

INVEST IN THE GOOD NEWS:
Celebrating Our Heritage
Hebrews 11:1-12

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There's a white frame house on the south side of Lake Road, between Woodstock and Beachdale, which was the first physical home for our congregation. I hope it goes up for sale someday, because I'd love to walk through it. I know that it has been a private home for over 60 years, but still I'd like to be in the space. I believe it would feel like sacred space. I have heard stories from our older members about Sunday School classes in the basement. I would like to stand in that building and hear the echos of prayers spoken, laughter shared, hymns sung. Our church family was born in that space.

In 1953, the church purchased 16 1/2 acres where we have been located ever since. Imagine how audacious that must have seemed to some people. 16 1/2 acres?! What are you ever going to do with all that property? I applaud the boldness and the vision of our ancestors who made that decision.

I have been looking through some of our church's historical materials, prompted in part by the bicentennial of Avon Lake, and prompted in part by my friend Tim Schulz whose office contains many of these documents and pictures which need sorting! We will have other occasions during the course of the year to focus on our specific history, and I will be planning some work days for those of you who are interested in helping to put a church timeline together.

Today's purpose is to celebrate those whose faithfulness has brought us to this time and place, particularly those who have been members 30 years and more. This is a different kind of sermon today. Some of you will know all of the people I mention, some

of you won't know any. What I hope you will listen for, though, are the words people use when they talk about what the church means to them. All of us can relate to the meaning that church has in our lives. Whether you know the people or not, I hope you feel inspired to think about how an investment in the church can reap benefits.

Many of you have shared memories with me, too many to share in just one sermon...but let me share a few of the comments I received which have touched me:

"All of our five kids went to Sunday School and were confirmed here, 2 were married here. The church has been an anchor for our family and has always been there when we asked." (Gloria Buckeye)

Nancy Frey was one of the ones who babysat for children in the basement nursery: "I felt the church was always a part of me. It was my home away from home. I felt safe there."

Dave Weaver, who has done everything here from teaching 3rd grade Sunday School to singing in the choir to serving as moderator, says, "From my birth, involvement in church activities has been a lifelong habit like eating or brushing my teeth."

From the Tanzillis: "Church is where we where we met (literally, in Illinois). Here, (and what better place is there?), we've met, worked with, and created friendships with people of all generations; interactions enabling us to learn many new things, challenging us to be better persons, and to do what we can to help others. It has been a joy to help our church grow. Sometimes we venture out of our comfort zone knowing there are tasks that just have to be done to help our church. These always seem to work out well. We are blessed with how our church help us form life long friendships, meet many new people and puts purpose and direction in our lives."

Beth Hackett wrote, "The most important aspect of this wonderful church for me has been the caring and wonderful persons I see every Sunday, their smiles, laughter, kindness, sorrows, sadness, etc. I could go on and on. I love my church...Getting involved in this church makes all the difference in the world to me."

Chuck Pettys: "I love this church simply because it is so inclusive, welcoming and non-judgmental. The signage in front is perfect. ALL are welcome. But what I love most is that when you lead us in prayer we pray for the world, our leaders, those in other parts of the world who are suffering, or frightened. For refugees, for victims of natural and made catastrophic events. We do not simply pray for just our church, or just those things that impact us directly."

Paul Dunford enjoyed leading the folk choir for 15 years, and then in more recent times he tells me he has received great satisfaction and enjoyment through being a Trustee of the church and taking care of our beautiful buildings and grounds. "The Saturday Morning Work Crew is a part of my weekly routine. The countless maintenance projects we do with faithful skilled workers to guide people like me. But the best ever was the building/rebuilding of the Buoy Youth Center. Five years in the making, resulting in what I am sure is one of the finest youth gathering spaces around. Its great working with Witz! We also refurbished the office spaces into beautiful modern rooms. I am grateful I had the opportunity to be a small part of these projects... and continue my efforts as much as I can.

Today our church is more alive and active then ever before. There is something for every person going on all the time. Mission Central is the heart of the church... from outreach programs, the Thrift Store, The amazing youth Mission trips, the Teams that drive the business of the church, the music programs, financial planning to the Daniel

Plan There is something for everyone here at home at the Avon Lake United Church of Christ.”

I have a few anecdotes which are funny, too, so let me start with Marge Fehlner, for hers is both touching and humorous.

“There are so many things I keep dear to my heart about the church and the times spent with the members and staff. I believe I may hold the record of being married the most times to the same man in the church. George and I were married by Alex Campbell in 1986, repeated our vows in 1996 (ten years) and again in 2011 (twenty-five years) . You see George was afraid he wouldn’t live long enough to make our twenty fifth so he decided we should have a party in ten years (He always loved a party). When we were approaching our twenty fifth the grandkids urged on by George, thought we should do it again and we had a wonderful celebration at the church. The people of the church have always been very special to us. They cried when we were sad and rejoiced during the happy times. I know they are there in my time of need. It has been such a blessing to our family. I am proud to be a member of The Avon Lake UCC and tell everyone who will listen to our story.”

