Sunday, May 3, 1981
KEEPING THE VISION ALIVE
Acts 2:22-24,36,42

One of the enduring tasks of the Christian Church from its beginning has been to keep the vision alive of what the church of Jesus Christ is to be and do. Immediately following the Easter events, the disciples, and other followers of Jesus begam work on this task.

First, the disciples knew that the story of what Jesus had done, his life, teachings, death, and resurrection needed to be told to others. So, as we read in the book of Acts this morning, Peter and the others almost immediately began to tell the story in sermons and in other ways as well. The basic message was that God had acted in a new way in and through Jesus Christ, specifically through his death and resurrection. As a result of this kind of storytelling and preaching, a growing Christian com-munity was gathered in and around Jerusalem.

Secondly, the early church leaders also knew that the message of God's good news needed to be told all over the world. They remembered the parting words of Jesus to them, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son • and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you, and lo, I am with you to the close of the age."

Third, and equally important, the disciples and other early church leaders knew that the life which Jesus showed them had to be lived out in their own lives and in the lives of the congregations they established. Since God loves all human beings, no matter what their condition, or race, or age, or nationality — followers of Jesus had to do the same.

Furthermore, this love of God expressed in the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus had to be practiced in an active way in the world — it was not just love of God and neighbor in theory. Thus, the church down through the ages has had a special concern for the unloved, for the poor, the downtrodden, the forgotten, the outcasts of society, the crippled, those in prison and many more. As the letter of I John puts it in the New Testament, "If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates another human being, that one is a liar."

It is because of this kind of vision that the Christian Church spread to every part of the world. And wherever the Christians went, they established congregations, com-munities of believers who began to live out the teachings and example of Jesus Christ.

It is because of this initial vision and missionary impulse that we have First-Plymouth Church in Lincoln, almost 2000 years after the first Easter. Specifically, in 1866, in a new settlement known as Lancaster, a year before Nebraska became a state, six people organized the First Congregational Church of Lancaster. The town then had six buildings, four houses, one store and a blacksmith shop. The first minister was a missionary from the American Home Missionary Society and his name was the Rev. E.C. Taylor.

On October 27, 1867, the church issued a call to the Reverend Charles Little, as its first full-time pastor. Much of the money which helped put the church on a sound financial basis came from the American Home Missionary Society, whose successor today is the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries of the United Church of Christ.

A year later in 1868, the church officially changed its name from First Congregational Church of Lancaster to the First Congregational Church of Lincoln. In 1869, the young congregation completed its first building which was placed on the rear of two lots on the northwest corner of 13th and L, now the parking lot next to the Cornhusker Hotel. The building was 25 by 40 feet, sheathed with boards and paper.

In 1883, the church decided to build a new building at the same location. After several years of discussion and planning, the new building was completed in 1887, at a total cost of $27,685, with a debt of $2,225.

The same year that First Congregational Church moved into its new building, it was also responsible for starting another Congregational Church in Lincoln, which came to be known as Plymouth Church. Its first building was erected at the corner of 17th and A, at a cost of $180. It stood in the midst of cornfields where there was no paving and no sidewalks. Then in 1890, First Church sent out another colony of 45 members to form. Vine Congregational Church in Lincoln.

From the very beginning, the members and ministers of these congregational churches were very active in all kinds of community affairs. Lewis Gregory, pastor of First Congregational Church from 1876 to 1898, was the first minister in Lincoln, to become a member of a discussion club, being a charter member of the Round Table Club of Lincoln; a discussion club of which I am presently a member. It was said of Gregory, that “no man ever took a deeper interest in his city.” He was an active member of the Lincoln School Board, and chairman of the Board of Trustees of Doane College, along with many other community activities.

In the Congregational Churches in particular, there was good and strong precedent for this. In New England, where Congregational Churches had their beginning in this country, the heart and center of each community or village was the Congregational Church. The meetinghouse or church building was not only the place of worship, but it was likewise the social center of every New England community. It was also a meeting house for politica1 parties, for discussion of controversial issues and for every other kind of community activity. Later the anti-slavery movement had its beginning in a meeting held in a congregational church, as well as the anti-saloon league.

Our forefathers and mothers knew that the continued existence of a free society depended on a free and open discussion of all issues particularly the controversial ones and that the church was the proper place for such activities.

Plymouth Church, founded in 1887, had 40 charter members. Its members and ministers and church building like that of First Congregational Church were all deeply. involved in community activities and political issues. In addition, the music programs in both churches were outstanding and well-known through the community just as they are today.

