

NOTE: The text below is "sort of" what George preached that day.

Two weeks ago, I used my own spiritual journey as an illustration of how convoluted a life path can be, how many turns it can take, how hard it is sometimes to discern direction. Last week, I invited you to begin to think about how communities of faith live, change, and – sometimes – die.

This week I am going to bring this home: to this place, this time, this gathered people...and the challenges we are facing *today* as First Plymouth Church (UCC). I would even go so far as to say that this is more than a challenge; it is a crisis, a crisis that has been 40 years in the making but has happened so slowly that it has crept up on us, so it doesn't *feel* like a crisis. However, whether we have been worshiping here for all 40 of those years, for 20 of them, or since last week, we (you and I) are the laborers in the vineyard when this harvest has come due. Unless we reverse a steady, slow 40 year decline in commitment and membership, we will not survive. As one younger member of Council said at our last meeting, "An organization is either growing or dying. There is no in between." We have declined 80% in the last 40 years.

Without significant evangelism on our parts starting today...and I mean, quite literally, *today*, we will be leaving this building within a couple of years. We can no longer afford to stay here. And before you ask, Yes, the Council is trying to address this. The Council is trying to figure out a way to get us all to talk about this and discern our future together. And what they are facing in trying to set that up is its own quintessential example of an underlying problem: no matter when discussion is scheduled, people don't show up. The Council knows this from past experience. To make this point, ask yourself when was the last time you went to a scheduled congregational conversation. On average we had less than 10 people showing up for these as we tried to figure out how to move forward last year. Ten people out of a total membership of 991.

The solution that everyone eagerly suggests is to grow. I have a steady stream of people coming to me with good ideas about what *I* should do to grow this church. So, let me tell you what I have done.

First, believing that new vision was crucial, I suggested, then helped the Council examine options and then choose a method of long-range planning, one based on Appreciative Inquiry. This was run by church members; the plan that emerged came from members. It was and is a plan developed by those who chose to participate in the process.

Next, we restructured our governance so that it would empower the plan and our mission rather than spawning meetings. A task force of laity convened and reduced the Church Council from 41 members to 9, commissioning them to focus on leadership, vision, communication, and our future.

Then I invited the Chairs of Ministries and committees to form the Mission Team in order to coordinate our efforts and support each other, eliminating as much miscommunication and as much duplication of efforts as possible so that our human and financial resources can be stretched further.

I listened carefully during the long-range planning process to who you say you are at your best and I have thrown my energy and my time behind programs that reflect your articulated vision of yourselves, programs such as the Web of Care, a program which is designed to insure that our more than 300 elderly members can have visits from and be part of the love of this community.

Most importantly, I have led you in worship and preached the gospel to you to the best of my ability. In addition to visiting the dying; conducting baptisms, funerals, and other rites of passage; supervising staff; supporting and nurturing your lay leaders; counseling; leading workshops; and showing up in purple when the Rockies won the pennant, that is what *I* have been doing.

I will continue to do what I can do, but what I can do is not now and will never be enough to grow a Congregational church. However, there is something that has the potential to be enough, more than enough. I'd like you to listen to your own words:

**[MEMBERS OF THE CONGREGATION READ THESE ALOUD FROM WHERE THEY ARE SITTING.]**

First Plymouth is at its best:

- ...when we create a sense of community through individual participation and involvement.
- ...when we unconditionally accept, care for and support our members.
- ...when we reach out to people outside our church community.
- ...when we foster intellectual, personal and spiritual growth.
- ...when we provide a forum to express and embrace our faith.
- ...when we seek and share diversity.
- ...when we nurture families, children and youth.
- ...when we rejoice in our rich traditions and history and explore new boundaries.

What a glorious vision! What you said of yourselves is great! But I cannot do this for you. I certainly cannot do it alone. I cannot be who you say you are. Only you can be who you say you are. I can help empower you by providing rich and strengthening worship and visionary preaching, but I cannot be the reason that people come to this congregation, and I cannot be the reason they stay here. First Plymouth Congregational Church is not and never should be "The Cult of George" or of any minister; we are Congregationalists and called to be people of the gospel, defined by the power of the good news to transform lives in our current context.

Let me say that again, We are called to be people of the gospel, defined by the power of the good news to transform lives. But I must tell you today that we no longer have the luxury of waiting. If we want to live the vision you just heard, we must do it now. We must start *today*.

Moving to a smaller building is a temporary solution because without a different attitude about evangelism, in a generation or two that new location will also be too large. The question you need to answer today is, Do you want to make your vision of First Plymouth Church real? The only thing standing between now and the fulfillment of your vision is the walk from the articulation of the vision to the living of its reality.

Do you want to be who you say you can be?

