Sunday, January 23, 1983
A LETTER TO THE SAINTS IN FIRST-PLYMOUTH (Annual Report of the Senior Minister)

"For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many are one body, so it is with Christ. For by one Spirit, we were all baptized into one body — Jews, Greeks, slaves or free, and all were made to drink of one Spirit... Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. For in Christ Jesus, you are all children of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male or female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (I Corinthians 12:1-13, 27; Galatians 3:26-28)

A letter to the people of God in Lincoln, called First-Plymouth; to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who are a part of God's Community in every place. Grace to you and peace from God our Creator and the Savior Jesus Christ.

Dear members and saints:

I call you saints because in the early church the name "saint" was given to all those who were members of a Christian congregation. Only much later was the word capitalized and use for those individuals who were believed to have lived especially exemplary lives.

I thank God always for your support and friendship. Working with you as pastor and teacher and with the other staff members continues to be both a pleasure and a challenge. I often say to myself and to others that I have the most interesting and exciting job there is. And the best part is the First-Plymouth remains a strong and healthy congregation. The Annual Report you will receive in the mail this week will show this. But in addition to this in my report to you I want to tell you why this is so.

1. The first and foremost sign of a healthy and vital Christian congregation is attendance and participation in public worship. In our situation, attendance at our Sunday worship services continues to increase. During this past fall we attained our long-stated goal of an average of 700 per Sunday. The most significant increase in attendance has been in the 9:30 a.m. service of worship.

Participation in worship is one of the best tests of the health and vitality of a congregation because worship is the one indispensable function of the church. It is primary and basic. All other things in a Christian congregation flow from it.

Worship reminds us that we are spiritual beings as well as physical beings. It is also a message to us that there is a God who created this world and continues to create and that God so loved the world that God gave his only Son.

Worship always points to the fact that there is a transcendent dimension or supernatural element in our lives and beyond our lives. Worship can life us out of our small world into a larger perspective. We all need those experiences in which we are reminded of the presence of a Power which urges human life toward a richer harmony. Our lives gain a richness from the capacity for ecstasy, any experience which helps us step outside the taken-for-granted reality of everyday life, which opens us to the mystery that surrounds us on all sides.

Worship adds the dimension of depth which adds so much to our life together. Too often we only shape our lives around the practical, the utilitarian, devoid of dreams and visions.

To put it another way, deep down all human beings want some kind of communication, contact, connection with God; the feeling and knowledge of being known by God. It can be said in so many ways — we long for a sense of depth, a sense of ultimate meaning, of ultimate worth in existence. We long for the assurance that our life is bound up or based upon the kind of foundation that only God can provide. Although we often try to live within our own little neat and not so neat systems in order to satisfy this longing, we know that ultimately, we cannot satisfy it within ourselves.

Worship helps to integrate our vision of the world and our place in it. It brings a wholeness to our living that cannot be gotten in any way. All this is why attendance at worship is the most important sign of the health and vitality of a congregation and its members.

2. A second sign of health and related to worship is the life of prayer, both of individual members and the congregation. Late last fall, we began a regular morning prayer service in the chapel at 7:30 a.m. each Wednesday morning. Here we pray for those who are ill or in some special need and we also pray for the needs of the whole world in addition to our own needs. It's also a time of reflection and thanksgiving. Hopefully we are also encouraging that daily prayer life of our members. Everyone is welcome!

3. A third sign of the health of this congregation is its growing Sunday Church School. This past fall we added a complete church school session which begins at 9:15 a.m. and is designed so that parents can attend the 9:30 a.m. service of while their children are in church school classes.

But Christian education is not only for children and young people, and I'm pleased to report than an increasing number of adults in the congregation are taking advantage of the various Bible study groups and other opportunities for Christian growth and nurture.

4. Another sign of First-Plymouth's strength is our increasing outreach program. Not only are we giving more money each year to help support Christian ministries outside our church walls and outside this city and state, but our church building continues to carry on its ministry in this community as more and more groups are welcome in it.

Added to this is our ministry at the Lincoln Correctional Center as we bring friendship and love to those in prison. Our music and arts program remains strong and is the most creative of any in this community. This too is a part of our outreach.

The newly created Board for Women's Ministries is another outreach arm of this congregation as it works on community issues as well as carrying on a ministry to the women of this church.

And then each of you as individual members are part of the outreach of First-Plymouth in this community as you carry on your work and witness. You also are ministers in the best sense of that word.

