

“2010 State of the Church Address: Evaluating Our Progress”

Dear friends, Greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus.

It doesn't matter what business you're in, if you don't have a plan for where you're going (and what you're working to accomplish), odds are pretty good that it won't happen. And even if you have a plan (and you follow it down to the last detail), if you're not honest in your assessment of what's happening along the way, odds are pretty good that your plan will never turn out as you planned.

In business, they set up periodic evaluations to review their progress. In sports, it's an ongoing challenge to assess what's happening with (each of the players) and the team. Even in the church, if congregations don't spend the time they need, taking a hard look at what they're doing (and whether or not it's working) it's only a matter of time before (what's not working) causes them to take an even harder look.

This is now the twelfth year since we began a tradition here at St. Timothy's, that on the weekend of our Annual Meeting that we'd set aside the assigned readings for that week, take a step back and think about what's been happening in our church. And so that's what we're doing here again today. In an annual State of the Church Address, we're using our time together to think about what we're doing, and about what God is calling us to be about as a family.

This year I want to come at it a bit differently, by asking and answering three basic questions that (I believe) are keys for us as we move forward (in the year ahead) in the work we have been given in Christ. Under the theme of “Evaluating Our Progress,” I want to ask (and answer) these three questions: “Who we are?”, “What have we done?” and “Where are we going?” (“Who we are?”, “What have we done?” and “Where are we going?”) And there's an outline in your bulletin if you want to follow along and take notes.

First: “Who we are?” And we've talked about this before, (in each of the eleven previous years), so I don't want to spend a lot of time with this first question. But it's important to remember who you are, because who you are defines what you do. And what you do (what we do) becomes (in the church) our witness to the world.

Now, the model we've been using for the past several years to describe who we are (and if you've been a member here, you should be able to talk about this on your own) is a baseball diamond with a different word on each of the four bases and the pitcher's mound that represents the purposes God has given to His Church.

Who we are is defined (at least in part) by the purposes God has given. And that's exactly what we find in the model. (Go around the bases.) First base has to do with belonging to a church family. We're a community of support (is what we are) that comes together around Jesus. (It's our membership segment.) Jesus said, “Go into the world and baptize.” And so we do. And people (when they're baptized) become members in the church.

Second base has to do with growing in our faith. In that sense, we're a family of faith. It's about maturing as believers. And Jesus wants His Church to mature. (He wants you to mature.) And the maturity (he wants) is not just in your knowledge of what the Bible has to say, but in your life and how you live out what you've come to know.

Third base is Ministry, reminding us that God has called us to use our gifts to serve others and to thereby serve Him. In fact, in doing so, our lives (the Bible says) become a reflection of Jesus. When we use our gifts, we're not only serving others, but him. And that's what God wants. And that's what ministry is all about.

The Mission segment (at home plate) represents the responsibility that each of us has to tell others about Christ. “Go into all the world,” Jesus said, and share the good news. It's our witness to the world. More than anything else, that's what we're called to do.

And then, finally, right in the middle (of the model) there's Magnify, reminding us that our praise and worship of God are essential to our Christian life. “With all of our heart, and soul, and strength, and mind.” We're a dependent body. And so we magnify the Lord, (we worship him) with all we have.

Now, in our Vision Statement, (and this is on your outline as well) we say the same thing. Different words, but the same meaning. “We are a connected family of believers (membership), worshiping God

(magnify), growing in faith (maturity), committed to serving (ministry), with a mission of bringing new believers to Jesus Christ.”

Now, when we adopted this statement (back in 2007), I challenged you to memorize it. (And I’ve said it each year.) If you haven’t done so, I’d challenge you again. And not just to memorize it, but to learn it and to live it and to never lose sight of what it means to be part of the Church.

Because nothing in this world matters more than the connection you have with Christ through the Church! (I hope you realize that.) Everything else in this world is temporary. (It doesn’t mean it’s not important, but it’s temporary.) Nothing in this world will last forever, but God’s family will. Jesus died for the Church. Jesus died for us. And that’s why we’re going to keep on doing what we’ve been called to do, until that day when Jesus comes back and calls it to an end.

And so “Who are we?” We’re a community of support. We’re a family of faith. We’re a reflection of Jesus. We’re a witness to the world. And we’re a body that’s dependent upon God for all that we do and say.

