

A VISION FOR THE FUTURE

Philippians 3:14-16

*God has given us a future with hope
at First United Methodist Church!*

A sermon preached by
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First United Methodist Church
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We want to visit with you today about the future of the church. We believe God is calling us to move in some particular directions, and we'd like to share these with you.

Bud: I'm sure you've heard the fable that comes out of India about the blind men who encountered an elephant one day. One blind man grabbed the elephant's tail and said, "The elephant is like a rope!"

Another blind man grabbed the elephant's leg and declared, "No, the elephant is like a tree!"

Another blind man felt the side of the elephant and said, "No the elephant is like a wall."

And so it went. The one who felt the elephant's ear thought the elephant was like a fan. The one who felt the trunk thought the elephant was like a snake. And the man who touched the tusk of the elephant thought it was like a spear. Each blind man was correct in his assessment of the elephant, but nobody had the whole picture.

The church is like an elephant. In part we are like a monastery because we pray and worship all the time. In part we are like a social service agency, because we take care of people's needs. But no, we are like a school, because we teach the Word and always have classes going. And we are like a business, because we have to maintain buildings and manage employees and keep our finances in order. The church is all these things.

Today we are going to talk about a different aspect of the church than what we normally address in the sermon. If we are going to be a thriving church and do the ministry God calls us to do, we have to pay attention to the organizational part of the church. What are our priorities? What are our goals? What are the strategic directions where we feel God is leading us?

So let's start with the good stuff. There are many things to celebrate about First United Methodist Church. We are a strong church with a great tradition. We are celebrating the 175th anniversary of our founding in 6 weeks. That is definitely something to celebrate!

- *Dane: Attendance on a slight upward trend, up 17% since 2014, maybe a little more by the end of the year. Most of growth in Connexion service.*

- *Finances are stable and solid. Thank you!*

- *Our ministry programs for children, youth and music are all expanding. Our children's daycare and day schools are among the best in Fort Smith. All led by great staff people.*

- *We are involved in all kinds of missions in the community and outside our local area. From Guatemala to the Last Sunday breakfast to the sack lunch program to hurricane relief to partnering with schools, we are constantly reaching out to those in need.*

- *What I have noticed in the three years I have been here is the shift from funerals to baptisms and new members. Our Newcomer's Lunch was full. We always have someone to visit with at Coffee With the Pastors. There is a spirit of enthusiasm all around the church.*

Bud: So where do we go from here? What do we need to do now that will ensure our success in the future? First, we depend on God! Then there are some other initiatives we need to take:

We need to take steps now to ensure our long-term financial stability. Let me be clear here. We are not in financial difficulties at this point. But we need to be proactive to make sure we never get there, because then it will be too late to preserve a thriving ministry. The reason this is an issue is because we discovered after analyzing our giving from last year that over a third of our annual ministry income comes from generous saints who are over 80 years old. We love every one of them, but that is an unsustainable situation. Most of those folks will go to heaven in the next twenty years.

So the leaders of the Finance Committee and the Administrative Board developed an action plan with three points:

1. Strive to increase the number of younger families in the church. Do our job on evangelism.

2. Educate those under 80, particularly those under 50, about giving as a spiritual discipline. The generations after the people who lived

through World War II have to be taught and encouraged to give. We don't do it naturally.

3. Emphasize endowment giving through our Foundation. We have a wonderful Foundation at First United Methodist Church that invests endowment gifts and uses the interest off those investments to support our ministry. Last year the Foundation contributed \$165K to our various ministries at the church. This year it will be about \$110K. Planned giving is a way to continue your support of the church even after you go to heaven. We have a great legacy in this church, and almost every family can plan to give a perpetual gift through their estate at the end of their lives.

So next year, we are going to take action to ensure the financial stability of our church for the long haul. We will start with a capital campaign next spring that will have two purposes. One will be to refurbish our family life center. It needs a facelift, and the Connexion worship space needs some significant improvements. The other part of the campaign will be to emphasize our endowment giving, both to make gifts in the present, but even more, to educate the church about the possibility of supporting this ministry forever. Just think of the joy that will bring!

Then in the fall of 2018, we will do a more involved annual giving campaign, to help educate all the families of the church about the spiritual importance of stewardship and the satisfaction of giving to the Lord.

So we are going to be talking about money a lot in 2018. Get ready. But it's all positive; it's all faithful; it's all for the future of our church; and it's only for a season. We won't do it every year from now on!

Dane: I heard an old interview on the radio the other day with the late Frank Broyles. He was talking about the factors that led to the decision to join the SEC. Faced with declining attendance and revenue in the old Southwest Conference and the possibility that the conference would disband, Frank acted ahead of his time to get Arkansas into a nationally-prominent conference, thus assuring the

Razorbacks a long-term financially viable athletic program. And since then Arkansas' athletic program (if not their football) has been one of the most successful in the nation. Frank Broyles could read the signs. His wisdom and foresight allowed the U of A to grow and thrive. We can read the signs as well about the financial future of our church. If we don't take action, it could be tough down the road. But if we act now from a position of strength, we will go a long way toward ensuring a positive future for the church.

