

**“State of the Church Address:
Returning to our Roots”**

Dear Friends, Greetings this morning in the name of our Lord Jesus.

Back in 1999, we began a tradition (here at St. Timothy's) that on the weekend of our Annual Congregational Meeting we would take a step back from what we would normally be doing that day, set aside the (assigned readings), and use our sermon time to share what we have been calling our State of the Church Address.

This is now the 14th time we've done this. For those of you who've been around here, this is nothing new. In fact, in some ways, every one of those sermons has been designed to be somewhat the same. It's a time to think about who we are as a congregation, about what God is calling us to do (and to be) in this place, and to give some thought to what that means for our future.

Today, that's (exactly) what we're doing. We're taking a step back and looking at some of our history: where we've been, where we are today, and where (we believe) God is leading us in the years ahead.

This year, we're doing it (also) in light of the fact that we'll soon be celebrating our 50th Anniversary. It was 50 years ago, (as you know) in March of 1962, when St. Timothy's was officially formed. In that sense, this year marks an important milestone in our history. Yet another reason, and perhaps even more important for us to think back on where we've been and forward to where we're going.

Before looking at what we've done in this past year, and where we're going in the year ahead, let's start with a quick review of the model we're using and of the vision we've adopted, (where we believe God is leading us) in these next several years. If you want to follow along, you'll find those in the sermon outline in your bulletins.

Let's start with the model. It's a simple one. As members, it's something you should be able to (sit down) and explain to someone else. It's a baseball diamond, with a different word (beginning with the letter “M”) on each of the four bases and the pitcher's mound that represent the purposes God has given to his Church.

And that's exactly what we find in the model. (Go around the bases.) First base has to do with belonging to the Church family. That's our Membership segment. Jesus said, “Go into the world and baptize.” And so we do. And people (when they're baptized) become members of the church.

Second base has to do with growing in your faith, (it's the Maturity piece in our model), with becoming more mature in your relationship with God. The 201 class we're offering (beginning today) has to do with figuring out what that means (for your life) and how it can best happen. (If you haven't taken it, I'd encourage you to do so.)

Third base is Ministry, reminding us that God has called us to use our gifts to serve others and (in so doing) to serve Him. In fact, Jesus says that we can't claim that we love God, if we're not using the gifts (God has given us) to love others.

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.” More than anything else, that's what God wants us to do.

And then, finally, (right in the middle) there's Magnify, reminding us that worship of God is essential to the Christian life. “With all of our heart, and soul, and strength, and mind,” we're to love God with everything 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 message. “We are a connected family of believers, worshipping God, growing in faith, committed to serving, with a mission of bringing new believers to Jesus Christ.”

Now, every year since we adopted that statement (in 2007), I've challenged you to commit it to memory. If you haven't done it, you're a slow learner. (It's been five years.) You need to do it. And not just to do it, 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.

I hope you know that. The most important thing you can say about yourself (bar none) is that you are a member of Christ's Church. You are a member of the family for which Jesus died. And he died (and came back to life) not just to give us (the promise of life) for when we die, but to give us a reason to live (here and now) and a message to share with the world.

Now, that's our model and our vision. That's what's behind (and what's driving) everything we're about. Let's talk about where we're at, about what's happening as we get ready to celebrate 50 years of God's blessings.

I don't know if you've ever seen this or not, ever read about how it happens. But there's a natural (and we might even say) a predictable life-cycle that every congregation experiences. From start to finish, there's a pattern that almost (without fail) is found in every congregation's life-history.

And what's interesting is that it doesn't matter how large or how small a congregation is. Regardless of the size, it's a life-cycle that is important to recognize and to understand.

Now, there's a picture of it on your outline. It's a bell curve. It starts on one side (at the bottom), works its way up (to the top), and then goes back down (on the other side) until it reaches the bottom again.

What's interesting about this bell curve is that it's a picture of what happens in every congregation. It's the life-cycle congregations go through. They start at the bottom. They're born. They're given life. For us, it was 50 years ago (in 1962). That's when our life together began. From there, they grow, and they continue to grow, until they reach a plateau (they reach the top).

Now, that top (that plateau) might be a membership level, or a worship attendance level. (It doesn't matter.) And a congregation might stay there for a number of years. But it's a level that's not going to change, and that (at some point) will begin to decline, unless something happens, something changes to move it to the next level.

