

**STATE OF THE CHURCH ADDRESS
FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
2005**

“Don’t lose a minute in building on what you’ve been given, complementing your basic faith with good character, spiritual understanding, alert discipline, passionate patience, reverent wonder, warm friendliness and generous love.” (2 Peter 1:5)

Who would have thought 9 years ago, I’d still be sharing with you my perceptions of the state of our church? Those years have gone quickly. In the past I have spent time discussing my understanding of where we are as a church, and some of where I think we are headed. I have a bit different purpose today that I’ll explain in a minute.

For the record, I believe the state of FUMC to be quite healthy. We are certainly not without our problems and challenges, but for the most part I think we are really doing quite well. A couple examples;

#1. Our financial picture is solid. We continue to see God bless our efforts at being faithful. A number of you have accepted God’s call to begin or even expand your tithing, and that is key. We still have a significant number of folks who contribute nothing to God through the church, and we have some who are not yet able to do all they would like to help the cause.

#2. Our Children’s and Youth ministries continue to evidence growth, both in numbers of participants, number of leaders, and in what we offer our young people spiritually. The UMW are consistently fulfilling their missions, and many other groups do too.

#3. I am most excited to share with you the expanding college and career age ministry groups that have developed this past year. Largely through the efforts of some of our own trained young people, returning from college, we have seen the effect and will continue to be used to minister to those 18-28 year olds. I am excited about this new effort.

#4. I think one of the best ministries we provide and are even now expanding, are the dinner groups. I think they are a great way for a large church like ours to stay connected. I hope each of you might sign up for a group, and get to know some new people from your church.

Here are a few challenges in front of us:

#1. Our worship attendance has remained relatively flat for the past three years, and I'd like to see that reversed. I know I don't know the reason for this, probably isn't one, but a combination. I believe we offer 3 good worship options for people who prefer different styles, and we attempt to do them all with excellence.

#2. Our membership numbers have declined. I'm not as concerned about this as I am worship, but it needs to be noted. We have made a more intentional effort to responsibly maintain our rolls, which has led to the removal of a number of inactive folks in recent years, but our biggest challenge is that it still takes about 3 new members to actually gain one; with the deaths and transfers we naturally incur each year.

#3. We have some space issues. We have done pretty well learning to share space, and we've gotten pretty creative, programming for effective ministry. More will likely be required.

And here are a few opportunities that are also in front of us:

#1. With the success of the Capital Fund Drive to pay off the debt on the land, and with the outstanding balance now below \$60,000, it reminds us that we need to continue to discern God's Will for our future development there. The Vision Task Force that conducted the survey last spring will continue its work to help in the discerning process. As always your input and discernment are appreciated and important.

#2. I'm not sure how to say this, but I think we have to change a bit how we have been thinking. We speak often of reaching our neighbors, and serving God's world, but I want to highlight a couple ways we are doing that, and probably don't think much about it and...probably should!

Our simple TV ministry continues to amaze me, with the number of people who watch it with some regularity, and speak of its effect on their lives. There are currently about 25,000 Cable subscribers in the Bismarck/Mandan area. I am also amazed at the potential our Web site has to reach people all over the world. 2000+ visits a week, with 100+ outside the US, blows me away. Maybe we should be giving more priority to these two ministries. That doesn't mean we abandon any of our current efforts, just try to be faithful to places where God seems to be using us, and we may not even notice. Our unique stance as an Evangelical, Protestant, Mainline church distinguishes us, and can help us to reach people who are looking for a relationship with Jesus.

So, that's a bit of our state. I want to focus the rest of my minutes with you around our purpose statement, our mission statement: Lets read it together:

"We are a church of Jesus Christ, that invites all people to:

-encounter God

-love each other

-deepen our faith

-reach our neighbors

-serve God's world."

This morning I want to personalize this statement. In previous State of the Church addresses we have discussed it at some length regarding our church; I want to help us think about it personally. Maybe you have ceased making resolutions for the New Year, but I want to challenge us to think about adding these to our lives.

My purpose is two-fold: I believe the church is never any stronger than its members, so strengthening our lives will strengthen our church, and secondly; the more we fulfill God's purpose individually, the more faithful will our church become, and that's the state we'd all like to be in!

FIVE GREAT LIFE QUESTIONS;

1. WHAT WILL BE THE CENTER OF MY LIFE?

This is the question of Worship. Who are you going to live for? What are you going to build your life around? You can center your life around your career, your family, a sport or hobby, money, having fun, or many other activities. These are all good things, but they don't belong at the center of our life. None is strong enough to hold you together when life starts breaking apart. We need an unshakable center.

