Sunday, January 29, 1989
KEEPING THE GIANT ALIVE
I Corinthians 13:1-13

On January 1, 1972, almost one month and seventeen years ago, I began my work here among you as the new Senior Minister. I quickly discovered that the Pastoral Search Committee that recommended me for the position had been forthright and honest with me in describing the congregation at that point in its history. The Committee characterized this congregation as a 'sleeping giant,' that was ready to awaken, to grow and expand with the proper leadership.

In order to help this happen, our first task together was to assess the strengths and weaknesses of this congregation.

The Strengths We Found Were These:

A Willingness and Readiness to Grow: Almost everyone I talked with believed that this congregation should and could be receiving many more new members.

A Tradition of Being a Leading Church in the City of Lincoln: Because of its being the oldest church of any kind in Lincoln (having been organized in 1866) and in the past having been a leading church in outreach and ministry and in community leadership, this tradition was still in people's memories.

A Tradition of Having a Strong and Vital Music Program: Since 1886, when Carrie Bell Raymond became the organist and director of music, the congregation had had a growing music program. It was one of the first churches in Lincoln to have a full-time staff member as organist and music director. The Church also possessed three fine musical instruments — the main pipe organ, a smaller pipe organ in the Chapel, and the only true Carillon of 48 bells in the State of Nebraska.

A Well-Maintained and Versatile Church Building: The overall Church building was in good shape and very usable in a variety of ways. The main Church auditorium had been built for worship especially. A major remodeling program and the new addition of the Chapel and the East Wing for small children had taken place in 1966, as part of the Centennial Celebration of the Church.

An Established Outreach Through Media: The congregation had not been afraid to use the media for its outreach. In the early 1940s, the Church had begun the weekly broadcast live of its 9:30 A.M. worship on a local radio station, and that broadcast is still being carried on. We have since added a weekly telecast of our worship services.

The Weaknesses We Identified Were These:

Lack of Young Members: Not very many young people were members of the congregation. Almost a whole generation was missing. Furthermore, the Church had been having net losses in membership since the late 1950s. The congregation had gone from a high of 2,000 members in 1952, to 1,200 members in 1971.

Insufficient Financial Support: In addition to a debt remaining on the building expansion that took place in 1966, there was an accumulating operating budget deficit. The congregation had been spending the advance pledge payments for the coming year to pay the last year's bills. This had been going on for several years.

Low Attendance at Worship Services: Attendance at the Sunday morning worship services was small and getting smaller. Usually, only 80 or 90 people attended the 9:30 A.M. service, and about 200 were present at the 11:00 A.M. service. In spite of good music, the worship services lacked energy and excitement. Worship had become a boring routine exercise. Sunday Church School attendance and enrollment were also very low.

A Reputation for Being Unfriendly: The Church had gained the reputation over the previous ten years leading up to 1972, of being an unfriendly, cold place. Visitors, when they came, did not feel welcome or wanted.

A Vision and Plan for the Future

Gradually, a vision and a plan which would build on the strengths already present and overcome the weaknesses was devised and put into place.

At the first Annual Meeting of the congregation, which I attended in January 1972, having been on the job only three weeks, I announced my personal goal of increasing attendance at public worship so that a few years hence we would be averaging 700 per Sunday. I went on to say that it was my goal to make worship exciting and interesting so that when people left the service they would feel better than when they came in.

For the past several years, we have averaged more than 700 per Sunday in worship, and we get more positive comments from visitors about the overall quality of our worship services than on almost any other aspect of our Church's ministry. People mention the way the service is put together, the flow in the worship, the music, the preaching, the use of inclusive language, the lack of 'dead' time, the cohesiveness, and the overall feeling of taking part in a spiritual experience.

Some months later in 1972, at the Board of Deacons meeting, and after much discussion, the Deacons voted at my suggestion that we set a goal of receiving at least 100 new members in the next year and in the year after at least 150. The Deacons further agreed to put into place a plan for greeting visitors and members as they entered the worship service, and those greeters would be sure to get as many visitors as possible to sign the guest book with name, address, and phone number.

In the Fall of 1972, Jack Levick, our present Minister of Music and Fine Arts, joined the staff, and since that time has brought new inspiration, energy, and excellence to our worship services and our overall music programs.

When the year had ended, we could sense that the giant was beginning to awaken.