If that happens, then congregations can break the plateau and keep on growing. They can experience (if you will) a new start. But in order for that to happen, something else needs to happen, something needs to change. And that something that needs to change, (that needs to happen) is always related to the original purposes and principles, the reasons why, and the things that were behind the congregation's start.

In other words, to break the plateau and to keep from moving into decline, congregations need to remember who they are and what they're all about. They need to re-claim their identity and to re-think how they might better fulfill the original purposes for which they were brought into being.

If we had the time today, we could go through the Old Testament and on into the New. If we did, we'd find example after example of God calling his people back to their roots. Starting with (people like) Moses and Joshua, and (later on) with the prophets, all the way up to Jesus, and from there into the writings of Peter and Paul and John, it's the same thing. The Bible is filled with examples of how God called his people back to the purposes to which they were originally called.

Now, what's interesting about this life-cycle, along with the fact that it's found all throughout the Bible, is the fact that it's exactly what has happened at St. Timothy's on a number of occasions. I'm not going to go into all the details (here today). But St. Timothy's reached a plateau (and began to decline) at least four different times in its 50-year history.

The first was in the mid-1960s, only a few years after it began. It was beginning to decline not long after it started. But it remembered why it was started and made some decisions that helped it move forward. And from there, it continued to grow.

It happened again in the late 1970's (for different reasons), and again in the early to mid-90's. In each case, there was a plateau that had been reached and a decline that was beginning to take place. But, in each case, decisions were made that moved it forward and that enabled its growth to continue. And in each case, the decisions that were made were tied to the original principles and purposes behind why it was first started.

Now, why are we spending so much time with this congregational life-cycle, with reaching plateaus and with the importance of remembering and re-claiming our identity? Because as we move ever so close to celebrating our 50th Anniversary, we are also (I believe) at one of those key moments in our history in which we've reached a plateau and need to make some decisions for our future.

For the past 5-7 years we've been hovering around the 1200 (plus or minus) number for our membership. We've also experienced similar ups and downs in worship attendance. We're at a point where we need to make some intentional decisions that will help us remember and reclaim our roots. And I believe we're doing just that, with a number of key decisions and directions already in the works.

Now, I'm not going to touch on everything that's going on here at St. Timothy's, either last year, or with what's being planned for the year ahead. But let me highlight three of the more important things that have happened (and that are going to happen) that I believe will be instrumental for us as we move into the second 50 years of our congregational history. And then, let me close it out (today) with a brief mention of two "hands-on" opportunities where we'll need your support.

Let's start with the things that are happening - that have already happened. The first has to do with our new church body affiliation with the North American Lutheran Church, a decision we made last year and a reality into which we're begin to live today. Without rehearsing all of the steps that led us to make the change, it's enough to simply say that for the past five to ten years, (if not longer), our affiliation has been a distraction. For a variety of reasons, without making any judgments, we've been distracted by what was happening on the national level.

Last February, we made a decision and (since then) we've moved on. I don't know about you, but it was refreshing for me to have our national bishop here with us last week. He preached on discipleship and on the importance of going "All In" for Jesus. And not for a moment was I wondering, or even concerned, about what he was saying. It was a Christ-centered message; one that brought us back to our roots, to what the Church is intended to do and to be. And it was refreshing to hear it from one of our leaders. It's time for us as a congregation to move beyond those affiliation concerns (and I believe we have) and to get on with what we were created to be about.

Second, I am very hopeful and prayerful and excited about a new discipleship movement that's beginning to find roots in the United States, and with which we are on the front end, called 3DM. 3DM (three dimensional ministries) is a movement built around the importance of making disciples.

And it's a balanced approach. They use the language of "Up, In, and Out", reminding us that our relationship with God is where it starts, what's happening inside of us is important, and how we respond to the world around is an essential part in being a disciple.

And it's a movement, and not just another program, because it understands discipleship not as one of many, in a long list of things that congregations are to be doing, but rather as the thing that Jesus commissioned us to do.

"Go into the world and make disciples..." That was the commission. That's what Jesus told his followers. He didn't say "Go build a church." He didn't tell them to go out and start a bunch of ministries. He said, "Go and make disciples."

And when it comes to the Church, the only thing Jesus said about the Church? (Do you remember what he said?) He said, "Don't worry about the Church." He said, "I'll take care of building the Church." He said, "You take care of building disciples, and leave the building of the Church to me." (That's what Jesus said.)

