Sunday, January 18, 1981
EQUIPPING FOR MINISTRY: WE BUILD LIVES! (Annual Report of the Senior Minister)
Ephesians 4:1-7,11-12

As many of you know, during the past year and a half, I've been engaged in a study of flourishing and effective large churches around the country in order to gain new ideas for the work of this congregation in its ministry. There are still some congregations I plan to visit during 1981, but already I've come to some conclusions about what makes a congregation a powerful force for the good in people's lives and in the community in which it exists. I've gained a renewed vision of what First-Plymouth Church is and can become.

More than anything else, I'm beginning to understand in a new way how the church is to be the Body of Christ in this world; a new way of understanding our ministry to-gether.

Over and over again in the New Testament, the church is described as the Body of Christ whose power comes from Christ's Spirit or the Holy Spirit which dwells among us and in us. St. Paul puts it this way in I Corinthians--"Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it." And the writer of the letter to the Ephesians reminds us that we each have our unique gifts for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.

Thus, one of the main functions of a church congregation is to be an equipping center for equipping each one of us to carry on our ministry. To put it another way — each one of you as a member of this congregation is at the same time a minister of Christ. You are a part of the body of Christ. It is the job of the clergy and other employed staff members to help and equip you as much as possible to carry out your ministry.

That's the way it has been from the beginning in the Christian Church. The professional clergy will never reach the world for Christ, nor will professional evangel-ists, or the electronic church. In fact, part of the prob-lem with professional evangelists and television preachers and many of us who are pastors of local congregations is that we tend to draw attention away from the ministry of the laity. People come to think that only ordained clergy have a ministry to perform. We do have a ministry of course, but so does every individual lay person. The church of Jesus Christ is primarily a lay movement. On Sundays and at many other times, we all gather for worship and to be equipped for our various ministries. Too often church members think of themselves only as receivers of ministry and not as doers of ministry.

This means that pastors like myself and other employed staff members are called by a congregation to be equipper -of others in ministry as well as carrying out our own specialized ministry. So, think of this congregation and this building as an equipping center. It is here that we build lives for ministry in the world. In building lives, we help persons become the kind of persons God meant them to be. We help people use and develop the gifts which God has given them.

So, as we enter 1981, and look ahead to the future ministry of this congregation, in my annual report to you, I want to give you my renewed vision of our ministry together.

To begin, each congregation as a part of the Body of Christ has some ministries which it carries out as a congregation, and these are held in common with all other Christian congre-gations everywhere.

1. First and foremost of these is the ministry of worship. For the Christian, worship is primary and basic. All other things flow from it. Worship is the one indispensable function of the church. Many of you as lay people are a part of this ministry of worship — the greeters at the door, the ushers, those at the guestbook, the various choirs. Together as a congregation we carry out this ministry of worship.

Regular participation in worship is necessary for all of us who are members of the body of Christ and also necessary for the many visitors who are present among us each Sunday. Our ministry of worship is expanded by being carried to many individuals through our radio broadcast of both the 9:30 a.m. and the 11:00 a.m. services, and this year through the nationwide telecast by CBS of our Christmas Eve service.

In comparing the excitement and inspiration of our worship services with those of the church I've visited, there's no doubt that our worship services in First-Plymouth are second to none. That's why I continually wonder why our attendance at worship is not growing more rapidly. Do we take it for granted? But I've not given up on our goal of at least 700 per Sunday average attendance in our worship services. In fact, when I compare the quality of our worship services with others, I'm convinced that our goal should be 1000 per Sunday.

2. Secondly, our congregation has a ministry of teaching, of passing the history, beliefs, and knowledge of our faith on to others. We carry out this ministry in a variety of ways — the Sunday church school in which many of you are in-volved in this teaching ministry, youth groups, Bible classes of various kinds, Parent Effective Training classes, growth groups, new member orientation classes, and more. In this way we try to equip people to carry out their own ministries.

3. Thirdly, as a congregation we carry out a ministry of caring and fellowship, and that is also a very important individual ministry for many of you. The deaconesses regularly call on people who are lonely; the clergy visit people in hospitals and nursing homes. The ministry of caring and fellowship goes on in groups like the Tower Club, the Sunday Evening Club and Saints and Sinners, the Women's Association and its many circles, and in countless other ways. Many of you carry on this ministry in your own private way as you visit people in your neighborhood who are lonely or who need help. And many of you carry out this ministry of caring where you work or in a volunteer capacity.

In the future, I believe more and more of our lay people are going to need to be trained to carry out this ministry of pastoral care within the congregation. Here again the congregation is to be an equipping center as it trains people to carry out this ministry of caring.

We are all aware of the "Senior Minister Syndrome." People want to see the top person and feel that they are neglected if they don't see him. Yet our Protestant theology reminds us that we are all to be ministers to one another. The transition is not easy from thinking of the ordained clergy as the only valid ministers to seeing lay persons as equally valid ministers of caring. We need to help people to be able to receive ministry from one another. In one of the churches I visited, the Garden Grove Community Church where Dr. Robert Schuller is the Senior Minister, hundreds of lay persons have been trained as ministers of pastoral care and are doing an effective job throughout the congregation.

4. A fourth ministry of each congregation is that of Evan-gelism. It has been said over and over again that the church exists primarily for those who are not in it. Our continuing ministry is to be reaching out to the unchurched. And that's a large market. It has been estimated that at

least 50% of the people in a city like Lincoln are not a part of any church. What an opportunity we have. As a Christian congregation we have something to offer that can be found nowhere else — the good news of God's love which is for all people everywhere.

