

The State of the Church

A summary of the significant changes that have occurred in the church over the twenty plus years of my stewardship and a pastor's perspective on where the church is today and where it needs to go from here.

Scripture: *We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers. We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. 1 Th 1:2-3 NIV*

A positive change of atmosphere

Divisions left behind

When I came, Community Wesleyan Church in Kirksville was deeply divided. It had voted out two of its past three pastors and my predecessor had only been here three years. There was a lack of fellowship too as few saw each other outside of Sunday services. People who came only to the single AM service could stop coming entirely and no one would notice. The service style was very traditional, and not open to emotional or physical expression, or to change. For example, I was upbraided by a leading member when I introduced applauding at baptisms. Another member left because it was so disconcerting when I strayed from the bulletin. A member was overheard to say with regret, "You'll never get drums in here." The church had no youth group. The board was firmly in the hands of the founding generation. It wasn't the friendliest place to visit.

Greater openness and hospitality

But God granted me favor with the congregation. Many people wanted some change and found it refreshing. Some change I introduced unknowingly just by being myself. Some I introduced slowly but intentionally. So we have learned and grown together. The divisions of the past are almost lost history. Fellowship has grown so much that we hardly need the fellowship committee that I instituted as a means to increase it. Fellowship happens by itself as various sub-groups of the body sponsor events. The atmosphere of the services has changed too. First service has become very expressive, open to contemporary forms and constantly learning new songs. Second service is more open to change as well. As time has passed, the board has gone through two generational shifts during my long tenure. By the grace of God, plus the teaching of hospitality for Jesus, and the volunteer work of key laypersons like Mark Boswell and Ben Mackey, the hospitality atmosphere of our church has changed dramatically. We are now known as a very friendly congregation.

Some very essential things have been preserved, even strengthened

Prayer life continued

In 1991, Rev. Blaine left me two symbolic gifts. One was a rubber baseball centered on a roll of masking tape. It sat in the center of the empty desk to symbolize the transfer of leadership. As a baseball fan, I understood. The other gift was a single plant. As one who appreciated plants, I knew what it was and why he left that particular one. It was a prayer plant, so-called because it folds its leaves up to heaven each evening. Kirkville was a praying church when I arrived. There was both a prayer service and a time of prayer on Sunday morning with Dave Schwarz singing a chorus to give time for people to come forward to pray. The prayer plant that Rev. Blaine gave me is still growing in my office. But more importantly, the planting of prayer into this congregation which he and others before had begun has continued and with Larry's help has even been strengthened up to today. And I pray that it continues to be so. I have continued prayer in services. With Larry's help, I have continued Wednesday prayer service. We have added men's prayer, greater prayer emphasis in SS classes, prayer cells, special prayer services such as those for 9/11, and sacred assemblies.

This is still a Word-centered church

When I arrived, Kirkville was already a church that very much valued hearing the Word of God expounded and taught. I have sought to preserve and enhance that value. We have become known as a teaching-style church where sermons are drawn directly from the Bible and laced with Scripture. I have encouraged Bible reading and Bible memorization too. I have also taught the Reformation principle that the Bible needs to be in the language of the people. Because of that principle, I use a modern translation, the NIV version. I have encouraged the people of the church to also use contemporary versions and to understand that no translation is perfect and, since language is changing, Bible translation is a continuing work. Over the years, we have given away cases of Bibles. I pray that Community Wesleyan will always stay focused in the Bible.

A church that seeks to reach out

When I came, our church was already active in carrying out the Great Commission, both in local outreaches such as the "I Found It" campaign and through support of missionaries. Fulfilling the Great Commission in such ways is central to the task of the church and making disciples remains one of our three foci. While I have been here, we have preserved and enhanced both mission outreach and the emphasis upon making disciples locally. The growth of the missions convention, the work of the missions team, short term missions trips, and most recently, Pastor Eric's and Magda's inspirational example have grown our missions work. Participating in local outreaches such as the Jesus video give away, the Luis Palau preaching event, and the Christian Film Festival all helped us to reach out in our area. In addition, we tried many things on our own such as door to door VBS invitations, Joyfest, Thanksgiving and Christmas giving, and special services. Over the years, Vacation Bible School has been the most vital expression of our core value of evangelism as it has been responsible for many more confessions of faith than any other single ministry of our church.

Innovations to Keep

One important question to ask at a time of pastoral transition is this; “What changes or achievements have we reached together that you consider crucial to the future of the church.” I would list several.

A Scriptural, Memorable, and Practical Mission Statement

The adoption of our six word mission statement, “Love God, Love Others, Make Disciples” has served us well as a guiding light to focus us both on Jesus’ commands to the church and on what is most important in a practical sense. The board has already endorsed this as a statement of continuing value to be preserved in our transition.

