

STEPPING FORWARD INTO AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

(02/23/2020)

Scripture Lessons: Ecclesiastes 3:14
Acts 5:17-42

“I know that whatever God does endures forever.” (Ecclesiastes 3:14)

“If this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them.” (Acts 5:38-39)

This afternoon, following our worship service and a luncheon provided by Women’s Fellowship, we will hold the 155th annual meeting in the history of this church. This morning, in place of a sermon, I will be sharing my (slightly revised) annual report with you. I know that my report appears in the printed annual reports, which some of you here this morning have already read, but for those of you who are reading this on-line or listening to the audio version, I would like you, too, to be cognizant of some of the serious challenges that lie before us as a church.

I begin my printed report by saying that this is the twenty-second time that I have written a Pastor’s Report for the Annual Reports of the First Community Church of Southborough, the twenty-second time that I have tried to look back over the year that has passed and discern where we as a church are heading in the year or years to come.

When I reflect on the past year, I celebrate the constant incarnation of our core identity as Christians. We are a community of faith. We find God in the faith that shapes our values, that frames our interactions. Many thoughtful, caring, loving, and compassionate acts took place in this little community this past year. We are open, accepting, welcoming, and affirming in our stance toward our members and everyone whose path crosses ours. We have found we can also be patient and forgiving with each other. We experience God in our fellowship.

We experience God in the richness and meaningfulness of our Sunday morning worship service and special services on Christmas Eve and Maundy Thursday. We embrace what would be called a traditional form of worship. We sing the “old time” hymns, most of which were written in the nineteenth century, not only because the tunes are familiar, but also because they articulate a depth of faith that resonates deep within us. The focus of our worship is sacred music, prayer, the sacraments, scripture, and the pastor’s reflection on the scripture. Do we really need more than this? Do we really need something different from this?

The depth of our life as a community finds expression at our legendary Sunday morning coffee hour where we are present to each other and to visitors who have graced us with their presence. It finds expression in the loving care of our building. It is evidenced in the work of boards and committees, in our support of missions, and in our involvement in the United Parishes ecumenical and interfaith gatherings. I would note that, in terms of percentage of membership, our church is generally overrepresented at the United Parishes Lenten series, the Thanksgiving service, and the Easter sunrise service, and I am the only pastor in Southborough who has participated in every single Easter sunrise service over the past twenty-two years.

We have a lot to celebrate in our little church! Our commitment to grow in the faith finds expression in our Sunday morning Bible study, which has been going on for far longer than I have been here. In this study-discussion group, we are slowly and steadily working our way through the Bible (emphasis on slowly). In our Tuesday afternoon Spiritual Exploration Reading Group over the past twenty-two years, we have read and discussed some of the works in theology, spirituality, Jungian psychology, and world religions that have been an important part of my own religious and spiritual formation. The commitment to spiritual growth through being exposed to new/ancient ideas and through respectful listening to one another is one of the high points in my week. There are times when there are almost as many people at our Tuesday study group as there are at Sunday worship.

David Crane constantly reminds us of our on-line outreach. He notes that over the past fifteen months, people all around our country and even around the world have listened to the audio version of my sermons 1,072 times. This does not include the number of sermons that people read on-line or downloaded and printed to read. Assuming that approximately the same number of people read the printed text of my sermons as listen to the audio versions, this means that approximately 50 people “out there” listen to my sermons every week--roughly triple the number who are present on a Sunday morning. David refers to this as the “thirteenth mission of our church,” the other twelve being the local, regional, national, and world missions we support each month. I find it deeply touching and gratifying to realize that some of you out there are finding my reflections helpful in your own spiritual journey.

I not only believe; I *know* that we have a lot to celebrate in our little church! However, we are facing some serious challenges. The amount pledged this coming year to the general fund, \$29,500, which has been pledged by fourteen families or pledging units, covers only 37%

of our projected total budget. Although the average amount pledged, \$40 per week, is indicative of an exceptional level of commitment for a blue-collar church, the gradually decreasing number of pledging units in our church only serves to widen the gap. We are indeed fortunate that a relatively anonymous benefactor has tithed to our church, raising our loose (unpledged) offering to \$17,500 this past year. If it were not for his/her extremely generous support, we would be in serious trouble.

In addition to the various fund raisers we hold during the year: D&D dinners, the pie sale, the bottle/can drives, etc., we benefit from the interest, dividends, and growth in our Endowment Fund. However, every year we have to draw more from our invested funds than we have gained to cover our operating expenses. Unless something miraculous happens, this erosion of our principle will come to an abrupt end in the not-too-distant future. This is a major cause of concern, especially in light of our Sunday morning attendance (now down to 15-25 at an average service), and decreased involvement in the life and ministry of our church (the difficulty we have finding people to serve on boards and committees).

Over the past few years, some of our members have asked whether we will be able to continue as a church, whether we will be able to survive. I would hate to see us close our doors—after 155 years of faithful service to our members, to this community and beyond. I know that this has been the fate of many small mainline churches, but I fail to find that comforting. And yet, I not only hope we are different, I *know* we are different. I know that what we have is valuable and worth saving. However, our ability to survive these challenging times may depend on whether we have the wisdom, the vision, and the courage to undergo a process of reshaping the structure or form of who we are, re-imagining who we are and what we feel God calls us to be. To use Jesus' metaphor, we may need to create new wineskins for the new wine that God pours into us through the Holy Spirit.

