

## **WE ARE ALL WITNESSES IN VISIONING THE FUTURE**

### Philippians 3:12-14

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Today is the last day in our sermon series on witnessing. We have been trying to reclaim this “witness” word that is so often associated with an obnoxious form of testifying. We don’t believe that we can talk other people into faith by beating them over the head with a Bible, or shouting at them. Nor do we believe in inducing guilt and shame in people. Rather we are trying to put our faith into practice, witnessing to the power of God’s love in our lives by the way we live every day. And we hope that through that kind of living, we might attract others to the good news of God’s grace and justice.

Today’s scripture is once again a sports metaphor, an image of running with our eyes on the goal. Philippians tells us that God is urging us into the future. Can you picture the way a runner looks at the beginning of a race? Feet in the starting blocks, entire body moving towards the finish line? You want to position yourself in the most advantageous way, so you lean in, all muscles moving in the same forward direction.

Or picture a swimmer, ready to enter the water for a race, her entire body leaning over the water.

In the same way, we are to be looking to the future, all eyes on the goal. Runners have the finish line, and swimmers have a number of laps to complete. What is our goal? What is the future God is calling us to?

Jesus had a mission in his life. His mission was to fulfill a prophecy from Isaiah: “God’s Spirit is on me;

he's chosen me to preach the Message of good news to the poor,  
Sent me to announce pardon to prisoners and  
recovery of sight to the blind,  
To set the burdened and battered free,  
to announce, "This is God's year to act!"

If we are following in Jesus' footsteps, if he has passed the baton to us and asked us to run with it, then his mission is our mission.

In the gospel of Matthew, he gives his followers more specific instructions. "I'm not going to be with you any more in physical form," he says, but I have something for you to do: "God authorized and commanded me to commission you: Go out and train everyone you meet, far and near, in this way of life, marking them by baptism in the threefold name: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Then instruct them in the practice of all I have commanded you. I'll be with you as you do this, day after day after day, right up to the end of the age."

These are our goals. To keep the good news alive. To share it in the present and ensure that it will live into the future. As long as there are people who are poor, as long as there are people who are burdened, as long as there are people who are oppressed, battered, and in prison, we are to live the way of Jesus, practicing the faith and sharing it with others." How well are we doing?

As I said last week, I regularly meet with groups of ministers from the United Church of Christ and from other denominations. In some of those gatherings, we talk about how the church is doing, and I want to share with you some statistics this morning.\* The statistics you see on the screen would be similar if we were talking

about the United Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church or the Episcopal Church. All are in decline.

Yet some congregations are bucking the trend, and this congregation is one of them. I want to show you one more statistic which gives you a feel as to how our congregation compares to others in terms of numbers.

### **UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

**average worship attendance: 79**

**Average membership: 193**

### **AVON LAKE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

**average worship attendance: 375**

**membership: 900**

My purpose in showing you these numbers is not so that we should pat ourselves on the back. I have two other reasons in mind.

First, I want to thank each of you for what you do to keep this church healthy, growing, alive, vital and strong. It takes hard work, prayer, and dedication from each of us - from those of us who can write larger checks and from those of us who give our hard physical labor, from those of us who worship weekly and from those who volunteer in many other ways throughout the week. This church is blessed with members who care and members who give and I don't want any of you to ever feel taken for granted.

My other purpose is to say this. If we do not stay vigilant, we will not continue to thrive. Institutions don't maintain themselves. In fact, decline is the natural course. Bucking the trend requires constant creative work; this church is a living growing

organism, and like every living thing, it needs daily attention. You can't let your most beloved relationships go without attention; you can't let your plants go without attention, and if we think the church will just be here for us when we need it, we're wrong.

As I was researching exactly why it is that some churches are in decline and others are growing, I came across this fact. There is a correlation between church growth and youth involvement. In all churches, the greater the youth involvement, the greater the church's growth. As I thank you for your support, I thank you especially for your support of our youth ministry.

I believe this particular congregation, the Avon Lake United Church of Christ, is serving important purposes in our community. Our beautiful building itself is a home to preschoolers, to recovering alcoholics, to those who love the arts. We are one of the few churches in our area who has warmly welcomed those who are gay and lesbian and their allies. We have offered support groups for family and friends of those living with mental illness. We are developing a wide variety of adult education opportunities with the goal of becoming the best place for in-depth, quality adult Christian education. I want to see us continue to offer hands-on mission opportunities. In addition to our relationships with St. Paul's Community Church, Haven Center Homeless Shelter, Family Promise, and our other mission partners, could we adopt a school in Lorain or Elyria, could we help with tutoring or adult literacy programs? In addition to our fabulous youth mission trips and the support we give to Bill and Bev Stives and a few others, could we offer some intergenerational mission trips, perhaps back to Biloxi, Mississippi, or to other places in this country and internationally?

We provide Doorstep Dinners, Stephen Ministers, and the resources of our staff to help those within our church family, but there is more we need to do. I spent some time this fall looking at each name on our membership rolls. I sent 300 personalized letters but did not have time to send any more. There are people in this church who slip through the cracks. There are more people to be visited, called, checked up on. We are a caring church but there is more we could do.

The reality is this. There is one obstacle to us meeting our goal of continued growth in faith, mission and service. We simply don't have enough money. We have a wonderfully dedicated congregation, and a hardworking staff. We have a beautiful well-maintained facility. Thanks to the generosity of many of you, we have significantly reduced our mortgage. But our regular annual giving simply isn't keeping up with our dreams. We are facing a need to cut back. The past two summers, we have completely depleted our checking account. We can't continue to operate this way.

I am resisting cutting back with every fiber of my being because I don't believe God wants us to cut our mission and ministry. We are needed. There are still poor, oppressed, battered people longing for good news. We are needed. But we are stretched thin. We have the smallest staff of any church our size in the United Church of Christ. We watch our expenses carefully. But we dream big.

My husband and I carefully consider our gift to the church each year, thinking about what this church means to us and to the people we love. Currently our gift to the church is our third largest monthly expenditure, after our mortgage and our payment to Ohio University. We are all in different financial circumstances. If you are currently giving all you can to the church, thank you. If you could give more, please consider the

goal that Jesus has put before us: to share our faith in word and in deed with all people.  
Join me in giving, and join me in refusing to believe that what God wants from us is less.  
Less sharing, less ministry, less mission.

Let us keep our eyes on the goal: forgetting what lies behind and straining  
forward to what lies ahead, knowing that in Christ, all things are possible.

\* UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST STATISTICS

In 1965:

2,070,413 members

In 2013:

979,239 members

That is a 53% decline.