King Asa told the people of Judah to '*center their lives in God.*' (2 Chronicles 14:4) Actually, whatever is at the center of your life is your god. When you committed your life to Christ, he moved into the center, but you must keep him there through worship. This is not just an appeal to attend church more, but a question to help you think about what is utterly important in your life.

How do you know when God is at the center of your life? When God's at the center, you worship. When He's not, you worry. Worry is the warning light that God has been shoved to the sideline. The moment you put him back at the center, you will have peace again. The Bible says, "*A sense of God's wholeness...will come and settle you down. It's wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the center of your life.*" (Phil. 4:7)

2. WHAT WILL BE THE COMMUNITY OF MY LIFE?

This is the question of Fellowship. How will you demonstrate your commitment to other believers and your connection to the family of God?

We can enjoy fellowship on Sunday morning during and between worship services, but that is not all fellowship means. The Bible says, *“Christ loves the church and gave his life for it.”* (Eph. 5:25) Part of fellowship is being willing to know other believers, intimately, and being willing to sacrifice part of our lives for others well-being. That’s why we give to people half-a world away, that we’ll never meet!

For the most part, people here at FUMC, really do love each other. You are a gracious bunch. I hope that each of you who desire’s to be connected to a small group has one, and if not, please let me help you find one!

3. WHAT WILL BE THE CHARACTER OF MY LIFE?

This is the question of discipleship. What kind of person will you be? God is far more interested in what you are than what you do. Remember, you will take your character into eternity, but not your career. Maybe this year’s resolutions should include a list of the character qualities you want to work on and develop in your life. You might begin with the fruit of the Spirit, for example, or the beatitudes.

Peter said, *“Don’t lose a minute in building on what you’ve been given, complementing your basic faith with good character, spiritual understanding, alert discipline, passionate patience, reverent wonder, warm friendliness and generous love.”* (2 Peter 1:5) All five of our purposes are mentioned in that one verse!

It takes a lifetime to build Christ like character. Don’t get discouraged and give up when you stumble. Paul told Timothy, *“Keep a firm grasp on both your character and your teaching. Don’t be diverted. Just keep at it.”* (1Tim. 4:16)

4. WHAT WILL BE THE COMMUNICATION OF MY LIFE?

This is the question of our mission to unbelievers. Part of our life purpose is to share the Good News with those who have yet to discover the Love of God. Our life lessons, our divinely inspired passions, and our natural interests will help reveal how and to whom God would have us communicate this Good News.

If you are a parent, part of your communication mission is to raise your children to know Christ, to help them understand His purposes for their lives, and to send them out on their own mission to the world.

Of course, our lives must support and validate the message we communicate. Before most unbelievers accept the Bible as credible they want to know that we are credible. That is why the Bible says. *“Be sure that you live in a way that brings honor to the Good News of Christ.”* (Phil. 1:27)

5. WHAT WILL BE THE CONTRIBUTION OF MY LIFE?

This is the question of service. Most of us at the end of our lives want to know what we did that mattered, my question; why wait till the end? What will be our ministry in the Body of Christ, in our community, or in the larger world? Knowing the combination of your SHAPE; spiritual gifts, heart passions, abilities, personality and experiences, what would be your best role in the family of God, or in the Kingdom of God? Paul pointed out two wonderful benefits when you fulfill your ministry: *“This service you perform not only meets the needs of God’s people, but also produces an outpouring of gratitude to God.”* (2 Cor. 9:12)

While you are shaped to serve others, even Jesus didn’t meet the needs of everyone while on earth. You have to choose whom you can best help, based on your shape. You need to ask, ‘Who do I have a desire to help most?’ Jesus said, *“I commissioned you to go out and to bear fruit, fruit that will last.”* (John 15:16) Each of us bears different fruit, but all of us bear fruit. I hope that each of you are fulfilling the call God has placed on your life. If you are still seeking that place of service, maybe I can help.

In conclusion; we are a strong church, not without our own unique challenges and opportunities, but God has been faithful to us, probably beyond what we deserve, if we’d be honest. I hope 2005 is a great year for you personally, if it is, then I suspect it will also be for First United Methodist Church!

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This is the question of _____ *‘center your lives in God.’ 2 Chronicles 14:4*

2. WHAT WILL BE THE _____ OF MY LIFE?

This is the question of _____ *“Christ loves the church and gave his life for it.” Eph. 5:25*

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