Bud: The second big idea for our future is to claim our identity as a downtown regional church. We have had many conversations about our “mission field” over the last few years, and the emphasis has been on our ministry here in the downtown area. We want to continue to claim that. But our mission field is bigger than just downtown. We are a regional church; our members come from all over Fort Smith, Sebastian and Crawford County, over into Oklahoma. The revitalization of downtown is good for our church, and our missional base is here, but we want to expand our vision to be in ministry beyond our neighborhood as well.

Dane: Most of you have heard that the Barling United Methodist Church closed in June, and we considered whether we should take the property as a ministry site for the future. For a variety of reasons, we decided that property was not a good fit for our church. But the conversation ignited an interest in ministry in east Fort Smith. You know about the growth of city in the Chaffee Crossing area, and we may have an opportunity in the near future to engage new people and new forms of ministry in that area. At the same time, we are increasing our efforts to reach out to downtown through First Tuesdays, young adult ministries, downtown missions, etc.

Bud: We want to be a downtown regional church. It's not an either/or decision; it's a both/and possibility. We can do both. God will help us do both. As the prayer of Jabez says, God will bless us and enlarge our border, and his hand will be with us!¹

Dane: So what do we think the church will look like in five years? Where are we headed? We are facing the future from a position of strength, but there are some real challenges:

- *We have received and are receiving new members, and many of them are younger. We have to continue that trend and increase it.*

- *The church culture in our country has been eroding for 50 years. Church attendance used to be expected of every decent citizen—not so any more. Regular attendance used to mean practically every Sunday. Now with our ability to travel and the competition for weekend time commitments from activities for our kids, regular attendance may mean once every 4 to 6 weeks.*

- *We are facing some uncertainty in our denomination. The Council of Bishops appointed a special Commission to study and propose a solution for how the United Methodist Church can continue to stay united when we disagree on the issue of homosexuality, gay marriage and ordination of gay pastors. That's the presenting issue, but the deeper issues involve the way we interpret Scripture and the way we stay connected in covenant to one another. Nobody knows at this point where we will end up, but there may very well be some uncomfortable or even painful choices down the road. We can't ignore that elephant in the room. These are all challenges.*

Bud: Yet we cannot let our challenges define us or paralyze us. Our God is a big God, and God has a place and a purpose for FUMCFS. We are a large, strong, regional, historical church, and while that is not a guarantee of survival, we believe that with God's help we can meet our challenges and thrive in our ministry. God has always been faithful before, through 175 years of ministry in Fort Smith. Why would God abandon us now? There are challenges ahead of us, but we believe our best days can also be ahead of us, because we believe in a God, as Paul said, "who is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine. To him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen"²

The key to success in ministry is to stay true to our mission. And what is our mission? Broadly speaking, it is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. That means everything we do is supposed to be somehow focused on introducing people to Jesus, helping people grow spiritually, and then sending people out into the community and the world to make a Christian difference. That's what we're all about. That's all we need to be about.

Last January, our church leaders had a retreat day, and we talked about our mission as a church. We came up with three things we want to keep, and three things we need to improve. The three things we need to keep are :

1. Excellence and diversity in worship services.
2. Engagement with the mission field through community missions.
3. Educational ministries for children, youth, and adults.

The three things we need to improve are:

1. **Lay Ministry Empowerment**, that is, putting more lay people into significant areas of ministry and service. One of the key ways to do this is to teach **spiritual gifts** as the basis for leadership.

2. **Hospitality and Evangelism.** We need to welcome and invite and assimilate people better. We're making progress on this with our greeters and events for newcomers and nametags.

3. The use of **technology**, particularly in worship. We now have videos of the sermons available every week. We're working to improve our web presence and our social media.

If we can stay true to our mission, keep laser-focused on the main things that make us who we are, we will grow and thrive and succeed as a church.

Dane: But the real bottom line on our mission is the transformation of people. We are here to change lives for Jesus. And through our various ministries, we are seeing people transformed by the grace and love of God. We don't have time to tell you all the stories we hear of children, youth and adults who are falling deeper in love with God and finding new meaning and purpose through serving God in some

way. Some are coming to the church through bad experiences in other churches and have been kind of burnt out on church. Others have been spiritually adrift for a while and are coming back to faith. But when they come here, they find care and compassion and openness and a non-judgmental atmosphere that makes them want to come back and stay and grow. That's why we're here.

Bud: We are so excited for the future of First United Methodist Church! For 175 years, we have been in ministry to this community, but we believe God is renewing our church, leading us into some new forms of ministry, and giving us a spirit of revival. We're not perfect or even good yet at everything we're doing. But we feel like we're on a great trajectory and making progress toward becoming the church God calls us to be. So it's like Paul said in the letter to the Philippians, "I'm not saying that I have this all together, that I have it made. But I am well on my way, reaching out for Christ, who has so wondrously reached out for me. Friends, don't get me wrong: By no means do I count myself an expert in all of this, but I've got my eye on the goal, where God is beckoning us onward—to Jesus. I'm off and running, and I'm not turning back."³

Dane: So we're off and running. We're not turning back. We invite you to come with us. In the name of the Father, son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ I Chronicles 4:10.

² Ephesians 3:20-21.

³ Philippians 3:12-14.