In the year 1895-96, for example, the choir of Plymouth Church planned six special musical productions. A season’s ticket was 50 cents, and tickets for individual concerts were 10¢ each.

Plymouth’s second church building was built in 1888, at a cost of $10,000 and then as early as 1904, Plymouth Church was planning its third church building at the same location. That building was built in 1915, for a total cost of $33,500, and is nov1 being used. by the Seventh Day Adventist Church, at 17th and A.

It was this building that was the home of the newly merged First Congregational Church and Plymouth Church in 1923.

In 1926, this now combined congregation decided that a new building was needed, and property was purchased at 20th and D Streets for $32,248. Construction began in 1929, the cornerstone was placed in 1930, and the building was officially dedicated on April 5, 1931. So, this spring we've been commemorating the 50th Anniversary of this magnificent building.

In the sermon on April 5, a few weeks ago, I recounted how the vision for this building came into being and how it was put into brick and mortar, at a cost of about $500,000 in 1931. In 1962, an extensive remodeling program was conceived and in 1965, the congregation authorized plans for the remodeling at a cost of $538,000, greater than the cost of the original building. Within six weeks, members of the church responded overwhelmingly with pledges of $422,708. An additional $126,000 was already in hand. However, because of rising construction costs, the total remodeling program came to $775,000 by 1968, when it was completed. When I arrived as minister in January 1972, there was a considerable debt remaining, in addition to a rather large operating fund accumulated deficit. Both debts were retired within a few years, and we have been free of debt and have had a balanced budget every year since 1972.

Furthermore, during the last five years, we have completed a number of major building maintenance projects — including the complete rebuilding of the boilers, extensive insulation, the addition of many storm windows and much more.

Now however, in conjunction with the 50th Anniversary of this building, the 50th Anniversary Committee, along with the Board of Trustees and Church Council are together proposing some major improvements which are beyond the scope of our annual maintenance and major repair budget. The proposals are being made in order to keep the vision alive of an active church in this community.

More importantly, we are aware that we have been entrusted with an outstanding and unique church building, and we feel it our duty and responsibility to keep it in the best possible sh.pe. We are preserving more than just a church building — it is also an architectural gem, an historic building, often described by many people as one of the most beautiful church buildings in the country.

At first, our 50th Anniversary Committee talked of raising a minimum of $100.000, for the major improvements needed. The Trustees then engaged the architectural firm of Davis, Fenton, Stange, Darling, who had designed the building additions and remodeling in the 1960's. Their studies are now complete, and our committee met with people from this firm this past week. If we did all the remodeling and improvements suggested, the cost would come to almost $250,000. The committee however is now recommending that we begin with the highest priority items, and this will come to a little over $150,000.

Here are these items and their estimated costs according to the architects and engineers.

1) Rebui1d and restore the main front steps and sidewalk leading to the front doors of the church building. It will be done with materials as similar as possible to the original. Cost, $23,000.

2) Construct a women's dressing room — rest room across the hall from the present choir room by using part of the boy's club room. This would be used by the women of the choir and other women who are in that part of the building. There is presently no women's rest room on that entire level of our church building. Cost, $14,500.

3) Restore and remodel the tower room which used to be the Senior Minister's office so that it again becomes his office. Air-conditioning has to be added and major re-novation in that entire area is needed, including the walkway which houses the children's library — estimated cost, including new furnishings, etc. $44,000.

4) Rebuild completely the East Courtyard wall. The present one would have to be taken down. That east brick wall presently is bulging and eventually may come apart on its own. The proposal is to replace it completely. Estimated cost — $57,000.

We also need to do some major painting throughout the main hallways and here in the sanctuary. All this, plus architectural and engineering fees will bring the cost to a little over $150,000, rather than the $100,000 as originally proposed.

This morning, following the sermon in just a few minutes, we are going to ask you our members to fill out a pledge card for the "50th Anniversary Building Improvement Fund." We hope to be able to raise the needed $150,000 in pledges today and within the next few weeks.

This building has been a gift to us, and we in turn feel a strong obligation to keep it in the best condition. In this way we help keep the· vision alive. It's one of the very practical ways in which we follow in the footsteps of those first disciples and other followers of Jesus after the first Easter.

To carry on an effective ministry in today's kind of world, we need buildings like this one. In keeping this building in the best shape possible, we are not giving toward preserving a monument to the past; rather we are giving to preserve a living, thriving institution. This building is the successor to all those other previous church buildings that served First Congregational Church and Plymouth Church since 1866. The difference is that it is a building that has been built for the centuries.

What our ancestors did for us, we are now being asked to continue and pass on for the future. I hope you will pledge generously this morning.