Now, this isn't a critique as much as it is an observation and maybe even a (bit of a) confession. Because, honestly, I think we've had it backwards for too many years. And when I say we, I'm thinking more about those of us who are pastors and leaders in the Church. We get so caught up in worrying about building up the Church that we forget about Jesus' commission to go and build up people. (And that's backwards.) 3DM is a discipleship movement, within the Church, that's designed to concern itself with the former, and to leave the latter to Christ.

We're in the process of taking some of the early steps in doing just that, and we'll be taking more steps that will involve more people as we move deeper into the process. For now, I'd ask you to keep that discipleship effort in your prayers and to begin thinking about where you are in your own discipleship walk with Jesus.

And then third, we started last year and we're moving it forward this year, with an effort to take a step back and evaluate not only what we're doing here today (through the efforts of our church and our school), but also (and maybe even more importantly), what we think we might want to be doing in the next 10-20 years and beyond.

Now, I don't want to take away their thunder, so I won't say too much. This effort is being driven by our Strategic Planning Team and they'll be making a presentation at our meeting this afternoon. What they're working on and what they're (going to be working on) over the next three years is to come up with a new Ministry and Mission Vision for our future, trying to identify what we hope to be doing on and with our campus.

Now, they're going to be doing it in light of the limitations we have with our property and with the current (debt load) that we're carrying. It's not going to be some "pie in the sky", what do you "hope to have" exercise that's not based in reality.

But neither will it be getting into any of the specifics (at least for these next three years) about buildings or construction or what needs to happen to make it happen. Instead, they'll be approaching this effort with the confidence and faith that if our vision for where we believe God is leading us is consistent with God's vision for where he wants to take us, then the details that follow are not ones about which we need to be concerned.

Now, those are the things that are happening, that are in the works. Let me close this out (today) with a brief mention of two things that are coming up where we'll need your support.

The first has to do with our 50th Anniversary and with the ways we'll be celebrating in these next months. Coming up in March, (as we've already mentioned), there's a family event on the 17th and a dinner and program on the 18th. We're hoping that every one of us can take part in some way.

We're also planning a new picture directory for our members. That'll be happening in April, May, and the early part of June. It'll be fun to have a directory from the 50th Anniversary year. (When that time comes, make sure you sign-up.)

We're also planning to celebrate our 50th Anniversary by raising an additional \$50K, between now and the celebration weekend in March that will be used to support a mission start (or a number of mission starts) in the NALC. Fifty years ago, we were on the receiving end of gifts that we're given to help us get our feet on the ground. This year, we have the chance to do the same for one (or more) of our sister congregations. If we all do a small part, that \$50K should be an easy goal to reach.

The second area in which we'll need your support is one that is a combination of something we'll be doing (as a congregation) and something I'll be doing (as one of your pastors). As most of you know, I'm now in the second year of a three-year Doctor of Ministry program in Biblical Preaching. It's turning into a good amount of work, but a work that I hope will be helpful and productive, not only for me, but for you.

The final year (coming up) is one in which I'll be writing a thesis, based upon something I've done or am doing in the congregation. What my thesis will be attempting to answer will be the question of whether or not the addition of sermon series into the preaching pattern will be helpful in the faith development of our members. Given the fact that we have followed and continue to follow (for the most part) the three-year lectionary preaching cycle that is used in a majority of Lutheran congregations, the question I'm hoping to answer is whether or not the addition of sermon series into that cycle will be a plus.

As a result, we are planning between now and the end of September to preach a number of (three or four-week) series. And at the end of (each of those) series, I'll be asking for your input and response. And then I'll be compiling the input and drawing some conclusions. And hopefully, what is found will be something that will not only be beneficial to us (as your pastors), but more importantly to you and to (all of us) as we seek to grow as disciples of Jesus.

The first of those series will be starting next week. It's a series on "Healthy Living." It's based upon three healing stories in Mark's gospel in which Jesus not only restores the health of the person in need, but also models for us how it is we're to live.

Next week, when that series begins, I'll say more about the ways in which we'll be asking you to become involved. Until then, thanks for the support you're giving during this course of study and for the input you'll be offering as that project takes shape.

In closing today, let me simply say that for 50 years God has blessed this congregation. From a small and seemingly insignificant start, (back in 1962), thousands if not tens of thousands of lives have been touched. And not just touched, but changed. And not just changed, but changed for eternity.

As we move toward the celebration of those 50 years, let us also commit ourselves to moving forward in our own discipleship walk with Christ. Amen.