

Sun. Oct. 17, 2004

Stirrings: A State of the Communion Address

Hebrews 11: 8-12; Matthew 13: 31-35

Rev. Dean Snyder

*By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. Heb 11:8*

It began as a stirring within his soul, a lump in his throat, an inner itch that Abraham did not know how to scratch. It began as something inside that told him there was more to his faith journey than he had yet experienced. It was not that there was anything wrong with Abraham's life, nothing bad about his work or his home, nothing wrong with his relationship with Sarah. There was just something missing. There was something stirring within.

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I want to talk this morning about the state of Foundry Church's soul. I want to talk about where I see us going as an organization, but more than that I want to talk about our corporate soul. What is the state of our communion with one another?

Here is my understanding of where we are at as a congregation organizationally. (I want to mention that much of what I am going to say this morning has come out of the five house meetings I participated in over the past several weeks with 50 or 60 church leaders with whom I have discussed at some length much of what I am about to say, and I want to express a word of thanks to the Stewardship Committee, Jane Northern and John Hysom for organizing those discussions and to all of the other people who have hosted us in their homes. The conversations that have shaped what I am going to be saying to you this morning about the state of our communion.)

This is where I believe we are at as a church organizationally:

We have three **core commitments** that remain our highest values year in and year out: These three commitments do not change. They are the priority of where we spend our time and resources:

1. Spiritual worship through prayerful and powerful music, thoughtful liturgy, and relevant preaching. This hour or so that we spend together in the spirit of prayer, praise and encounter, meeting God and one another here is the center and wellspring of all we do.
2. Mission: caring for those outside of our doors who are hurting, marginalized or oppressed is at the core of what we do and it remains a priority of our church life year in and year out.
3. Welcoming and reconciling those who in the past have been excluded from full participation in the life of the church, including people of differing races, cultures, sexual orientations and needs. Notice that we not only welcome but we commit ourselves to being a reconciling congregation, which means we resolve to face, work through, correct and heal the injustices and oppressions of the past that marginalized some of us. And we are committed to helping our denomination to do the same and to help society become more inclusive and welcoming.

Year-in, year-out, good times and hard times, flush years and lean years, these remain our core commitments. These things are always the priorities of how we spend our time and how we deploy our tithes and offerings. They are at the center of our prayer life. These will not change, at least not during my ministry here.

But from time to time, we will also focus on areas of our church life that need strengthening. We will devote some special attention, for a time, to aspects of our life together that need a boost.

This year in **2004** we are focusing on three areas in order to strengthen them. We are devoting extra time, energy and resources to them to give them a boost:

1. Congregation care through small groups and personal ministries to make sure everyone has the opportunity to build close personal friendships within the congregation.
2. Children and family ministries so that we remain a church where children are welcomed, included and nurtured.
3. Communication to each other and the world around us through our publications, Website, ads, etc.

We have made enormous strides at strengthening our ministries to children and families. During the first

half of the 2004, attendance in our Sunday school was up 70 percent. Our children, some of who had been drifting away, have come back and are present. Of course we need to continue to work at this and to stay in communication with our children, to provide them with an excellent Sunday school experience.

We have also been making progress this year in developing congregational care systems. You heard Anne Ledyard talk last week about CC, or Congregational Care or Christ Care groups, that we are developing in the hope that each one of us will have some group within the church where we will have a more intimate relationship with others and be able to talk about our faith journey and our spiritual life and just life in general.

We have also been making, thanks to our Communication Committee, good progress in the area of communications. You will be able to pick up your copy of our second edition of *All Things Foundry* today. What a gift to us this has been! My first year here I felt like I did not half of what was going on around here. So our Communications Committee resolved to put together one book that would show all of our ministries and missions in one place so that we all might be better informed about them.

We have a wonderful new pictorial directory that will soon be published by our Community Life Committee. Our web site is being updated regularly. You will see a new website up in November. Our Focus and Forge are improving. We are doing a better job of helping each other know what is going on here.

So these are areas that we have a boost this year and that we will continue to put energy into next year.

