Sunday, January 17, 1982
A REPORT TO THE COMPANY (Annual Report of the Senior Minister)
Luke 8:4-8

Members of First-Plymouth Church: we will meet on the 24th day of January 1982, to review the operations of this company, First-Plymouth Congregational Church of Lincoln, Inc. We will look at the year just past and look ahead to the company's future for 1982 and the years beyond.

Since I have just completed ten years of service among you as your Senior Minister and chief executive officer, in my report I want to review briefly what has happened during this longer time period.

When I talked with the Search Committee of this company in 1971, that committee indicated at least four goals for the future. (l) Increased membership. At one point in its 115-year history, this church had a membership of over 2000. But that was many years ago. For several decades prior to 1971, church membership had been decreasing rather than increasing. (2) Increased participation in attendance at worship services and other activities. Fewer and fewer people were attending the worship services each Sunday. (3) Build a sound financial base for carrying out this company's mission. Budgets were not being met and more was being spent than was being received. (4) A deepening of Christian commitment among all the members and a reaching out into the community. This company was described by the search committee as a "sleeping giant."

What has happened during these ten years? First a few generalities about our position on the open market. We are alive and strong. These past ten years have been a time of growth in church membership, financial stability, and community outreach. These generalities are supported by statistics.

First, the financial statistics. In January 1972, when I began my work with this company, the budget for 1971 had been $146,429: $129,595 for local operations and $16,834 for benevolence and outreach. In 1981, the year just completed, our budget was a total of $373,850; $317,600 for local operations and $56,250 for outreach and benevolence. For this year of 1982, our budget will be about $415,000, and the money is pledged to support this budget.

As we began 1972, ten years ago, there was a remaining building debt of $179,000 and an accumulated cash deficit of $13,000. For several years prior to 1972, more money had been spent than was received. 1971 bills were being paid with 1972 money, and the same had happened in previous years.

However, during this ten-year period just completed, the $179,000 building debt has been retired, the cash deficit of $13,000 has been overcome and in the last five years we have had a small surplus at the end of each year. We have had a balanced budget for the past ten years. Or to put it another way, we have always received a least a few more dollars than we have spent. Our pledge income in 1971 was $101,000 and in 1981, $320,000.

Ten years ago, as we began 1972, we had a small endowment fund of about $79,000. As we begin 1982, that endowment has grown to about $282,000, and will go over the $300,000 mark

in 1982. Last year at the Annual Meeting we merged the Trust Fund into the First-Plymouth Foundation so that we have now one endowment fund.

Also, during this ten-year period we have spent a large amount of money on building maintenance and repair. The two boilers have been rebuilt; the church building has had storm windows and insulation added wherever possible. The leaded glass windows have been redone. New equipment has been purchased for the custodians and for the office. Parking has been expanded and will have to be expanded again. The new front sidewalk and steps have been completed, and renovation work is now going on inside the building in several places. A lot of painting has been done, the downstairs library has been built, and much more. There is still much to be done in the coming years in regard to the building. The East Courtyard needs to be rebuilt and the Carillon needs much repair.

But we have an historic and unique church building and it must be maintained in the best possible condition. More than that it is a very usef¥1 tool in our ministry as a congregation. It continues to be one of the most beautiful buildings anywhere.

Our membership growth has also been strong during these ten years. It has gone against the trend of most “near downtown” city churches like ours. We began 1972, with 1163 resident members. By contrast, we began 1982 with over 1700 resident members, a net gain of more than 540. Furthermore, our attendance and participation in public worship has been growing steadily during these same ten years. In 1971, the average attendance at worship for both services was 336. In 1981, our average attendance at both services was 628. We are not far from our goal of an average of 700 per Sunday. Note particularly that our worship attendance has grown at a faster rate than our increase in membership which means that our members are being more faithful in worship.

Church consultants continue to insist that the best measure of a congregation’s strength is participation in worship. It tells more about a congregation’s commitment and faithfulness than any other indicator. Worship is the supreme and only indispensable activity of the Christian Church. It is first in priority.

Our music program is a vital part of the inspiration in worship each Sunday and at special services. In that department we are second to none. Our Abendmusik series also continues to be excellent and draws many people to our church.

Also, our overall growth in membership and in worship participation has seen a large increase in young people, both single and married. We now have a congregation with individuals in all age groups. We are not primarily a young congregation or an old one, rather we have a good balance.

So much for the ten-year period, now let’s take a brief look at some of the highlights of the year just finished — 1981.

This year was a high point for our company as we celebrated the 50th anniversary of this church building. The events planned and carried out by the “50th Anniversary Committee,” under the chairmanship of Judge Robert Van Pelt were outstanding. The “50th Anniversary Building Improvement Fund,” is being put to good use.

Also, during 1981, we inaugurated an expanded approach to Women’s Ministries, first by amending the bylaws of the congregation to make “Women’s Ministries” an integral part of the

congregation. A new “Board for Women’s Ministries” will be elected at the Annual Meeting. In the meantime, our pastoral intern, Cheryl Cornish, has been working very effectively with an “Interim Board,” and a strong beginning with an expanded program in this area has already been made. Cheryl will continue to work with the newly elected Board this winter and spring,

In September of 1981, Nancy Tanner Nielson joined our staff to work in the area of Youth and Young Adult Ministries. She had already made a significant contribution in these areas. The future looks bright here.

Now of course there’s much more to the work of this company than can be contained in statistics and finance. We are after all a very special kind of company — a company of God’s people. All the statistics and other highlights I have mentioned are only important insofar as they indicate we are sound as an institution. But they are only part of the measurement of the work of a church congregation.

The church of Jesus Christ is not the kind of Company that manufactures and sells a product for a profit. We are a not-for-profit corporation, and we are in the business of proclaiming and spreading the love of God and the love of neighbor. We are in the business of building and changing lives and in the business of working at the sore spots in society. Justice is a form of love in Christian theology. Jesus Christ had a special concern for the “nobodies” of this world, and as a church that is our business too.

Thus, our institutional strength is necessary, but is only good if we use it for the purposes and mission of our company. I believe we have been doing this, but we must always keep it in mind.

Our business is also unique in that it is often times difficult to measure the results of our work. It’s not possible to apply the “cost-benefit ratio” to what we do. That’s because we are primarily in the business of prevention, and prevention is never very dramatic and almost impossible to measure except years later. We may never know how many people have been prevented from falling because of their participation in our worship services or in one of our weekday programs. We’ll never know how many lives have been enriched, how many young people have been kept on the right path because of their relationship with this congregation.

We will never know of the help that countless people have been given through our radio broadcast of the worship services. The cost-benefit ratio is almost impossible to calculate.

Years ago, the head of our company world-wide, Jesus Christ, told a story about a sower who went out to sow the seed, and as he sowed, some of the seed fell along the path and was trodden under foot and the birds of the air devoured it. And some fell on the rock; and as it grew up, it withered away because it had no depth of soil and no moisture. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew with it and choked it. But some fell into the good soil and grew and yielded a hundredfold.

That’s the way it is with the business our company is in. Some of the love of God which we spread will not take rook as we would like it, and it’s easy to become discouraged because so much of the seed seems to be going to waste. However, we are told to keep on sowing, for if we do, some will take root and will multiply out of all proportion to the seed we have sown. And in our sowing, it’s not always possible from our vantage point, to tell the good soil from that which is not so good. We never know where the seed might take root. Our mission is to keep on sowing the seed for if we sow faithfully, God will give the growth.

The first letter of Peter puts it this way- “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were no people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”

The church is a very special kind of company.