Personally, I love your vision; I love the mission statement I read before I came here to interview; and I have come to love this congregation. But my love is not enough. Only your love, lived fully, intentionally, and without counting the cost, will turn this crisis into hope and triumph. God is offering resurrection, but we need to stand up and walk out of the contentment of the tomb.

There are hopeful seeds, small shoots suggesting nascent resurrection. At the first Choir rehearsal this year there were eight new members and the Choir sounds glorious.

Church member Heather Greenwood was frustrated that we were not doing enough mission outside of the church in ways that would involve children, weaving the habit and discipline of service into their lives from an early age. She wanted to be part of a church that does that and she realized, "If I don't do it, here or somewhere else, who will?" So she organized LOFT (Living Our Faith Together.) It launches two weeks from today on October 11<sup>th</sup>. On the second Sunday of each month, families and all who want to join, will gather for 9:00 o'clock worship and the 10:10 CE Hour. They will have lunch together in Plymouth Hall, and then go out to do a service project for the afternoon. She asks you all to participate.

Church member, Anne Kleinkopf, has started the New Spirit groups (three of them) as a way of helping those who participate engage with God personally and experientially. She thought, "If I don't do this, who will?"

Randy Nicholas and other members of the Inclusivity/Open and Affirming Committee are working hard to seek and share diversity not only by promoting such important activities as the Gay Pride Parade, but by inviting and welcoming speakers from the Muslim community to teach us and stretch us. Randy and the others thought, if we don't do it, who will?

Margo Sargent and other members of the Rwanda Task Force, (understanding that if they don't do this, who will?) are working to support First Plymouth's international mission efforts. Next Sunday, October 4<sup>th</sup>, they have arranged for Dr. Edward Antonio, himself an African, to preach on reconciliation and the desperate need for it in our world. And they continue to ask us to make a foundational difference in the lives of hundreds of children in Kenombe village outside Kigali.

New church member and young adult, Michelle Mullinax, would like to start a ministry to the hearing-impaired (a profoundly under-served population) with the intention that at least one service every Sunday morning will be signed by someone fluent in American Sign Language. This is not a ministry she can do alone. She needs your help, so if anyone is willing to participate in making this a reality, please contact me and I will put you in touch with Michelle. Can you imagine, can you imagine what this would mean to others, and especially to us, if we offered this ministry?

Do you see? Do you see the potential we have as we live our vision of ourselves? If we don't live it, who will? Leadership guru Steven Covey says that to get people moving they need vision (for without it they perish), and the leader needs to take people there in their imagination. But I don't need to. You have already gone there in your imaginations, and we are beginning to live that vision, that glorious vision. So I invite you, I invite each and every one of you, to live into your vision of yourselves, and invite and welcome others. Let me tell you the number one way churches grow, out pacing all other ways combined. It's not the minister. It's you. Your love of your church and its mission and your invitation to others to share Christ's love. There is no more effective means to church growth than that. Invite your neighbors, invite your friends, invite your family members, commit to being here every week and starting or sharing a ministry. Stop listening to the complainers and start listening to your vision. Those who have come before us have gifted us with this building and our Congregational traditions. We are empowered. We have the vision. We have the facility. We have the capability. We have the structure. We have the people. We need the will. A collective vision cannot be lived by a few. If we don't live it, who will?

To end this sermon, I offer you one more reminder of your self-articulated vision. I ask you to turn to the inside of the back cover of our orders of worship. You will see there our church's mission statement that you all crafted nearly ten years ago, that very mission statement that articulated such a core sense of identity that when searching for a new church I took one look at it and said to myself, "THAT is the kind of church I want to be part of." Let us say it now together:

THE MISSION OF FIRST PLYMOUTH CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH,  
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST IS  
TO WORSHIP GOD,  
TO NURTURE PEOPLE IN THEIR CHRISTIAN JOURNEY,  
AND  
TO WITNESS TO GOD'S LOVE IN WORD AND DEED.  
  
RELYING ON THE GRACE AND POWER OF GOD,  
KNOWN TO US MOST FULLY  
IN THE LIFE AND TEACHING OF JESUS CHRIST,  
WE ASPIRE TO BE A COMMUNITY  
WHICH IS  
BIBLICALLY BASED,  
INTELLECTUALLY OPEN,  
THEOLOGICALLY PROGRESSIVE  
AND  
INCLUSIVE OF ALL PEOPLE.

Fostering an atmosphere of joy and celebration that welcomes all  
people, we commit to provide:

Varied and meaningful opportunities for worship and spiritual growth.

Engaging and interactive Christian education for all age groups.

A caring and compassionate ministry to members and friends of the church family.

Loving service to the wider community with a focus on human need,  
social justice, and stewardship of the earth.

And let all the people say, "AMEN!"