

State of the Church Address, 2007

By

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Jeremiah 31:31-24

I don't know when I started doing this State of the Church Address. It was probably 15 years ago or so. I believe that every so often I ought to take the time to tell you how I think we're doing and more importantly, where I think we're going. My sense is that you folks are very much like stockholders in a corporation and in a sense you all own a piece of this congregation and its ministry.

I want to begin by telling you where I think we are. To do that I want to tell you about two things that happened recently. The first is the Halloween party that the Education Committee hosted a couple of weeks ago. My remembrance is that they have done this every year – but this one was the best. The party was held at the same time that the Hispanic church was holding worship – and I was afraid that we would bother them – but it worked out fine – I think both groups made enough noise to drown out what the other was doing.

What I'll remember is that we had 80 people at our party. Of that number a handful were “mature adults” like me. But the vast majority were our young families. Let me say this more plainly, the majority of the people present were young families who are members of this congregation. While lots of our sister churches are struggling to have any children or young adults at all – we seem to be doing pretty well.

Of course it's more than that because it was evident that the folks who attended the party really enjoyed being together. People talked and mingled and ate together. Babies were passed around. Parents helped children they probably didn't know with crafts. It was pretty cool. It was worth celebrating.

The second picture that I want to draw for you is actually a phone call that I received several months ago from the Chair of the Outreach Commission at St. Pius X Catholic Church. The Chairman wanted to ask a favor of me. It seems that he had heard me speak last May at the Town Hall meeting put on by the Washington County Coalition on Homelessness. At that meeting they had asked me to speak to the crowd about how it was that this congregation had been among the first to contribute to the fund for affordable housing.

I didn't know how it was that we were among the first to contribute to the fund, so I told them about you. I told them about the Food Pantry, and Habitat for Humanity. I told them about Smart Reading at Greenway Elementary. I told them about the Angel Tree project. I told them about our support of the Heifer project, collecting school supplies, fixing dinner at the Good Neighbor Shelter. I told them about the Special Needs Fund, our support of the Beaverton Area Emergency Fund. In other words, I stood up and bragged on you. Then I told them that I didn't know how we had gotten involved in so many things, but my suspicion was that somewhere along the line someone in the congregation must have read the 25<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel of Matthew and decided to take it seriously.

Well, back to the phone call. It seems that the Outreach Commission wanted me to come to their meeting and tell them how we can become such an active, generous congregation. I

explained that I was not responsible for that happening and didn't have anything to say. He insisted they needed my help – and so early in January our entire Outreach Committee is going to go to St. Pius X Catholic Church and to tell them how we became the church we are. I am eager to hear what the others say. What amazes me is that we evidently are getting quite the reputation. I think that's pretty cool.

Which is to say this. In the last 3 years the worship attendance of the United Methodist Church in the United States has declined by 150,000 people. Most mainline churches are struggling to stay afloat. But Murray Hills Christian Church seems to be going a different direction.

There are two basic statistics that preachers keep their eye on. The first is worship attendance, the second is income. In regards to the first, I thought it significant that there were 194 of us in worship on Youth Sunday. That's pretty good. What's more significant is that for most congregations an average of 200 in worship is a barrier which they can't get through. That's because churches that average more than 200 on Sunday are a different kind of church than those who average 175 and most churches just can't make the transition. My guess is that we're different. Unless I miss my guess we're about to break through that barrier.

In regards to the second statistic I would tell you that Sharon Jarmon presented me with a financial statement which showed that by the end of the year, you folks, us, will have contributed almost a half million dollars to the life and ministry of this congregation. All of our bills are paid. We were able this year to take on some expensive maintenance on the building. We have fulfilled our Outreach commitments giving away 13% of our General Fund income, along with very significant special offerings. Our Estimates of Giving have made it possible for the Board to present you with a proposed budget that is much healthier than last year.

In terms of statistics – I think we're doing pretty well.

But at the same time I want you to know that I believe there are two directions in which we need to go right now. The first is spirituality. You know, we Disciples are great thinkers. We love to read and think and discuss. Lots of Sundays I am drawn to the short reading on page 553, which is a quote from Ronald Osborn, a prominent leader in our denomination in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, who lived, up until his death in Eugene. He was a man that I enjoyed being with and whom I respected. The thing that strikes me about the reading is how he so accurately nails us as people who put a premium on rationality and faithfulness in action. That is exactly who we are – thinkers who believe in acting out our faith.

And that isn't bad, it's just incomplete. Last week I came across an article written by Diana Butler Bass in which she was commenting upon a recent conversation with Bill Hybels, the founding Pastor of the Willow Creek Church in Chicago. Willow Creek is the largest Protestant church in the United States with more than 16,000 people attending worship on any given weekend. Willow Creek has been so influential and successful that they several times a year they have put on workshops to train others how to replicate what they do. They have a publishing house that sells the hundreds of curriculums that they have developed.