When we learned that CBS was going to televise our Christ-mas Eve service, some wondered if we should not print reserve seat tickets to distribute to members of the con-gregation so that they could get a seat in the 11:00 p.m. worship service. We didn't do it because that might've crowded out some of the very people we want to reach. The church exists primarily for those who are not in it. That's why it's good news that we have dozens and dozens of visitors every Sunday.

During 1981, we are going to be looking for individuals who are willing and ready to be trained and equipped for the ministry of Evangelism. For the past eight years, Mr. Alexander has been our primary minister of Evangelism, and he needs help. We're going to find people and equip them for this ministry. If you want to be part of this exciting opportunity, be sure and talk with me as soon as possible.

5. Congregations like ours also carry on a very important ministry of hospitality. Our greeters, our ushers, those who work in the coffee hour between services, those at the guest book and M.A. Alexander all are carrying on this vital and important ministry. All of us need to be a part of this ministry as we seek out and greet visitors and members in our worship services and other church gatherings.

6. A sixth ministry which needs more attention and support in our congregation is the ministry of prayer. For the past 6 years or more, a prayer group has met almost every Thursday night in the chapel at 8:00 p.m. Sometimes the group has been as large as 15 or 20, and sometimes as few as two or three. We meet to learn more about prayer, to pray for those we know who are sick, or troubled. Though small in numbers, it's one of the most important ministries this church carries on. Those of us who have attended over the years have been tremendously enriched in our spiritual lives. The prayer group will continue to meet and perhaps later this year we'll find new ways of expanding our mini-stry of prayer. There's a power that comes through regular and disciplined prayer that can be found nowhere else. I invite you to consider being better equipped and trained in this ministry.

7. A ministry in which many of you are already involved is that of administration and support. You are involved in several ways. First, you support the church with your money, and then many of you are in this ministry by serving on the various boards and committees of the church. Each year new peop1e are enlisted and equipped £or this ministry as they are elected by the Annual Meeting to these boards and committees. There are also many volunteers who help in many ways with this ministry.

Some of our employed staff are engaged in this ministry of administration and support, the office manager, secretaries, & custodians are deeply involved in this very important work.

8. Another ministry which we began a few years ago is the Ministry of Assimilation. Here we try to help new members find their way into the life and mission of this congre-gation. New member escorts are assigned to new members who join the church. We hope to be able to expand this ministry in 1981.

The eight essential ministries I've mentioned are common to almost all Christian congregations in the world. But each congregation also has some specialized ministries which are unique to it

because of its location and environ-ment. One of our specialized ministries is what we do with music and some of the other arts. Because of our unusually beautiful building and outstanding organ, we have for years carried on this significant ministry. We do this through our own music program and concert series and also by letting the Nebraska Chamber Orchestra use this building as its primary concert hall. Not every congre-gation has the opportunity for this kind of ministry.

Another special ministry which we should be carrying on because of our location and the need which exists is that of a ministry to prisoners who are in the care of the Department of Correctional Services of the State of Nebraska, better known as State Prison System. Last fall I wrote several articles in the First-Plymouth Herald about our need to get involved in helping prisoners adjust to the outside world so that when they are paroled, they are better able to get a good start in their new life outside the prison. Because our congregation is in Lincoln, we have a unique opportunity to help individuals who desperately need our help and in so doing to help society as a whole. It is significant that in the New Testament, Jesus Christ especially mentions that his followers should have a special concern for those in prison. They are the forgotten people in our society. I hope we can work out some programs for this ministry in the coming years.

In addition to the ministries which a congregation carries on, each one of us in his or her own daily life has a ministry to perform outside the church, and the congrega-tion needs to be an equipping center to give you the power and the help in your ministry. Many of you carry out your ministry in your job, or in your home or in your volunteer work or h9pefully in all of them. And that's has it should be. That's carrying on the work of the church wherever you find yourself. In this way, you penetrate the structures of society and influence them from within.

The maximum impact of the church in the world is through the influence of all of you, whether it be as a stockbroker, a teacher, an administrator, a lawyer, a banker, a physician, a factory worker, a truck driver, a nurse, a salesperson, a carpenter, a businessman or woman or whatever. You are to be an ambassador for Christ wherever you work and the way in which you treat people around you, the way you make decisions, the way you run your business, all these and more are a part of your ministry in the world. The congregation is where you can be better equipped and em-powered to carry out your ministry.

I have now served First-Plymouth Church for nine years, and yet I have the sense. that I've just begun. I've been tempted by offers from other congregations and other church agencies a number of times during these years, but I continue to be-lieve that my work is here among you. Maybe it's better to bloom where you're planted. There is so much that we can do together in the future. There are so many ministries to be carried on and this congregation has an abundance of talent and commitment. We have an opportunity as a congre-gation and you in your individual ministries to make an even better and more positive impact on this community.

Like all leaders I have a dream. I want First-Plymouth to continue to be the kind of place where all kinds of people are accepted and loved. I want people to find compassion and forgiveness in our midst. Having problems is not an abnormal condition but a normal condition. The issue al-ways is what are we going with the problems which confront us, not do we have any. I want this church to be the kind of place where people can get help toward fulfilling their dreams and their potential, where people are helped to find the love of God as they have never known it before. I want this to be a place of inspiration and encouragement, putting strength into people to go forth and do the great things of which they are capable with God's help. Amen.