I would like to encourage us to begin a dialogue around this issue. At our annual meeting this afternoon, I am going to propose that we create an *ad hoc* committee to study the various options that we can consider as we move forth into the future. My son, Corey, who is a United Church of Christ pastor in Groton, and who has been involved in new church starts, has offered to help us in this process. He has already mentioned resources that are available to us through the newly formed Southern New England Conference of the United Church of Christ. I told him that, since we don't have much money, in exchange for his help I will offer some study groups or

give some talks on Jungian psychology and Tibetan Buddhism to the people of his church. I think that's a fair swap!

Let me start the process by sharing some of the thoughts and feelings that have passed through my mind concerning the future of our church. I suspect that none of us, *none* of us wants our church to simply close. It would be a sad day when we finally turned out the light. We want the essence of who and what we are, the core part of our identity, our faith, our mission to live on in one form or another. The questions that come to mind are: (1) What is it that we wish to preserve? and (2) How and in what form will we be able to do this?

It has been noted that we could cut down on our overhead expenses if we moved out of this building and sold it—although this building is totally paid for and in great shape. We all know that the church is more than the building. However, when I consider selling this building and moving into a storefront, renting space in a school, or meeting in members' homes, I feel a strong resistance welling up inside me. I love this historic building, a building that goes back 155 years! A lot of wonderful things have taken place in this building throughout the history of our church. It has a beautiful energy to it! I like worshipping in our sanctuary and meeting in our vestry. I like it when people come to our church suppers and remark about what a beautiful church we have. I know that we are more than a building, but I don't want to let this building go without a fight.

We know that what makes us special as a church are the people, the members and friends of this church. A recent newcomer to our Tuesday afternoon Spiritual Exploration Reading Group was impressed by how friendly and welcoming our people are. Everyone who has ever attended one of our church activities or worship services says this. Yet, we know that whatever it is that makes us special is not limited to our present role of members. Throughout the past 155 years, people have moved away; they have died; they have drifted away. Some have even been alienated by the pastor's liberal sermons. However, new members have always stepped forward to take their place. I have a feeling that not only do our members shape who we are as a church; in some strange way, this church shapes our members, those who make a commitment to become an integral part of our fellowship, in a beautiful way.

Some have been kind enough to suggest that what makes us special as a church is the present pastor, the one with all the capital letters after his name. To be sure, he may be a more than adequate teacher and preacher, and he certainly loves his flock, but he can't be that which

makes us special. Your present pastor, just twenty-two years ago, was invited to be a guest preacher at this church during an interim period. It took him less than two weeks to discover that there was something special in this little church, a spirit, a charism, something that could not be attributable to any single pastor since most of the pastors in this church's history have been student pastors who stayed for only one or two years. It was this sense of something special, something ineffable, that he experienced as a call to become the settled pastor of this church. If he, God forbid, were to retire, respond to another call, or die, he would not take with him the spirit, the charism that makes this church so special.

These are just a few introductory thoughts and feelings on the topic of what it is that makes us special, what we would like to preserve. I believe that keeping everything exactly the way it is until it is no longer tenable, and then closing our doors and turning out the lights is not a realistic option. We may consider merging with another church. We may decide to share our building with another church or religious group. We may be able to rent out space. Some of these options would help us financially, but it would not help us increase our core membership. We may be moved to redesign ourselves in some way. I am not talking about becoming the kind of "happy-clappy" modern entertainment center that some churches have embraced. I am not sure what I am talking about, but I am willing to explore our options. We do need to remember, however, that there is a price for everything. We also need to reaffirm the commitment we have made in our previous discussions of this topic: we would rather die for the right reasons than stay alive for the wrong ones.

We are encouraged by the new people who have found us and have come to love us. However, many in the younger generation are reluctant to make the kind of commitment that has characterized church membership in earlier generations. And yet we hope. We look forward to the new townhouses that are under construction in our neighborhood, hoping that some of these people will take the time to discover us, get to know us, and feel called to join us. Of course, this is more apt to happen if we find ways to reach out to them. We also hope that our present church members will help us with our financial problem through increasing their weekly pledge, through making a special gift of money or stocks to our endowment fund, or by writing our church into their wills.

We have a sense of God's presence in the midst of our struggles. This is why we do not lose hope. We are a community that is open to evolving, if this is God's will. We are saddened

by the old-time members, the members of our church family who have passed away or moved away. We feel the loss of each and every one of them. We also feel we have something to offer to new members, something special. Through it all we believe that if we are trying our very best to do what God is calling us to do, God will help us find a way to do it.

This is the hope, the assurance that we draw from scripture. Ecclesiastes tells us, *“I know that whatever God does endures forever.”* I believe that if what we have created here is in response to God’s call, it will endure. It will live forever in some form, and through this new form it will continue to create the kingdom of God on earth.

The book of Acts reminds us that the early church, the church of the first few centuries, faced difficult challenges. The early apostles were persecuted. There were forces that were determined to wipe out this nascent spiritual movement. However, as Gamaliel told the authorities in reference to the emerging Christian church, *“If this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them.”*

If this little church, with its 155 years of ministry to its members, to this community and beyond, is truly of God, it will not fail. If it is all about us, about our ego-centric needs, including our need to control the future, it will fail on its own.

We truly have a lot to celebrate in this church, a lot to celebrate in this past year. Serious challenges lie ahead. We pray for a consciousness of God’s presence and guidance in the year to come. And we pray that those of you who are listening to or reading this sermon will, in some way, become an even more integral part of our unfolding life as a church.

Faithfully yours

The Reverend Paul D. Sanderson

The First Community Church of Southborough

www.firstcommunitychurch.com

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