Sunday, January 13, 1974
GOOD NEWS AND BAD NEWS (A Report on the State of the Church)

Recently a biography of Jesus written by Andrew Greeley in the New York. Times Magazine began this way — “There is good news, we are told, and bad news. The good news? Jesus has come back to the world! The bad news? He’s really ticked off!”

The joke in its modified original form is undoubtedly vulgar. To some it may seem to skirt the edge of blasphemy. In fact, however, it conveys a profound historical and theological truth.

As the article points out, the man from Nazareth would scarcely be totally pleased with his followers at any time since his life on earth. For example, should Jesus reappear on the scene today, he might respond to the current attempts to make him an entertainment culture hero in about the same way he responded to the moneychangers in the temple.

Furthermore, Jesus would not like the picture created by some Roman Catholics which portray him as a gun-toting revolutionary. He would scarcely be edified by the argument of some conservative Protestants that he is an American superpatriot. He would not be excited by the news that he made the cover of TIME Magazine, not once but twice as a hippie hero. As a man who never sought anything for himself, Jesus would be acutely embarrassed by the attempt of the fundamentalist “Key 73” campaign to “Win the Continent for Christ.” What they would win, he wouldn’t want.

He would not be pleased by the plea of the Roman Catholic Church that nothing besides periodic continence can be done about the world’s population problems. But then he wouldn’t like very much the propensity of Protestant Clergy in solemn assembly convened to pass a lengthy set of resolutions providing detailed answers to all existing political and social problems.

There is good news and bad news all around. Actually, all of the good news, bad news stories that we hear reflect a deep insight into life itself and into the institutions we are all a part of. Good and bad are often mixed together in this world, intertwined so that many times it is even difficult to tell the good from the bad. Furthermore, what sometimes seems good to us can turn out to be the opposite, and what sometimes seems bad to us can turn out to be good. Jesus himself talked about this in some of his parables.

So it is with some risk that I characterize some things as being good and some bad, yet it’s a helpful way for looking at the work of First-Plymouth Church for the year just past and a way of looking ahead to the future.

Let’s begin on the statistical side. Here as in other places there is good news and bad news.

1. First, the good news is that we have continued to grow in membership. During the calendar year 1973, 128 new members were received. We had a loss of 50 members through letters of transfer and death, for a net gain of 78. By comparison in 1972, we received 104 new members and lost 60, for a total net gain of 44. In 1971, however, we received 71 new members, lost 57 members for a net gain of only 14, and in 1970, First-Plymouth received only 45 new members, and, after subtracting the members who died or moved away, we had a substantial net loss. So, we have reversed the trend.

Now even a net gain of 78 members for 1973, is not a very large gain, but it is nevertheless a gain, while the trend in most mainline Protestant Churches continues to be static or a loss. In addition, 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. The Board of Deacons and in particular, Mr. M.A. Alexander as a member of that Board, has done an excellent job in making our visitors feel welcome and in keeping in contact with them through telephoning and personal contacts.

On the bad news side is the fact that even though our membership is beginning to grow significantly again, attendance at our worship services stabilized. Thus, I'm personally disappointed that our average worship attendance is not better. Our overall average attendance in 1973, was about the same as in 1972.

It's also bad news in the sense that worship is still not a regular vital disciplined part of many of our member's lives. A society made up of individuals who neglect the regular worship of God who transcends all too soon begins to worship lesser or false gods.

Now I know the usual excuses for not being at worship. I also know that in the past some of the reasons for irregular — attendance at worship were that the services lacked meaning for people, they lacked excitement. Worship can become a hum-drum boring affair. And sometimes the services ran overtime. But as you know, we've been trying in First-Plymouth in the past two years to add excitement and variety to worship and we appreciate your comments and help.

However, worship is really going to be exciting in this beautiful building only if our services are filled or nearly filled with people. I'm going to say more about this later.

2. Secondly, there is good news and bad news in our over-all financial situation. On the statistical side we ended 1973, in the black again. That's our second straight year for that. Also, for the second year in a row, we were able to pay our benevolences in full.

In addition, on the good news side, we had a debt retirement campaign last spring which brought the church about $91,000 in pledges payable over the next two years. Our goal was to raise $100,000. Even though we didn't reach our goal, we should be able to pay off our mortgage completely with-in the next two years.

The bad news is that we did not quite receive the number of pledges we needed for the preliminary budget we had prepared last November. We found after analyzing the pledges for 1974, that we would be about $4000 short of what we needed, thus we have had to trim our 1974 general operating budget by that amount, and it will be that trimmed budget that we will present to the annual meeting on Wednesday night. Now in one sense it's not a setback, because our overall budget will still be higher than in 1973, as will our overall income. It's just that we did not advance as far as we would've liked.

Again, I'm aware of the reasons that we all have for not increasing our pledges to the church or for modest increases, but I also noted in the paper this past week that Christmas buying on the whole and other kinds of consumer spending for things which could not be called necessities continued to rise. In other words, for too many people the church is still considered something optional and not a necessity. If there is a little more money left over after doing all the other things we want to do, then we might increase our giving for the work of the church.

The really good news about our overall finances is the dedicated volunteer work that our treasurer Ray Dein has been doing this past year. He has put his wisdom, manage-ment skills and years of experience to work for our church in its financial matters.