That’s who we are. Let’s talk for a moment about what we’ve done. And there’s a lot we could say (about what we’ve done) since we began working toward our vision. (And so, let’s take it a piece at a time.)

Now, the vision (as you know) looks out to the year 2020. (And that’s quite a jump to make.) From the year 2008 (when we began following it) until 2020, it’s a bit too far-reaching to manage. And so we’ve divided it into smaller (more manageable) segments. Phase One is the first three years of our vision (2008-2010).

The vision (itself) also has fifteen different areas of focus. That’s also a bit too much (in terms of scope) to take on all at once. So we’re taking on a few of those fifteen in each of the three-year phases.

And so what’s been happening in Phase One? What have we done in these first couple of years? (And we’re trying today to evaluate our progress.) And so, let me say a word about three things we’ve done (we’re doing,) in terms of progress, that need our continuing attention.

The first has to do with the three-year Capital Campaign we began back in 2008. Now, Phase One has to do with more than the campaign itself (and I’ll get to that in a moment), but the campaign was (and is) an important piece. Through the Capital Campaign, a number of things have happened.

The first, (and obviously the most significant), is the completion of the enhancement we’ve done to our sanctuary. And I don’t want to make this more significant than it is. After all, it’s only a building. And we’re not in the business of building buildings, but people. But neither do I want us to underestimate its importance in the life of our congregation.

What we accomplished, this past year, through the sanctuary enhancement goes far beyond the simple fact that we brought all of our worship into one place, upgraded a building that was going on forty years old, provided needed room for our worship leaders, and created a more open and useable space. (And those are important.) But more important, it set us up for worship and outreach and growth into the 21st century.

Now, again, a building’s only a building, and it will never be, (nor was it intended to be), an end in itself. But now that it’s finished, it’s something we can use (we are using), and we’ll continue to use for those same purposes for many years to come. And that’s significant.

Now, along with the enhancement, (through our campaign), we increased the power supply to our campus. Not a very exciting accomplishment, but a required one for the sanctuary, and a critical piece for any future expansion plans.

We also have sent financial support to the Selian Hospital in Tanzania, and have made financial commitments to Youth Encounter, World Mission Prayer League, and a number of ministries in our own area.

Now, we need to finish strong in this final year of the campaign. We’re two-thirds of the way into it, and we’re two-thirds of the way toward reaching our goal. That means that this final year will be key to the overall success of those campaign efforts. And so, if you’ve made commitments and given gifts, then thanks for what you’ve done and are doing. (It’s making a major difference.) And if you haven’t, (to this point), it’s not too late. God has done (and will continue to do) a tremendous work as his people respond to his call and step out in faith.

Now, that was all related to what’s happening through the Capital Campaign. But we said that Phase One also relates to what we’re doing, (beyond the campaign) within our congregation. And within our congregation, in these first few years, (since adopting our vision), we’ve done a lot.

Just to give you a feel, we've taken (for example) some very intentional steps to build on what we're doing in the areas of our children's ministries, our youth ministries, our seniors, our MOPS and Stephen Ministry, just to name a few. We've also added a couple of new ministries (designed to strength the family) through "Sisters" and "Growing Christian Fathers." We've expanded our outreach into the prisons. We've added to our music ministry and the variety of styles we offer in worship. And we're in the process of developing a more comprehensive strategic plan for the next 5-10 years. (That's all within our congregation.)

In relation to our school, (in these first two years of our vision), we've done some good work there as well. We've received nationwide accreditation. We've expanded the per-day licensing for our preschool from 45 to 60 students. We're developing a broader base of support from parents, grandparents, and alumni. And we're finding new ways to communicate to the community what we have to offer through a school that is built around and upon what God has done for us in Christ.

All of that to say that what's happened in these first couple of years, (working toward our vision), has been significant. Through the Capital Campaign, within our congregation, and in relation to our school, God is working to build and to grow his Church.

And so, where are we going? In terms of evaluating our progress, what are the challenges we face in the year ahead? And again, (as with what we've done), let me give you three challenges we face.

Number one, (in this coming year) we need to clarify our identity. We need to clarify our identity.

Now, that doesn't mean that we have an identity crisis. I don't believe that's the case at all. I believe we know who we are and why we exist and what we're called to do. (And we're working hard to stay on track.) That's not what it means. But what it does mean is that we need to clarify the relationship we have (our identity) with the larger church.

Now, as most of you know, we're members in the ELCA. We've been part of that body since it began in the late 1980's. And our history, before that, goes back to the old ALC, one of the church bodies that merged to help form the ELCA.