Next year in **2005**, while continuing to work on current focuses, we will concentrate on strengthening two additional areas of our life together:

1. Administration, organization and data management to support all our church programs and missions. We will assure that our operations, reporting, record keeping, and information sharing for leaders and members are dependable, useful and transparent. I know this is not the first thing that comes to people's minds when we think about ministry and mission. But we have learned here at Foundry how important administration is to all of the rest of our mission and ministry.

This year we faced the realization that good administration is critical for our ability to do all our other ministries and missions. In the past we had tried to cut too many corners, and our church was beginning

to suffer because of it. We have not had enough staff. We have used computers that were held together by duct tape. We have tried to get by with software systems that we bought because they are the cheapest that anybody could find anywhere. The staff, as committed as they were, just could not keep up with the administrative needs of the church.

We could not get information out to people who needed the addresses and phone numbers of members of the committees that they were asked to chair in a timely fashion. We could not get financial information out to you in our congregation in a timely fashion. Our data bases would not talk with one another. No matter how committed our staff was, because our equipment was old and there was never enough time, we just could not produce the information needed by our leaders and members to be leaders. The breaking point for me was when I discovered that one of our members was still getting mail at home addressed to his beloved wife who had died almost a year ago. We need administration in this church that helps us make sure we treat one another better than that.

So as we have done our planning as a church to prepare for 2005 we have said that we are going to put more resources into our administrative staff and into our computers and our record keeping systems and our financial tracking systems. This is an important thing for us to do if the rest of the church is going to be able to do our mission and ministry.

SPRC called together a Blue-Ribbon panel to study what we needed to do to get our house in order. As a result of this study, the Council voted to establish a senior administration position and SPRC secured the appointment of Rev. Peter DeGroote, a pastor with unique administrative abilities. Under Peter's leadership we will seek to fill three administrative positions: Administrative Associate for Finance, Administrative Assistant for Membership Services, and Administrative Assistant for Operations. This will return our administrative staff to the level it was before staff cuts voted in late 2002, and allow us to do a better job of information and financial management. However, this also requires an increase in administrative salary support.

2. Mission support through restoring our Minister of Mission staff position to full-time in order to better support existing groups and open doors to new opportunities for service.

I asked our new Minister of Mission, Jana Meyer, to join us for worship this morning, even though she does not officially begin her ministry here until November 11. I wanted you to meet her today. When Jennifer Knutsen left Foundry, our church made two important decisions: One was to make the Minister of mission full-time again. We all appreciated Jennifer so much that when she wanted to be less than full time, we scaled the position back because we wanted her to be able to continue to work with us.

Now that Jennifer has decided to move on, our church went through an interesting discussion and struggle. Did we want to continue our Minister of Mission position as a part time position or did we want to renew our commitment to a full time Minister of Mission and to an expanded mission program? Here is what I heard our church leaders saying about this question. They said that at Foundry Church mission is as important as the utilities. Mission is as important as electricity, and gas and everything else that keeps this place functional. If we cannot have a significant and effective mission program then let us turn out the lights and go home, So we made the financial commitment to have the Minister of Mission program become fulltime again.

The second important decision was this: We decided to do a full-scale, all-out national search for our new Minister of Mission. We established a search committee. The committee advertised nationally and aggressively. Myles Greene, its chair, did an amazing job. The committee looked at 46 resumes. It spent a full day interviewing potential candidates by telephone, and another day doing lengthy interviews with the three finalists. The committee talk with each candidate for almost two hours each. And finally the committee made a recommendation to the Staff Parish Relations Committee that we invite Jana to join our staff to do this work.

Jana has two advanced degrees. She has a masters of divinity degree from Union Seminary in New York City and a masters in social work from Hunter College. She has been a social worker at one of our Methodist hospitals in Mozambique, Africa. She has worked in shelters for the homeless in Baltimore. She has worked as a Spanish outreach worker in a domestic violence program in Kentucky. She is fluent in Spanish and can get by in Portuguese.

She brings exceptional skills and, most of all, she has been looking to do this kind of work, congregational-based mission work all of her ministerial life. This is her calling.

The commitment to fulltime ministry and the commitment to find the best possible person to fill the position demonstrate that mission is a central and a core commitment for us. We will invest the resources that we need to invest to touch the world around us in an effective ways.

