Sunday January 12, 1975

"AN INVENTORY OF HOPE" Luke 8:4-8
Annual Report of the Senior Minister

Often we hear it said that a "gloom" has settled over our country and indeed over the world. And no doubt it has. One of the problems with this kind of gloom and despair is that it tends to be self-fulfilling. People who fear the worst, tend to invite it. Heads that are down cannot scan the horizon for new openings. Bursts of energy do not spring from a spirit of defeat. Ultimately, hopelessness leads to helplessness.

In this sense, the most serious problem confronting the nation now is not recession or inflation or the energy problem or the danger of war in the middle east. The most serious problem right now is that most of the American people are psychologically depleted and not primed for innovations.

What then is the case for hope? Some futurologists have turned to the computers for projections about the future of the human race. They have fed into the computer vast quantities of statistics on population, food resources, environment, industrial growth and so on. And the computer has responded with an ominous projection of a world overrun with people, short on habitable land and food, its resources rapidly being depleted, its oceans and air filled with poisons.

Nothing could be more dangerous than to ignore such warnings. But nothing is more irresponsible than to accept the comuter's projections or anyone's projections as inevitable. The computer can't be programmed to comprehend the mysteries of human response and certainly cannot take into account God's surprises.

The computer has no way of anticipating the advent of a Thomas Jefferson or a Winston Churchill or anyone capable of generating ideas or spirit that can lead to great change. Could the computer have projected the advent of Jesus Christ? Could anyone have forecast the changes the Christian faith has made in the history of the world?

The case for hope has never rested on provable facts or rational assessment even though we must always take these into account. Hope by its very nature goes beyond these.

What gives hope its power is the release of human energies generated by the longing for something better. The capacity for hope is the most significant fact in life. It gives us a sense of destination and the energy to get started.

And for us as Christians, hope has its beginning and end in God. As the Bible puts it, "nothing can separate us from the love of God, not inflation, or recession, or war in the middle east or whatever else. Furthermore, as the parable of the sower told by Jesus indicates, if we continue to sow the seed faithfully, even though some goes to waste, God will multiply, there is cause for hope.

How then has our seed-sowing gone as far as First-Plymouth Church is concerned for the year justpast, 1974? I believe that we in First-Plymouth have much to be hopeful about and perhaps our hopefulness about the church will give us cause for hope in other areas of life as well.

Here then is a short inventory of some of the cause for hope in the life of this congregation.

1. We continue to receive new members in expanded numbers. During the calendar year 1974, we received 185 new members. That's probably some sort of a record over the last 20 years or more. These persons come from a variety of Christian backgrounds and represent a wide age span. However most of them are younger people. All of this makes for the continued health of the congregation.

As has been the case for the past two years, most of our new member prospects come from persons who have visited one or more of our worship services. A lot of people hear about First-Plymouth in one way or another and then come to visit on Sunday mornings. Fortunately, once they are here, visitors find this a friendly place. Our deacons and the other persons who have been recruited as greeters make both the visitors and our members feel welcome. If a person is a visitor, he or she is encouraged to sign the guestbook.

Usually by Sunday evening of the same day, Mr. M.A. Alexander has telephoned each of these persons who were visitors. Then on Monday or Tuesday, a personal letter is sent to each visitor from the Senior Minister.

2. A second cause for hope is that our attendance and participation in worship showed an increase in 1974 over 1973. Average attendance was up about 40 persons per Sunday. While this is not a large over-all increase, at least it's on the way up again.

One of the most important activities this church carries on is the conducting of the regular Sunday morning worship services. Thus my personal vision continues to be that of attaining an average attendance of 700 per Sunday. The average in 1974, was 441 per Sunday. I've mentioned this fact every year since my coming here three years ago and I will continue to remind you and myself of this goal until it is reached. We have one of the best and most beautiful buildings for Christian worship anywhere in the country and it's a pity that this place is not filled to capacity twice each Sunday morning.

3. Thirdly, and also on the statistical side, 1974 was a hopeful year as far as our finances are concerned. We ended 1974, in the black again with all bills paid. This is our third straight year for that. As part of this we were able to pay all of our benevolences in full.

Furthermore, last spring we had a special campaign for the denominational 17/76 program, which is an effort to raise within the United Church of Christ, 17 million dollars by 1976, for the support of primarily black colleges and overseas educational institutions. We voted at last year's annual meeting to give all of our members an opportunity to pledge toward this program. Our latest figures show that our members have pledged $23,000 in this campaign, all of which is over and above our other budgets, and there are still some pledges to come in.