The question we face (in this coming year) has to do with our future affiliation. And we're asking it because, for a number of years, (as a congregation), we've had concerns with what's been happening (in the larger church) and where it's going, and whether or not it's the best fit for us, long term.

Last year (in December), as a result, we joined a nationwide organization called the Lutheran Coalition for Renewal, (Lutheran CORE). And in so doing, (among other things), we promised that (by no later than next January) our Church Council would bring a long-term affiliation recommendation to the congregation.

Today, at our annual meeting, (in following through on that promise), we'll be presenting a list of six of our members that we've asked to help us do some of the homework necessary to make such a recommendation. Their task, over the next several months, will be to explore the options we have.

Beginning with remaining in the ELCA, and thinking through the implications of what that would mean (for our future), they'll begin looking at some of the other Lutheran church bodies that exist in our country. And they'll bring a report of what they find to our Church Council, whose task it will be to sort it all out and make a recommendation. And then, (by no later than next January), we'll need to decide (as a congregation) where we believe God is leading, and where (within the larger Church) we believe we best fit.

Number one, (in the year ahead), we need clarify our identity. Number two, we need to increase our involvement.

Now, I mentioned a couple of weeks ago and, since then, I've shared it with our Church Council, some of the statistics of what's happened here at St. Timothy's over the past ten years. In terms of membership and worship attendance, we're about the same (today) as we were then. And that's not bad. In fact, it's good. But I believe it can be better. (I know it can be better.) And that's the challenge we face.

Now, the pendulum (even in congregations) swings back and forth, so we need to recognize how that can and will happen. But there are some interesting changes that have taken place in our country that I know have changed the reality of how things work (or don't work) even in the church.

A Barna study that came out (this past year) compared what happened in the 1920's and 30's (during the Great Depression), with what's happening today (during these years of economic challenge). In terms of people going to church, it said that during the depression, (and the years that followed) the numbers increased

dramatically. It said that more people than ever (started going to church) when things began to fall apart in the 1920's and 30's. Today it said, (during these past couple of years), the trend has been the opposite. When things have become tough (financially), it said that people have stopped going to church (and the overall numbers) have declined.

Now, I don't know if that's the only factor involved. (I doubt if it is.) It's often not just one thing that plays into some of the trends we see. But I do know that it's an indication (if nothing else) that times have changed, as have the ways in which the church needs to respond to the culture in which it lives.

And so what are we planning, in terms of involvement? We're planning (as starters) to expand the fellowship groups we have (in the church) to help keep people connected. We're looking to take a different approach to some of our Bible classes (beginning in the fall) to see if we can get more people involved. We're working on a Marriage Course (that I hope will develop into something ongoing) for husbands and wives. And we're planning to make more phone calls, more face-to-face contacts, and do everything we can to stay in touch with the people that God has led to this place, just to name a few. And it's all (number two) to increase our involvement.

And number three, we need to clarify our identity, increase our involvement, and extend our influence.

Now, much of this (third area) is related to what we just said (about our own members). Hopefully, what we do (internally) to increase the involvement of our members will result, also, in an external outreach beyond ourselves. But we need to do some things differently (and intentionally) to extend our influence into the community.

One of the challenges I'm setting before our leadership (beginning at our retreat next weekend) is to come up with two or three or four ideas of things we might try that we've never tried before (in our church and our school). I want us to take some chances in Phase Two (over the next three years) that might lead to new forms of outreach. (And not blindly, but boldly.) Things we've never done, that might be worth doing.

Now, I don't know what those will be. (We've been tossing around some ideas already.) And we'll be doing some more work during this year to try to figure it out. But I do want us to try some new things, and see if we can't find one or two that actually work. Because if we keep on doing what we've been doing (and only what we've been doing), then we can't expect to somehow get new results.

In closing today, let me simply ask for your continued prayer and support and involvement as we move into another year together in the church. We're evaluating our progress. We're taking a look at who we are, what we've done, and where we're going. And we're trying to be honest (in our evaluation) of what's been happening (and what needs to happen) in the year ahead.

And we're doing it because of what God has done for us in Christ and because of who we are as a result. Because who we are defines what we do, and what we do becomes our witness to the world.

"A connected family of believers, worshiping God, growing in faith, committed to serving, with a mission of bringing new believers to Jesus Christ." Amen.