A Functional Team-leader LBA Model

Most of you do not realize that our church organization takes advantage of a clause in the discipline that allows churches to structure their LBA’s in ways other than the standard discipline model. Our board consists of team leaders from the seven purpose areas that grow out of the three great commands. These are: local outreach (evangelism), global outreach, service to others, fellowship, worship, prayer, and discipleship. In addition, the LBA includes the pastors, three at-large members and team leaders from trustees, finance/stewardship, and records/membership. Years afterward I read that what we had done was to create a “functional structure” which according to the research of Christian Schwarz, is one of the requirements for a growing church. The board has endorsed our team-leader LBA plan to be preserved through the transition.

Doubling capacity through a two-service system

During my tenure, we have greatly increased the physical capacity of our church to minister to people. The most important way we did this was by instituting a two service system. I noticed in the previous history of the church that there was a ceiling in the attendance graphs at 140 people. Repeatedly, the church had risen to this number and fallen back. I then noticed that 140 people was also about 80% of the seating capacity of the main floor of the sanctuary. A two service system removed this barrier, essentially doubling the worship capacity of the church. This doubling of capacity was a key to the growth that happened in the 90’s and is happening now. This system has evolved more than once and continues to evolve. Years ago now, the first major change allowed the styles of worship in the two services to diverge. This enabled the church to transition to contemporary worship format with a praise team and today’s Christian music in first service. The two service system also made room for a dynamic Kidz Church ministry—now called JAM’n Kids—under the leadership of Kim Ouderkirk.

The season of building was important

Around the turn of the millennium I felt that God was leading us into a season of building. You responded in a great way, remodeling the parsonage, building a new church sign, air conditioning the sanctuary, installing a new electrical service and adding classroom space to our church. This was another way we increased the church’s capacity to minister. The 2004 addition added essential preschool, office and multi-use classroom space that we benefit from every week. Usage of various rooms will and should change over time but the added space will prove a great blessing in the years to come.

Moving up to the multi-cell model

Another key change that I have sought to introduce over the years is the multi-group model. In order for churches to grow beyond about 120 people, it is essential that they recognize the need to have multiple sub-groups. As long as we insist upon all meeting together at one time and all seeing one-another, we limit the church without realizing it. We force the church back into the horse and buggy days of tiny one-cell churches which the forefathers of Community Wesleyan Church sought to transcend when they envisioned a greater lighthouse here on this land. But by accepting the model of multiple subgroups expressed in various ways— many SS classes, more than one worship service, multiple fellowship groups—we open up the church to grow past the limits of a one cell face-to-face social structure. Churches our size (120-150) resist this opening up because it “feels nice” to see and know everyone. But we need to recognize that such thinking can hold back the growth of the kingdom. So it is critical going forward that the multi-cell concept continue to be part of the thinking at Community Wesleyan Church.

Noah’s Ark Christian Preschool

This fall is the 15th anniversary of the founding of Noah’s Ark Christian Preschool. We thank God for Pat Maum’s stellar leadership and the willingness of our congregation to sponsor this ministry. It has taught many children and families the love of God, won many children to Christ, and prepared many little ones for school as well. In doing all this, it has achieved an excellent reputation in our county and helped to give our church an excellent name too. Since Pat is in the process of retiring as well, we are working together to find new leadership for the school.

Unfinished Business

Fellowship team job description in flux

Structure is always evolving. The principle is that it needs to be functional, to help get the job done. Our fellowship team was implemented to increase congregational get-togethers which were not happening. Now, as I mentioned, get-togethers happen easily through sub-groups. The team’s job has diminished. I have been following the consulting work being done in the ENY-NE district. They are reorganizing church boards along functional lines, similar to how ours is organized. One team that they have been consistently creating in the re-organized churches is the assimilation team. For several years I have identified this area as a weakness at our church, but have not been able to put together a consistent team to address it. I believe a good approach may be to give our fellowship team a completely new job description focused on assimilation and promotion of fellowship groups rather than on organizing get-togethers. I plan to do some work on this in the next few months.

Personal evangelism needs a regular organized expression

Local evangelism ministry has several facets. One is getting good info about the church out and advertising events well. This we are doing through the website, the sign, and direct mail. Another part is training the congregation in personal evangelism ---both sensitizing them to the need and giving them practical tools. In this area, we have done helpful things such as sponsoring the excellent study, *Just Walk across the Room*, teaching the bridge diagram, and praying for outreach. We are ready for a new emphasis in this second area. The third area is organizing ways to touch base with people personally

with an eye to initiating spiritual discussions. This kind of one-to-one ministry has yet to find a regular expression. The heart is here but the practical expression is very intermittent. Evangelism teams and I have searched for this but have not landed on it yet.