These are the priorities and focuses we are asking you to support in the year ahead with your time, talent, energies, tithes, offerings and gifts.

There are two more concerns I want to mention that are not on the outline, but that were raised in my conversations with church leaders over the past weeks.

One of them is the question of our building. Does this plan deal with the needs of our building?

Three years ago Foundry had a Capital Campaign and many of you made commitments and contributed to the Capital Campaign to deal with needed renovations on our building. We have a great Building Committee that has been working with a wonderful architectural firm. They have developed a plan to renovate this building.

This building needs some attention between the walls where the electricity is and in back of the walls where the heating and air conditioning are. It needs to be even more accessible than it is now. There are many other concerns that we need to address in this building. The needs of the building are not included in our budget plan for 2005. But before the end of our five-year Capital Campaign, we need to have taken a first step in addressing our building needs.

We are not going to be able to do everything we want all at once. Notice the reference in our scripture lesson to Abraham where living for a time in tents in the land he had been promised. (Heb. 11: 9) It will take some time to address the needs of our building and we will need to figure out how to do it without lessening our commitment to the priorities that I have been talking about -- without lessening our commitment to vital worship and to strong mission and to being a welcoming and a reconciling church.

The second concern that came up in the meetings that we had with our leaders is our relationship to the denomination of which we are part, the United Methodist Church.

We have been given a great blessing. We have been given the blessing of being part of a great church during a historic struggle for justice. Just as in the past our church struggled dealing with the issue of racial segregation and just as in the past we struggled with the ordination of women, so now we have the privilege and blessing of being able to participate in the struggle for the full inclusion and affirmation of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender peoples in the life of our church.

The voice of the church on this issue is critically important to the larger society. The United Methodist Church which is the third largest denomination in the United States. The two denominations that are larger than us are not going to help very much on this. They are the Roman Catholic Church and the Southern Baptist Church. If any denomination in the United States is going to speak a prophetic voice to the society on the full inclusion of gay and lesbian people, it is going to be us. And if our denomination is going to do it, it will be because of the leadership of Foundry Church.

Sometimes I do not think we realize how far we have already come. In 1978 at 31 years of age, I was taken to meet with the Staff, Parish Relations Committee of a campus congregation in Philadelphia. They had asked me to prepare a list of 10 dreams that I would have for that church if I became the campus minister and pastor. One of the dreams that I included on the list is that we would be warm and welcoming to gay and lesbian people. In 1978 I sat outside the room after meeting with the committee for almost an hour and a half while that committee debated whether they would have a pastor who included that dream on his list.

In comparison to my experience in 1978, at General Conference this past year when there was a witness on the floor of General Conference by gay and lesbian people and those of us who support them, over half of our United Methodist bishops stood in support of the witness. We have come a long way.

We are greatly blessed to be able to be part of an historic struggle for justice within our church and our society at our time in history. Forty years from now there will be people who will say, "I wish I could have been part of the church back then when they were fighting that battle."

I would ask this of you: that in your participation and in your membership and in your giving, that you do nothing to undermine the witness of Foundry United Methodist Church to our denomination. Your support for Foundry Church is more important than it has ever been if you are committed to this witness and to this struggle. There is no congregation within the United Methodist Church that has made a greater difference in this area than Foundry Church has. And we need to continue the witness, to continue to be a reconciling and joyful voice in the midst of this struggle.

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It is not that there is anything wrong with Foundry's life as a church, nothing dramatically broken, our relationships are fine. Yet I discern a stirring within our corporate soul. There is yet a new adventure with God awaiting us although we do not quite know yet where we are going.

May we continue faithful to our core commitments – worship, mission, and reconciliation. May we strengthen the base of our ministry through strengthened relationships and caring for one another, communication, ministry with children and youth, and a greatly strengthened administrative organizational base and our renewed commitment to be a church in mission to our community and our world.

And let us listen to the lump in our throats and to the stirring in our souls and the itch within us as God invites us to continue on this journey to the promised land.

*By faith Abraham stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. Heb. 11: 9-10*