The giant was also beginning to awaken in financial support. We needed increased giving of money. In 1973, the congregation voted to have a special debt reduction drive with the goal of wiping out the building debt of about $150,000 within two years. That drive was successful. We also agreed, in the Board of Trustees, that we would never again have a deficit operating budget, and this meant not reducing the budget, but increased giving from the members. The

year 1972 ended with a small surplus, and we have not had a deficit since then. In 1971, the operating budget, including benevolences and the Preschool, was $164,000. In 1989, our total budget, including the Preschool, is $843,000.

In addition to that, in the past two and a half years, we have received more than $1,000,000 in the Development Fund, which we have used for the needed renovation of various parts of the building, the purchase of TV equipment, and in the near future, the repair of the Carillon and other building work.

Previous to that, in 1981, the congregation had a special fund drive on the occasion of the 50th Anniversary of this building for the purpose of re-doing some of the offices, as our staff was expanding, and we put in a new front sidewalk and steps. Then in 1983-84, we added a new sound system.

What has really made this giant awaken is that during the past 17 years, in addition to Jack Levick, we have continued to add quality staff persons — John Smeltzer, Dale Schuerman, Gary Schuerman, Judy Walsh, Jane Ellefson, Kevin Smith, Tammy Alvis, Nancy Hadley, and more.

The Giant is Awake

The giant is awake, alive, and growing. Literally thousands of people hear and see our worship services each week over radio and television, in addition to those who are here each Sunday morning. We have a growing Sunday morning Church School that is reaching out to increasing numbers of children and young people. Our programs for youth are growing and expanding. The weekday Preschool is one of excellence. This Church building is used by all kinds of community groups. We are known in this community as being a caring, loving, and inclusive congregation where God's love can be experienced, where people can find strength and inspiration for their daily lives. Our members are to be found in leadership positions in business, government, education, and volunteer work.

In the past ten years, we've had five members of our congregation attend seminary and enter the ordained ministry of the United Church of Christ. Two members of the Church are now in seminary and will be ordained sometime this year, and another member is in seminary and planning to become a teacher. Two of our present staff members are presently working to become 'Commissioned Ministers,' and one of these may go to a seminary within the next several years to study for the ordained ministry.

Looking Forward: How Do We Keep This Giant Awake and Growing?

Our success is bringing us new challenges and opportunities.

Sometime during the month of February, I'll be making the following proposal to the Church Council and other Church leaders. It includes four parts:

New Space for Our Growing Music Program: Because of our growing and expanding music program, we need new space for a choir rehearsal room, choir robe storage, and music offices. The adult choir now has more than 80 members enrolled. The present choir room is simply not adequate. It was built for a maximum of 40. This new music room would be used for other kinds of meetings and lectures when not in use for rehearsals. It would have separate offices for the music staff.

More Space for Sunday Church School Programs: We need more space for our Sunday Church School Programs, both for children and adults, and we need additional space for the Preschool Program during the week. I will be proposing that we build a two-level addition to this building off the northwest hallway, which leads to this worship area. When this original Church building was designed in 1929-1930, it was planned that additional space would be added there. That's why three large double-doorways were included. The addition would be so designed to blend in with the rest of the building as it was originally intended. On the main floor would be located the choir rehearsal room, music offices, choir robe storage, and robing rooms. The lower floor would have access off the main hallway at that level and would include space for Church School Classrooms. Totally accessible restrooms would be included on each of these two floors.

Improving Accessibility: To make the entire building more accessible for people of all kinds, an elevator tower would be built next to the northwest door entrance so that people could enter the elevator at the ground level from the parking lot and go down to the first level of the building, or up to this level, or on up to the office and classroom level on the top floor. We have needed this additional elevator for a long time.

Renovation and Expansion of the Main Pipe Organ: The fourth part of this plan would be the renovation and expansion of our main pipe organ, and this would include a new organ console and more space for the choirs on Sunday mornings and evening concerts. The redesign of the organ would be more in keeping with the overall architecture of the Church building than is our present arrangement.

Conclusion: Continuing the Mission

When I came to this Church 17 years ago, the last thing I wanted to do was to get involved in any kind of building program. However, I would be abdicating my leadership responsibilities if I did not make suggestions for the improvement and expansion of this Church's ministry.

In January 1976, this congregation, in its Annual Meeting, adopted a Statement of Mission which has been the guide for all of our ministries including the care and expansion of this beautiful building.

In that Statement, we agreed that the overall purpose of the Church is 'to increase among people the love of God and neighbor,' and to do this, we need to be continually reaching out in love. As the Apostle Paul reminded the Church in Corinth that inclusive love is the more excellent way, so also he reminds us. Amen.