Second service needs to continue to grow

Our second service needs to be strengthened even more. At the recent pastor's retreat, the resource person mentioned that 50 people in average attendance is the minimum number for a service to feel good, to feel vital and healthy. This last six months, while first service grew 2%, second service attendance grew 22% over last year's attendance in the same time period. That is very impressive but attendance is still below that feel-good number of 50. I am praying and working to keep it growing. I continue to believe that the two service system is a crucial key to future growth for our church. The fact that second service is growing shows that where there is a vacuum—a space provided ahead for growth—there growth often occurs. I published on my blog three great commission reasons to have two services. (<http://www.kirkvillewesleyan.org/pastorsdesk/2012/02/great-commandments-and-great-commission-reasons-for-two-services/>) The size of the sanctuary alone demands it as our average attendance could again this year be approaching 140 which represents 80% of the seating on the main floor. However, the two service system does not always have to look exactly like the current one. It could have different formats or even different times. While the 2- service system needs to continue to evolve and grow, maintaining this doubling of capacity is as essential to future growth as it is to current growth.

Recruiting the young

I think most of you understood well why I said that if you are getting AARP materials, then Pastor Eric's Bible study was not for you. I know all of you would enjoy being under his teaching. However, one of the great tasks that continually faces the church is winning the next generation to Christ and to the church. As we look around our church, it does not take a calculator to see that there are more gray haired folks than there are young adults and young couples. Now we love gray-haired folks, but the church desperately needs for the sake of its present and its future to focus on recruiting young adults. Right now there is a golden opportunity. For the last five decades, most high school graduates have left churches like Kirkville to go away to good colleges. However since the last economic recession, more and more high school graduates are staying home and attending local community or state colleges. This gives our church an unprecedented opportunity to relate to young adults. But to do so, we will need to let the pastors take time to focus on them. Laypersons will need to help also. For example, right now there is a great need for an assistant for Pastor Eric's young adult Sunday school class. We will also need to recruit younger people to work in the church. They can serve as assistant teachers, and help with Sunday worship as several currently do. We will need to allow musical teams to accommodate their tastes as well as ours. Older folks must constantly be thinking, not simply about what they like, but about what it takes to enlarge God's kingdom among the young. Over the years I've tried to help us do that, but it is always unfinished business.

Summary

Thank you for the joy of continuing to serve as your pastoral family. We feel honored by you and privileged to serve. Thank you also for your patience and understanding as I do not have the health and energy to work the hours that I used to work.

Where to from here

Later this month, I plan to make the official announcement of my retirement. Some are asking what happens then. In order to provide increased understanding of normal pastoral transition process in the Wesleyan Church I provide the following short but helpful outline.

1. The pastor presents his resignation which is effective at the end of the next District Conference which is June 15, 2013. His last Sunday in the pulpit would be June 16, 2013.
2. The District Superintendent (DS) meets with the Local Board of Administration (LBA) and constitutes them as the “pastoral search committee” under the leadership of the vice-chairperson (Larry Nemitz). This is scheduled for Dec. 11, 2012.
3. Under the guidance of the DS and leadership of the vice-chair, the LBA determines their own procedures and selects a candidate to present to the church as a candidate to be the next pastor. This does not have a set time frame.
4. The candidate preaches at the church on Sunday morning (called candidating) and then the church votes at the close of those services as to whether to call the person as pastor of the church for a two year term.
5. If the vote is positive, the candidate has two weeks to reply.
6. The district affirms the process by officially placing that person as the pastor in Kirksville during the district conference on June 15, 2013.
7. The DS holds an installation service for the new pastor at Kirksville.

Added notes.

1. When the senior pastor resigns, those positions that serve him and are hired subject to his approval must also submit pro-forma resignations so that the new pastor and the board working together can constitute the new staff in the way that best suits the new pastor. In our church, this will apply to the administrative assistant. Such persons may be rehired by the new pastor and board for the new church year if desired either on the same schedule or a different one. The Associate Pastor’s term also formally ends at the same time as the pastor’s resignation is effective (June 15, 2013).
2. Because those on the platform must work so closely with the pastor in the holding of services, according to the Wesleyan Discipline, the pastor is completely in charge of the appointment of musicians for the services (725(5)). So those who currently serve as musicians and praise team singers under my ministry should also anticipate discussions with the new pastor regarding their roles for the next church year; and they should understand the possibility of altered roles under his leadership depending upon his preferences, needs and plans.