Sunday, January 14, 1973
THE FUTURE OF FIRST-PLYMOUTH (Annual Report of the Senior Minister)
I Corinthians 12:12-28

Just a year ago on this Sunday, I preached my first sermon to you as your new Senior Minister. And then a few months before that in September of 1971, I spoke in the worship service and in a formal sense accepted the call to be the Senior Minister.

As you may remember on that occasion, the theme was -- “Helping Miracles Happen.” The sermon was based on the story of Jesus feeding the 5000 with the help of the boy who in faith brought his five loaves and two fish to Jesus. He didn’t stop to think whether or not it was enough. He wanted to help and so he gave all that he had. This is the kind of faith that miracles are made of.

So often we think we have so little to offer that there’s no use in even mentioning it. Or we just hold back whatever we have, not having enough faith to give it.

In that sermon, I went on to say that what makes a church congregation like this one really effective are the contributions of many people, their skills, their talents, their money, their interest, their spirit. When this happens, God’s multiplication takes over and miracles occur. Things happen that we never thought could happen. In other words, some of the largest problems are often solved through the little noticed services of people with only five loaves and two fish.

I concluded by saying that I would be coming to this job bringing my five loaves and two fish, and I hoped you also would bring yours and together we would have the faith and hope that God would multiply and make it more than sufficient for the work of this congregation.

Then in my first sermon here last January, the theme was “our mutual ministry,” the fact that we have as a congregation a mutual ministry one to the other and together to those outside our congregation including all the world.

In this mutual ministry there is a diversity of gifts and a division of labor. That’s what the Apostle Paul was talking about in our scripture lesson this morning. He used the image of the human body and said, “the body does not consist of one member, but many.” And each one is needed — the hand, the foot, the arm, the eyes, and all parts. If one member suffers, all suffer. If one member is honored, all rejoice together. Such is the nature of our human bodies, and such is the nature of church congregations. In fact, such is the nature of the world. The hand cannot do what the nose can do, the foot cannot do what the eye can do and who is to say which is most important? All need to function together in their diversity.

How then have we done during the year just past in our mutual ministry, in our helping miracles to happen. with what we’ve brought? And how does the future look for First-Plymouth Church? What kind of ministry is most needed in today’s world?

Many of the answers to these questions will be found in the annual reports of the other groups, organizations, and staff persons in our congregation. But here are some of my reflections on the year past and the future.

1. First, on the statistical side, we ended 1972, in a little better financial shape than the previous year. We received more dollars than we spent and that's always good news. In previous years we had built up some deficit, and thus at the end of 1972, we were able to reduce that deficit by around $2000. However, we still have a way to go on that.

In addition, for the first time in a number of years, First-Plymouth was able to meet its benevolence budget in full. In other words, we had enough income through benevolence pledges and special offerings to pay in full that portion of our budget.

Furthermore, on the basis of our most careful estimates, it looks now as if we will have enough income through pledges and other sources to completely underwrite our increased 1973 budget. In fact, if our estimates prove to be correct, we may even go over the goal by a slight amount. I'm told on good authority that if this happens, it will be the first time in the recent history of the congregation that this has happened. So, it's a time for rejoicing and thanking all of our members and friends for their generosity and faith in the work and ministry of First-Plymouth.

2. Secondly, in addition to our financial gains, our average attendance at the regular worship services showed an increase in the year just past. Overall, in 1972, we averaged about 60 more persons per Sunday than in 1971. That's not a fantastic amount but considering that most churches in the country are showing a decrease in attendance, it's something to be happy about. Some of our services showed a spectacular increase. For example, the Christmas Eve candlelight service had almost double the attendance of last year.

I'm still far from satisfied and I hope the same is true for you. My personal goal, as I said last year at the annual meeting, is to reach an average attendance of 700 per Sunday during the fall, winter, and spring months. That will take several years to achieve, but we're going to do it. We have one of the most beautiful buildings for worship in the country and it's not right to see it only half filled for worship. Furthermore, worship in this building takes on more excitement when the building is filled, and the sound is improved.

We're going to continue to work at making the worship services exciting and helpful — but we need you here to help us do that.

3. Thirdly, we showed a small net gain in membership for 1972 — 44 persons. We received a total of .04 new members, but through death, transfer and being dropped from the rolls for other reasons, we lost 60 members. Again, 44 is not a very large net gain, but it is a gain, while the trend in most mainline Protestant churches has been a net loss.

We continue to have a large number of visitors in our worship services each Sunday who sign the guest book or register with one of the cards in the pews. Presently, the Board of Deacons has set up a program of telephoning and visitation of visitors which should be a great help in the future. We are already feeling the effect.

Furthermore, as you may know, the Deacons have also set a goal of 150 new members in the coming year and it's an attainable goal if we all work at it.

Now I mention all of these statistics, not because they are ends in themselves, but because they can be indicators of what's happening in our congregation. I have been greatly encouraged during the past year by the overall spirit of the congregation. There is a willingness to try new things, a sense of trust, and a hopeful attitude among our members and friends.

But let's look ahead to this year of 1973, and further. What is the future of First-Plymouth? What are some of the things we need to work at in this year and the next?

