also recognizing the baptism performed in other churches.
4. We gather for the Lord's Supper, as often as possible, experiencing at this table the gracious, forgiving presence of Jesus Christ.
5. We structure our community around the biblical idea of covenant, emphasizing not obedience to human authority but accountability to one another because of our shared obedience to Christ.
6. We participate in God's mission for the world, working with partners to heal the brokenness of creation and bring justice and peace to the whole human family.
7. We hear a special calling to make visible the unity of all Christians, proclaiming that in our diversity we belong to one another because we commonly belong to Christ.
8. We witness to the Gospel of God's saving love for the world in Jesus Christ, while continuing to struggle with how God's love may be known to others in different ways.
9. We affirm the priesthood of all believers, rejoicing in the gifts of the Holy Spirit - which include the gift of leadership - that God has given for the common good.

10. We celebrate the diversity of our common life, affirming our different histories, styles of worship, and forms of service.
11. We give thanks that each congregation, where Christ is present through faith, is truly the church, affirming as well that God's church and God's mission stretch from our doorsteps to the ends of the earth.
12. We anticipate God's coming reign, seeking to serve the God - Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer - whose loving dominion has no end.

We are a strong and healthy congregation. Among Disciples congregations in our size range, we are fastest growing Disciples church in Virginia, and in the top ten percent of Disciples congregations in the country. We have experienced some strain and stress in this past year, but I believe we have rounded some important corners and made some significant advances. I continue to see a bright future ahead.

At the same time, I am coming increasingly to believe that the while the health of a congregation is in part measured by its numbers, it must also be measured by the spiritual maturity of those who lead it and the clarity of its focus on the mission of Christ.

May God bless Philippi, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), and the whole church on earth.