Also on the hopeful side, our best estimates indicate that we should have our building debt completely retired by the end of 1975, or sooner. As of this date the debt stands at $46,000. We have $22,000 more collected and ready to pay. This plus the oustanding pledges and some money set aside some years ago, should retire the debt.

And there's more cause for hope. The Everymember Canvass for the support of our regular operating budget and benevolences held in November, looks now as if it will reach the goal we had set. That's really something to rejoice about. We are going to be recommending some internal shifts

in the budget at the Annual Meeting of the congregation, but that's always necessary as costs change.

The capable and expert work of volunteers like Ray Dein, the treasurer of the church is also part of our inventory of hope. He continues to put his years of experience in accounting and financial affairs to work for First-Plymouth Church.

While these statistical matters are part of any inventory of hope, we all know that a church has to be much more. To simply have a smooth running and financially sound institution is nice, but it's not enough. Service institutions like the church are not to be an end in themselves. Are people being helped because of First-Plymouth Church? Are lives being changed? Is this community a better place because we are here? Such questions as these and many more like them have to be continually faced by church congregations.

Happily, I believe that this church is more than an end in itself. Here are some quick examples. There is an increased interest in prayer and the deeper aspects of the spiritual life. One prayer group meets each Thursday night in the chapel at 8:15. Another prayer group has begun meeting on Thursdays after lunch. We have an expanding adult education program which reaches all kinds of people. Then, too, our worship services through the radio broadcast is a help to untold numbers of persons. As I go about the community, I continue to be amazed at the large number of people who tell me that they worship with our congregation by radio every Sunday morning.

Our Sunday Church School and the various youth programs reach a wide variety of persons. And the Music and Fine Arts program with its many concerts and cultural events is a continuing witness to the vital relationship between religion and the arts. All of these programs and services reach many people both within and outside our congregation.

Added to this, the church building is constantly carrying on an increasing ministry of its own. Community groups of every kind use this building day and night. It's a kind of community center for this area of Lincoln, and of course that's what it should be.

There's still more to be done. We need to find ways to reach out more in the community. Constantly I'm impressed with the number of lonely people in a city like Lincoln. We have to find new ways to reach them and to relate them in significant ways to others. There's much work that could be done with inmates at the State Penal Complex which would benefit them and all of society. The New Testament mentions over and over again that we as Christians are to be concerned about those in prison.

I'm hopeful that we can continue our good work in the growth of our membership. This church should one day have an active membership of 2500 or more. We have the kind of building that could take care of that number.

We need to continue our work in a variety of ways for helping people deepen their own spiritual lives through worship and participation in smaller groups. I personally hope that we can do something to make the 9:30 a.m. service of worship more exciting and to find ways to increase the attendance at that service. Perhaps we need to re-structure it so that it becomes a special kind of "family worship service."

There is also the strong possibility that this church in cooperation with one or more Theological Seminaries will become a kind of training center for persons entering the Christian ministry much in the same way as some hospitals become teaching hospitals for doctors and nurses. You will be hearing more about this in the near future.

These are some of my personal goals. However, the Church Council at my recommendation is suggesting to the Annual Meeting, that a "special planning committee" be appointed as soon as possible in 1975, to work with the staff in studying the congregation and its present and future needs and to make some specific recommendations as to goals for First-Plymouth which are more than just my goals or the staff's goals.

I noted with interest in looking through some files recently, that in 1970, during the Lenten season, a number of Lenten Renewal Groups spent considerable time thinking and planning for the future of First-Plymouth and making recommendations. A number of these recommendations have come to pass, so that work was not an exercise in futility. But now we need to look ahead again and so some more dreaming and planning.

As I hope you can see from this annual report, I'm very hopeful about the present and the future of First-Plymouth. All of us on the staff continue to be encouraged by the over-all spirit and willingness of the members of this congregation. There continues to be an openness toward trying new things as well as a basic trust beneath it all. This makes it an exciting place to work.

I believe that we Christians, not only here in this congregation, but everywhere can continue to face life and all of its problems with a smile and with hope. I am using the word "smile" with a deeper meaning than we usually think of it, not the stereotyped smile of a cigarette advertisement, but the tolerant smile that comes from an amused awareness of the mutability of things. The smile that for the Christian comes from the knowledge that much of the things we emphasize so much in this world will pass away and in the long run are not as important as we make them out. There are eternal matters which are always around us so that we can learn even to smile at ourselves and our silly pretensions.

We can also smile because as the parable of the sower points out, if we are faithful in our work, in the sowing of the seed, even though a lot of our effort seems to go to waste, there will still be an abundant harvest. Amen.