Now statistics like all of these on membership, worship attendance and finances, only tell a part of the story. The other reports you will receive on Wednesday at the annual meeting give much more detail and cover other areas. And I suppose that any church could be doing quite well statistically and could at the same time be a disappointing church to Jesus Christ. But they do tell part of the story and help us in our overall analysis.

More than statistics, however, is the good news that all of us on the staff continue to be encouraged by the over- all spirit of the congregation. There continues to be a willingness to try new things, as well as a basic trust and a hopeful attitude among our members. We're also be-coming known as a friendly, open church. One letter I received a few weeks ago, put it this way — "We've visited First-Plymouth for years and can't believe the changes that are taking place. First-Plymouth has come alive."

Now let's look ahead so that together we plan and do our best to have more good news than bad. What are some of the things we need to work at in this year and in the years to come?

1. First, as I said last year in my report to you, I continue to be convinced that we have to work diligently on growth in our membership. We need to receive at least 150 new members in 1974. Hopefully, for the next several years we can average a net gain of at least 100 members each year. This means all of us will have to be working at gaining new members. When you meet any new person or even some of your oldest friends, be sensitive to the fact that they may be looking for a church. Invite them to visit First-Plymouth.

2. Secondly, we need to continue to strengthen the financial base of our congregation. In addition to increased education on stewardship so that all of us will put giving to the church on a higher priority, we are going to be making a major effort this year and, in the future, to dramatically increase our endowment funds. A brochure is just about ready for distribution to the members and friends of our congregation which describes both the First-Plymouth Trust Fund and the First-Plymouth Foundation and how mem-bers and friends of the church can remember this church in their wills.

We have one of the finest and most beautiful church buildings in the country, and it contains an outstanding p.pe organ. If we are going to continue to keep our physical facilities in excellent shape in the years to come so that we can carry on the programs which this building makes possible, then we are also going to have to greatly in-crease our endowment funds. You will be hearing a lot more about this in the future. I think it's realistic to think of reaching a $1,000,000 goal in our endowment funds.

3. Thirdly, we are going to continue to emphasize the importance of Christian worship in our lives and work at ways to considerably increase regular attendance at worship. When I first came here two years ago, I made the rash-sounding statement that it was my goal to one day have an average attendance of 700 per Sunday in our worship services. That is still my goal and I hope you will make it your goal too.

Our average attendance in 1973 exclusive of the summer months was 432 per Sunday. As I mentioned earlier, that's about exactly the same as in 1972. However, in 1972, we had a gain

of 60 per Sunday over 1971, so we've it a plateau. To reach an average of 700, we have a long way to go, particularly when the weather does not cooperate. But we shouldn't use that aa an excuse. It's a matter of self-discipline and the fact that on snowy Sundays our attendance shows a decline is evidence of the fact that we live in an undisciplined age. As a people we are religiously undisciplined. It may very well be that as adults we have been so captured by the cult of comfort ourselves that we are incapable of challenging our own young people.

I want this church filled even on the coldest snowy Sundays! And if you happen to be one who hasn't been a regular attender at worship, I say to you, "Try it, you'll like it! And if you don't like it after a fair trial, tell us about it and we'll work on it."

4. In the 4th place, and it's related to regular participation in worship; we plan to work at deepening the spiritual life of the congregation in the coming year and in years following. To do this, in addition to increasing participation in worship, we plan to begin all kinds of small groups--Bible Study groups, prayer groups, special study groups during the Lenten season and in a variety of other ways. It will take us several years to get a number of these groups going. We're beginning the process later this month with the groups that will be meeting in the church on Monday and Tuesday nights.

These, then, are four overall goals for the next several years at least — (1) Increased membership, (2) continue building a sound financial base (3) increased participation and attendance at worship (4) deepening the spiritual life and our Christian growth through many kinds of smaller groups.

We live in times when the church and the ministry it carries on and what it stands for is needed especially. Many studies and polls in recent months in particular have pointed up the bewilderment and distrust among almost all people in our country. People are confused, not sure of what to be-lieve and feel a lack in their lives. They are seeking for something eternal on which to base their lives. The church has it to offer! No one else does. People know this, but it takes leadership and work to get them to do something about it.

In a recent survey, the following question was asked of people all across the country — "I'm going to read to you a list of institutions in American society. Would you please tell me how much respect and confidence you, yourself have in each one — a great deal, quite a lot, some, or very little. The church or organized religion was at the top of the list of the institutions for which the highest percentage of people had the greatest confidence and respect. Incidentally the lowest was big business. The point is we in the church have something important to build on.

Also, in a recent book entitled "WHATEVER BECAME OF SIN," by Dr. Karl Menninger, founder of the Menninger Institute in Topeka, Kansas, Dr. Menninger contends that the church is the only institution that can take the lead in closing what he calls the "morality gap" which exists in our country.

To do this, Menninger says, the church will have to reassert an authority for leadership in the moral field which it has let slip from its hands. It is the church's special prerogative to study sin, or whatever you want to call it, to identify it, to define it, to warn us about it and to spur measures for combating and rectifying it. So, churches like First-Plymouth have to remain strong, vital institutions.

This church has great potential. We've just begun to tap it. Therefore, as the Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, "having this ministry, by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as servants for Jesus'sake. Amen.