Sunday January 18, 1976

"SUCCESS OR FAITHFULNESS?" Revelation 3:1-3, 14-20

When the writer of the book of Revelation had his vision, he was told among other things to write to the churches of that time. The message to the churches contained a warning and the warning was that success in worldly terms, statistical terms, could not autmatically be equated with faithfulness to what God calls us to be and do in the church. That warning still needs to be taken seriously by the church in our time.

With this warning in mind, let's look at First-Plymouth church in Lincoln, Nebraska, for the year just past and for the last four years and try to determine our faithfulness as well as our success. The success part is not difficult to illustrate and measure. But when we try to measure our faithfulness to what God wants to be, that's more difficult.

So let's take the easy part first. In statistical terms, the past year and the past four years that I have been privileged to work among you as Senior Minister have been successful.

On January 1, 1972, First-Plymouth had a total of 1,163 resident members. On January 1, 1976, we 1506 resident members for a net gain of 343 during the four year period. To obtain that net gain, we received during the last four years a total of 595 new members. During 1975, we received 178 of these new members.

Attendance and participation in worship has also shown an increase during the past four years and during 1975. The average attendance at worship during 1971, was 336 per Sunday. In 1975, average attendance had climbed to 465, for an overall average gain of 129 per Sunday during the four year period. In 1975, average attendance went up 43 per Sunday. That's not really very much for the four year period or for 1975, but at least it's in the right direction.

As far as church finances are concerned, there has also been improvement. In 1971, the total church budget including benevolences was $147,745. Unfortunately at the end of that year, the church had an actual cash deficit of $12,992. The congregation spent almost $13,000 more than it received. So we began 1972 with that deficit. ~~At the~~

At the same time, on January 1, 1972, our mortgage on the church building was $122,000.

I'm pleased to report that beginning with 1972, we have not had a budget deficit for any one of the past four years. In other words, in each of the last four years, we have received more money, though not much, than we have spent. We have not, however, been able to completely wipe out that $12,992 deficit we had on January 1, 1972. At the end of this past year 1975, we had reduced that $12,992 deficit to $2,376.32

In addition, you will be happy to know that also within the past four years we have completely paid of the $122,000 mortgage. So we begin 1976, debt free as far as our property is concerned.

I mentioned earlier that the 1971 budget was 147,745, including benevolences. By comparison our 1975 budget was $207,778, including benevolences for an over-all increase of 40% in four years. However, the significant fact is that the home-expense part of the budget increased 35%, while the benevolence part of the budget increased 77% during those four years, and this does not take into account how much our building is now being used by the community at large. We should probably allocate about 20% of our over-all maintenance budget as being benevolence.

During the same four year period, we have seen a significant growth in our Music and Fine Arts Program so that our congregation continues to be recognized as having fine arts events of the highest quality. The way in which attendance has grown in this area illustrates that the community at large appreciates the excellence of these varied programs. They are also a part of our community service and outreach. Jack Levick, our Minister of Music and Fine Arts has in three years time become a highly respected leader in the church music field throughout the area.

The Sunday Church School, Adult Education Seminars, youth programs, athletic teams,our week-day nursery school--Kinder Korner, the Day Care Center, new young adult groups, all these and more tell the story of a congregation seeking to serve an ever-increasing number of people of all ages. The work of Jim Freeman and Betty Jamieson in these areas, along with Craig Barton beginning this last fall, has been commendable.

A congregation like ours also has the responsibility to be a teaching institution as far as training future ministers and church musicians. We began that part of our program in a new way this past fall with the Rev. Craig Barton coming to us as our first "resident." The theory behind this program is that many seminary graduates need at least two years practical experience in a large church as part of a staff immediately following graduation and ordination. After a two year period, then the person will be in a church on his own. Mr. Barton has been with us five months now and I believe the program has great possibilities. Our hope is that other large churches across the country might follow our example.

We also began this fall an "internship" program with the School of Music of the University of Nebraska. Miss Cynthia Knosp, an organ major at the University is working in our congregation under Jack Levick. She receives academic credit for her work here as well as a stipend which goes to the University to help pay her expenses.