Many of you remember the mission trips to the Back Bay Mission in Biloxi, Mississippi. Jim and Diana Droke remember going once with the Turners, the Dunfords, the Tanzillis, the Novotnys and Rev. Campbell. “The last night shrimp boil didn’t agree with Jim. He rode, lying down in the back seat of Alex Campbell’s car, all the way back to Avon Lake. We lost count of the number of times they had to make a pit stop.”

Jill Camp wrote me a few stories that were really funny but that I probably shouldn’t share...but also these which I can: “Nate had just joined the staff when you sent out an email announcing his hiring and mentioned that he was a single guy who

might like to be invited to someone's house for dinner. So we invited him to Mom/Dad's for dinner. He arrived and I don't think he stopped talking from the moment he stepped into the house. After he left, my dad said "I'm exhausted. I need a nap!" and we all busted out laughing because we'd never really encountered anyone with such exuberance!

And speaking of Nate, you know how I feel about him! He's done some amazing things with the youth of the church. He's had a huge impact on me and both of my kids. I can't really put into words how the mission trips have changed my life. I look forward to that week like no other. It's one of the best weeks of my year. Nate works so hard to bring out the very best in the kids and the adults. He has a servant's heart and he has changed my life for the good.

The Daniel Plan has also been life changing. The fact that it was offered as a program through our church was the difference maker. I met new friends and strengthened existing friendships through the DP program. And now I get the chance to help others begin this program. I am so excited about the Daniel Plan cross training session and was honored to be asked to lead it with Lynne."

Bill Kauffman wrote this: "The first funny anecdote I thought of was when I was the acolyte for the day. I was standing at the back of the church of the old sanctuary waiting for the service to start. All of a sudden I overheard Maureen Wightman say that the acolyte had not shown up and what would they do. Hearing this I said that I would do it. With a shocked look Maureen said "You would?" I said I would. Thinking the real acolyte was going to be there, she was holding the acolyte robe. I said well I will take that and told her you can not be an acolyte without the robe. We found the largest one there was and it fit about eighty percent but it was good enough. I walked down the aisle

tall and proud. I lit and unlit the candles to perfection. After the service, Lorena Miller came up to me giggling saying “Only you Bill Kauffman would do this”. So that was the day the church had a fifty something old acolyte. In my mind I thought I did a great job, but I was never asked to do it again, so maybe that was not the case.”

And finally, Dave Dibbell shared this about our mutual friend, who is sorely missed, Lenore Marken: “I was victimized by Lenore as many of us have been. After my first Annual Meeting plea not to fold checks and currency, Lenore’s next check was folded as many times as humanly possible, ending up about the size of a cigarette!”

What I want to say to you all, you 30 year + members, and all of you, is thank you. Thank you for investing in this church. Thank you for investing your time, your talent, and your treasure. I try to imagine how many times you have been asked to teach Sunday School, serve on a committee, usher, serve Coffee Hour, and participate in countless other ways. I try to imagine how many times you have been asked to give of your money. Every year during our annual campaign, plus special offerings, capital campaigns. Moving from Lake Road to this location, building our first sanctuary, the Ed Wing, adding Fellowship Hall, and the lounge. Dick Bucey sharing his dream for the Good Neighbor Thrift Shop, and asking for support from the congregation. In 1998 we gutted the old sanctuary, met in the Fellowship Hall for a summer and completely renovated it. You invested in making that sanctuary a warmer and more inviting place for worship, and then, almost immediately, we started growing out of it. We considered adding onto it, we considered starting a satellite church in another location, and then we decided to invest in this worship space. Time after time, you have said “Yes”. “Yes, we believe this church is worthy of our investment.” “Yes, we believe God is calling us to grow.” “Yes, we believe that the good news needs to be shared with more people.” We

have invested in a full-time Director of Youth Ministries. Does anyone think we would have a thriving youth program without Nate? We have invested in a youth center to support his ministries. Most recently, we have invested in a full-time Associate Minister. We continue listening to God's call, and investing in God's good news by taking leaps of faith, trying new things, staying in relationship with one another, and having fun along the way.

I am going to have to save more remarks and more anecdotes for another sermon. But I want to end with this. I ran across the stewardship booklet for 1960. In it were some statistics about the brand-new United Church of Christ. The denomination at that time had over 8,000 churches with over 2 million members. Today, we have fewer than 5,000 churches and around 850,000 members. But here is the most ominous statistic to me. Over half of UCC congregations have fewer than 50 persons in worship on an average Sunday morning. Our churches are fragile institutions. They only survive if and when people invest in them. If we believe that our community is better off with a congregation like ours as part of it, if we believe our world is better off with the witness of our congregation and others like us, we will need to continue investing all we can.