But they have recently become aware that all is not well. So they did a self-study and came to an amazing conclusion. What they decided was that participation in church programs did not seem to affect relationships with God. What they found was that participation in their church programs did not seem to help people better “love God or neighbor.” In theological terms, Hybels was telling us that the Emperor has no clothes.

In reflection, Hybels remarked, he wished that he had taught people to be “self-feeders,” that they were responsible for their own spiritual development. He wished that he had taught people how to read the Bible for themselves, how to pray, and how to use the ancient spiritual disciplines.

You have no idea how good I felt reading Hybels incredibly courageous comments. You see, Hybels affirms what I believe. What I believe is that thinking about God is a very good thing that shapes and molds our faith – but that isn’t the best place to find life, energy, transformation and vision. We find those things best in our own experience of God. We find those things in hearing God’s voice for ourselves, feeling God’s presence for ourselves, experiencing God’s leading for ourselves. Thinking about God is fine, but experiencing God for ourselves is where we get the fuel for Christian service.

The scripture that I chose for this morning is one of my favorites. It’s part of sermon preached by the prophet Jeremiah in which, on God’s behalf, he paints a picture of what it is that God wants to do. Jeremiah paints a picture of a world in which the entire world is so transformed that no one has to be taught how to act or what to do – everyone just knows. And in this painting no one has to be taught how to connect with God – everyone is already connected. I think it’s interesting that in verse 34, Jeremiah says that everyone will “know” God for themselves. The word “know” in Hebrew is often the same word used for sexual intercourse. In other words it implies intimacy. That kind of intimacy isn’t developed just by thinking about God – but also by learning how to connect with God in other more personal and more intense ways.

Which is what I’d like to “gig” you about. I believe that as a church we need to become more a more a congregation of “self-feeders” who take more responsibility for our own spiritual lives, who know how to connect with God for ourselves.

The second direction in which I think we need to go is in becoming more missional. A couple of weeks ago Wayne Bartland stopped by my office to tell me about a conclusion he had come to. He came to tell me that he had decided that the mission of the church is to equip people in accepting their own ministry in the world. Now, you know Wayne. He is seldom radical, but that’s a fairly radical theological statement. It is also, I believe, absolutely correct.

Allow me again to apologize for the “number” that clergy have done to you over the last 2,000 years. We have taught you that our relationship with God is better than yours, that our ministry is more important than anything you can do, and that we have been called by God to do what we do while you have obviously not been called to do anything. By our special titles and special garments we have convinced you that we are the major players in the Kingdom of God and you are not. Which is all theological baloney.

The truth of the matter is that you are the folks who live and work and go to school on the front lines of God’s work in the world. I’m the one who lives and works within the safe shelter of the church. You are the folks who have the best chance of changing the world with God’s love – not me.

What Wayne was suggesting was that the church ought to be in the business of helping you to believe what I’ve just said. Wayne was suggesting that the church ought to be in the business of giving you the tools to live out your faith in the world. I have to admit that in saying that Wayne has tapped into my growing edge. It is my observation that in my lifetime the church has done a good job of teaching people how to use their gifts and opportunities within the church – but not a very good job of teaching people how to live and work outside the church. It

is my observation that in my lifetime the church has become expert at teaching people how to be good church people – but have done little to teach people how to be Christian in an unchristian world.

Which has gotten my wheels turning. Is that why so few of you are involved in Adult Christian Education – because it's not relevant to your lives? What would preparation for assuming your ministry in the world look like? Should we offer different Sunday School classes or are we talking about some kind of adult mentoring? Do people receive their training for assuming their mission in the world from some kind of class, or do we learn how to do mission by actually doing mission? I don't know.

But I believe that in the coming years you and I need to work on the answer to that question. You and I need to figure out how it is that this congregation can better prepare you and everyone else to help the dreams of God in the world. You and I need to figure out how we can help you change the world. I'm excited to see how this comes out.

All of which is to say this – Murray Hills Christian Church is a pretty wonderful place. This congregation is a positive, friendly place in which many of us find acceptance, love, support and opportunities for the service of God. More than most churches, this congregation is committed to making a difference in the world. In many ways, this congregation is the church that I've always wanted to serve. For so many things you and I need to be grateful for what this congregation is, what it does and what it means to us personally.

At the same time it is my gut-belief that this congregation is not done. We have not reached perfection. I believe that in the days and years to come, while we will always want to be a church that can think and talk about faith, we need to work on our ability to connect with God for ourselves. In the words of Bill Hybels we need to become more a congregation of "self-feeders" who assume responsibility for our own spiritual development.

And we need to work at becoming more missional. We need, I believe to figure out how to prepare ourselves for mission in the world. So that the dreams of God might come true.