1. First, I'm convinced that we have to continue to work hard on growth in our membership. I have already alluded to the goal of 150 new members this year. Many of you have heard me say often that this building can be of service and use to 2000 members as well as 1400 members. And when I talk about an increase in the number of members, I'm not doing so just because I think growth in itself is good or an end in itself.

I'm interested in increased membership because I'm con-vinced there are a lot of lone1y needy peop1e in our society who are searching for meaning and community. Furthermore, I believe that the Christian faith and the church have something to contribute for the betterment of people and our whole society.

Not only does the church seek to introduce persons to a living personal and vital faith in Jesus Christ, so that this faith become a motivating force in a persons'life, but equally important a congregation needs to relate people to others so that they feel a part of a community of persons. Jesus said, "Where two are three are gathered together in my name, there am I also." God's love, a faith in Jesus Christ, both are best expressed and ex-perienced within a group of persons.

I am emphasizing this because I just finished reading and reviewing the book "A NATION OF STRANGERS" by Vance Packard. It's a book all church people in particular should read. Mr. Packard contends that part of the problem with our society is that it is a society of torn roots. His studies sf people in the United States and other parts of the world as well, show that great numbers of persons feel unconnected to either people or places and throughout much of the nation there is a breakdown in community living.

In fact, there is a general shattering of small group life beginning with the family. He details a variety of forces 5. which are affecting social fragmentation and believes that we are confronted with a society that is coming apart at the seams. We've all felt this-in one way or another. It's more of a major problem on the east coast and the west coast and in the large urban areas, but we here in Lincoln are also affected more than we realize.

All of these forces have led to the accelerating fragmentation of our basic social unit, the family. This can be seen in the steady rise of broken families everywhere.

Now in all of this disruption of familiar patterns, many people are responding with a deepened sense of loneliness. James Geraghty, who has been commissioning the New Yorker's Cartoons for three decades and tries to keep abreast of the national mood remarked some months ago, "loneliness is the name of the game." Another commentator noted-- "There is a sense of loneliness in the country." People feel unconnected.

A sense of loneliness also undoubtedly accounts for the fact that many of the most popular songs of the past few years have focused on the sense of hurt and yearning. Carole King lamented in a smash hit that nobody seemed to stay in one place anymore. In another popular song, she exclaimed how good it was to know you had a friend.

And in the popular children's television program called Mr. Rogers, the words of the theme song he sings are-- "Won't you be my neighbor? Won't you please, won't you please, please won't you be my neighbor?"

And in the taverns of many industrial cities, former hillbillies for months sipped beer to the lament, "I wanna go home, I wanna go home!"

There is in the country a sharp. increase in people suffering alienation or just feeling adrift which is having an impact on emotional and even physical health. There is a sub-stantial increase in the number of persons suffering a loss of sense of community, identity, and continuity. These losses all contribute to a deteriorating sense of well-being, both for individuals and for society. In the church we talk a lot about salvation. The Greek word for salvation literally means "health," "well-being."

All of this is to say that churches like First-Plymouth have a mission and ministry to carry out to the many new people who move into this city who are lonely and seeking, and to the many lonely and lost people who are already here.

All human beings need a community, a feeling of continuity, the sense of being connected to others who care. In fact, a person's meaning and purpose in life comes primarily from his or her relationship with other human beings. Thus, a person's life begins to lose meaning, purpose, and direction most rapidly when that person becomes estranged or separated from others. The deepest desire of all of us is to be at one with someone.

In our kind of world, we in the church in particular need to focus our most creative thinking on developing ways to rediscover and rebuild the natural human community. And we must work out — invent if necessary — patterns of living that permit us to enjoy some sense of continuity in our lives so that we can feel clearly that we have a place in the ongoing stream of life.

The Christian faith has a unique ability to do this for it underscores the fact that we are all connected with one another and that we have a common history under one Creator. The whole reason for the church's existence is to increase among people the love of God and neighbor.

2. This means secondly that merely for us to increase our membership in numbers is not enough. We have to also be able to integrate persons into the kinds of smaller groupings where they can experience the relationship of other people. We already of course have a number of such groups within the church. The whole organization of the circles within the Women's Association is for this purpose.

However, we are going to have to begin even more different kinds of groups within the coming years. We are going to make a beginning attempt at this during this coming Lenten season when persons throughout the parish will be invited to join a small group which will meet once a week for 5 or 6 weeks in homes. You'll hear more about this later.

We are also going to be attempting a new kind of ministry with students who have come to Lincoln, from many of the smaller towns and cities around the state. Most of the United Churches of Christ in Nebraska have already sent us the names of such people.

In this year and in future years, we're also going to be working hard on strengthening family life. Already we have scheduled a "Family Camp," for one week, the first week in June, in

Colorado in an attempt to build new kinds of relationships between families and within families. Anyone is eligible to sign up. Single persons, married persons, with or without children.

We also intend to do much more along the lines of personal care and attention with the many of our longer living people and people who live alone who are members of our congregation. One of my deepest regrets this first year among you is that I have not had enough available time to be able to call and visit with many such people. Our Deaconesses and Deacons have done a superb job as has the Women's Association through its circles. But there's much more that needs to be done.

Churches around the country and we here in First-Plymouth have a major ministry in helping persons to overcome the loneliness that so much a part of today's world. As never before in the history of religion the quest for God includes the quest for selfhood and community.

I look forward with hope and anticipation to many years of work and fun with all of you.