5. If a church congregation continues to grow in membership, that's also a sign of strength and vitality. This congregation continued its growth during 1982. We do not seek to grow for the sake of growth itself, but because there are always people who need to hear the good news of God's love.

6. A sixth sign of our health and vigor is that we remain financially strong. We do not have an oversupply of money, but we are able to support and expand the ministries of this congregation that we have deemed important. We have just completed our 11th year having a balance budget.

Now let's look to the future and see what some of our goals and priorities need to be for 1983 and beyond.

1. First, as long as I am Senior Minister of this congregation, I will continue to emphasize the need for increased participation in public worship. To accomplish this, we are going to have to find ways to expand space for parking on Sunday mornings. Therefore, sometime this spring, we will try to experiment with a shuttle bus service so that we can make use of excellent parking lots which are within a half-mile of the church building. You'll be getting more details about this experiment later this spring. My personal goal is to have 1000 per Sunday average attendance in our Sunday worship by 1988, but this cannot be done easily without more parking.

2. As our programs and ministries continue to expand and grow, we are going to have to increase our financial commitment toward the support of this congregation. Although we have had eleven years of balance budgets, I am becoming more and more concerned because about 80% of the financial support comes from 20% of the membership.

We need to broaden our base of giving which means that a larger percentage of our membership needs to learn how to give and experience the joy of giving. For most people who still give a small amount for the support of the church it's not because they are short of money, but that too many church members still think of giving to the church as a charity, and that means giving leftovers.

I heard a story about a man in Las Vegas who was on the street asking people for money for food. One potential donor asked him, "How do I know if I give you money for food that you don't use it for gambling?" The one who was doing the begging replied, "Oh, don't worry, I have gambling money, what I need is food money."

That's the way with some church members. They have money for ski trips, boats, for new cars, trips to Europe, new furniture, golf, country clubs, but then say they don't have much money for the church. We have now about 100 families or individuals who give $1000 a year or more for the work of the church. We need to have, and we are capable of having, at least 400 families or individuals who give that amount or more and still they would not be sacrificing or doing without any of the necessities of life.

I hope to soon appoint a special committee of church members to think about and work on this issue. We will be trying to answer the question, "Why is it so difficult for some to give generously to the church?" in part I believe it's a matter of working to change people's habits and vision. It's like the one-dollar bill in the collection plate habit. Twenty years ago, most people when attending church put a one-dollar bill in the offering, and today they still do the same even though it's worth about a fourth as much. It's not that people don't want to give to the church, but that they have not learned how to give and how much to give.

3. A third area we are going to give much attention to in 1983 and 1984, is energy conservation. We have already done much about this int eh past five years, but with the price

of natural gas and electricity continuing to rise, much more needs to be done. I have all sorts of specific ideas on this subject that will be passed on to the property management committee of the trustees. I want all our members to know that we are going to do our best to spend the dollars we get wisely.

In addition, we will continue to keep the church building and property in the best condition possible. Our custodians do an outstanding job. Time after time as visitors come through this building they comment on its excellent condition.

Our office staff also does a magnificent job in serving the needs of church members and the groups which use this building. To aid all of us on the staff, we will in the near future be investigating the purchase or lease of a computer system.

As we go about carrying out the ministry of this congregation and as we add new programs to help you carry out your individual ministries, I will keep reminding you and myself that our overall purpose is the increase among people of the love of God and neighbor. Though it is always necessary to deal with budgets and programs and buildings and administration, our basic purpose in being the church is to be the “body of Christ” in this world. We are in the business of telling and living out the good news of God’s love for the whole world, and to remind every individual that he or she is a child of God. That is our ultimate purpose, and we must never lose sight of it.

As I have said in previous sermons, I want First-Plymouth to continue to be a place that is inclusive, where sinners are welcome, where mistakes are forgiven, where bumbling and fumbling are not condemned and rejected. The church is to be a place where people find compassion and understanding for their weaknesses and where individuals are loved and accepted no matter who they are or what they have done.

This church will also continue to be a place where one can find inspiration and encouragement, a place of joy and fun; a place where individuals find their self-esteem, discover their potential and begin to fulfill it. So many people are lonely; so many people are hurting; so many people are waiting for a smile and a word of encouragement and hope. The wounds of this world very much need the gifts of the members of this body of Christ. May the peace of God be with all of us. Amen.