The monetary support for both of the above programs is outside our budget and is provided by persons interested in well-trained leadership for the church now and in the future.

All of these things and more help make our congregation what can be termed a "success."

But are we also faithful in being what a church is supposed to be and do? That's a more difficult quality to measure.

There's always the danger of a church having the name of being alive, bustling and busy with all sorts of activities, as the writer of the book of Revelation described the congregation at Sardis; but at the same time being spiritually dead. There's the added danger that a church will become like the congregation in Laodicea, also described in the Book of Revelation--a church that is neither hot nor cold, but lukewarm about everything, in other words, a church that stands for little and has no commitment. The congregation in Laodicea prided itself on being rich and on having prospered. It was convinced it needed nothing more. It was self-satisfied and self-righteous.

What about our congregation? We've had some success, but are we also being faithful?

The Special Planning Committee appointed after last year's annual meeting has been attempting to deal with this question throughout 1975. That committee was assigned the task of looking at our congregation to see if we were being true to our mission as a Church of Jesus Christ.

For the Special Planning Committee to be able to do its job it first had to ask itself--what is the main business of the church? What standard do we use in order to look at our own congregation? What makes a church a church? How is it different from a social club, or a lodge, or a political party or a business?

Certainly a church congregation will have aspects of all of these. We are a social group, a social institution. We are a legal corporation. In some ways we have to operate like a business, so we have budgets, personnel, accounting procedures and other business-like functions. But a church is more than all of this. It has a uniqueness and a task that makes it like no other organization on earch.

The Special Planning Committee in wrestling with this issue describes the church by saying -- "The Church has been, is and is to be a community of persons who acknowledge God as Creator and Sustainer, Jesus Christ as God's redeeming activity, and human beings as participating with God in the responsibility for the well-being of the created order. The Church exists in history to increase among people the love of God and neighbor and to increase health and harmony in all the creation."

That's the church's unique task or business and it is first of all a community of persons who have a certain kind of faith.

Next the Special Planning Committee said, "If this is what the church is, then what are its indispensable functions?" What is a congregation supposed to be doing? Then the Committee worked out a list of seven statements which suggest that a church is not really a church unless it is seeking to do these things. Here is an attempt to measure a congregation's faithfulness. Listen!

" A church is a community of persons which accepts Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour and commits itself to following his example and teachings." A group of people cannot be called a Christian Church unless it is commited to doing this.

A church is a community of persons which gathers regularly and participates in and experiences the presence of God in public worship through preaching, prayer, Bible study, the Sacraments, music and other arts." In other words, worship is to be at the center of any congregation's life.

The Special Planning Committee went on to list five more marks of a Christian Church. Then it began to look at our own congregation to determine how we measure up in our faithfulness.

At the Annual Meeting we will be considering a list of "imperatives" drawn up by the Special Planning Committee--items which we believe are imperative for us to work on as a congregation in this year and in the future. Personally I subscribe whole-heartedly to what the Special Planning Committee will be recommending.

I want to also emphasize that I enjoy working in a congregation that is showing some success in statistical terms and I'm pleased with what we are accomplishing. But I also know that we have to be continually concerned about our faithfulness as a community of Christians.

Along with our success we have to keep asking--are people being brought into a deeper relationship with God and Jesus Christ and one another through our congregation?

Are we reaching out to be of help to persons who are lonely, oppressed, afraid, sick, poor and hungry?

Are we providing enough opportunities for learning the story of the Christian faith and for personal spiritual growth? Are lives being changed?

If a congregation that is faithful is to be a worshipping community, why is it that less than one-third of our members are regular in their participation in public worship? I believe we offer one of the best worship experiences I know about, but maybe it is lacking in something? Maybe not enough people know about it?

My hope is that in addition to being successful in terms of numerical growth and financial strength that we will also continue to grow in depth and knowledge of our faith. I hope our worship services will become even more joyful.

I ask you the members of First-Plymouth to join with me and the other members of the staff so that we can continue to become a more faithful congregation and at the same time a successful one. Amen.