

August 28, 2011
Rev. Mary Elyn Bahlert, Pastor
Judy Patrick, Lay Member to Annual Conference

The State of the Church

Judy and I talked about what we want the congregation here at Lake Merritt UMC to know. So today, we are going to have a conversation – between us, and with you. We have talked about what each of us intends to say, and still, we may surprise one another!

Every year at Easter, Jeff and I are invited to the house of Elva and Phil Cooper of Pleasanton, where Jeff and I served a growing congregation together at Lynnewood United Methodist Church, in the late 1980's. Elva and Phil have invited us to their house each Easter since 1985. In their extended family are two United Methodist Ministers, one of whom some of you will know: Wally Riches. Wally was associate pastor at First United Methodist Church, one of the forerunners of this congregation, many, many years ago. This past Easter, Wally and I chatted for a few minutes. I told him about some of the happenings here at Lake Merritt. Then I said: "It's a great congregation." Wally said: "It always was."

As you know, from time to time I reflect on the dream or the vision this congregation had a long, long, long time ago. When I tell others about this congregation, I tell them that the dream or vision of this congregation has always been to serve the city of Oakland. After First United Methodist Church burned down in 1984, and the people of First UMC and St. Stephen's congregation merged to form Lake Merritt United Methodist, this congregation could have transplanted anywhere, say, in a suburb of Oakland. But the commitment to serve the city of Oakland by being a witness to the Good News in Jesus Christ in this place was in the heart of the congregation then, as it is now.

A few weeks ago, several of us in leadership here at Lake Merritt UMC were reviewing the financial realities of the congregation in this place. I remembered my first meeting with Staff Parish Relations, before I became pastor here. Jean Moorhead made sure I was told that this congregation had financial difficulties. I knew that, having served a downtown congregation before in my ministry. The choice to stay and serve the city doesn't mean that resources will be plenty.

At the meeting of the leadership a few weeks ago, Stephen Ford, Chair of the Administrative Team here at Lake Merritt UMC made the connection that the congregations that merged to form LMUMC wanted to stay in this place to serve the world. "Now," Stephen said, "the world is coming to us."

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I grew up in a small town in Nebraska and I grew up Methodist. For most of my adult years I have said that it was the Methodist church that largely influenced my life path. It was through the church that I learned about the civil rights movement and other social justice movements. It was because of the Methodist Church that I spent a year in Germany as an exchange student, it was because of the Methodist church that I attended Nebraska Wesleyan University and worked for three years as an intern at the Methodist Church next to the campus where my job was to begin a community free school as a way of offering relevant places for engagement for students and people in the neighborhood. I would offer that the church brought the world to me. In those times, the church was very relevant to my life.

I was privileged to be this church's delegate to Annual Conference this year. I have to admit, I didn't go with very high expectations of inspiring content. Much to my surprise, I was very inspired by the guest lecturer, Adam Hamilton, the pastor of the largest Methodist Church in the US. What Adam did was talk about making the church relevant/meaningful/even compelling. What would make the Methodist Church compelling to 21st century people? He started a new church in 1990 in the suburbs

of Kansas City and decided to focus his ministry on reaching the nonreligious and the non-churched. Today this church has a membership of 15,000 and 23,000 attend Christmas Eve services. He maintains that the world we live in needs Methodism now more than ever. One of things that I have always loved about being a Methodist is that this is a faith that holds together the heart and the head...it is both an evangelical and a social justice gospel. In order for the church to grow, we need to ask ourselves "what do the people not here and present on Sunday morning need?"

Adam Hamilton made the point that we are living in a world where many people are broken and the world is broken. Both need God to be held together. How can we be/become the church that is about healing individuals and healing the world?

In these times of real hardship for so many – yesterday we gave out over 240 bags of food in the Food Pantry – I am more convinced than ever that people need to know about God. That's why I'm still in ministry today. I think that the lack of kindness, of respect for other human beings, of moral decay that we see lived out in our leaders and in this country can only be changed by a change of heart, a transformation, a repentance of human beings, one at a time. I often say: What we offer here is more important than anything else offered anywhere else.

But we know the churches are emptier than they ever were, this church included. Something about our message has not gotten out into the world in ways that can be understood, now, when we all need it most.

Also part of this year's annual conference was a presentation by Bishop Brown . He was basically making the case that we are currently in a 40 year decline. In these 40 years conference membership has fallen from 11 M to 7.8 M. One in three churches are not growing and 220 of our conferences 345 congregations have less than 100 people in worship on Sunday morning. During these same years, the population of this area has doubled. He made the point that the majority of giving to the church is spent internally...staff, building maintenance, conference staff. We are spending less than 5 % on going to what he called benevolence. Now I disagree a little bit with his analysis focused completely on monetary giving because I think giving also takes the form of service. However, I do agree with his subsequent point that we have very big legacy costs....maintaining what used to be. As long as we continue to focus on what used to be, we will not grow.

In the time of John Wesley, at the end of the 18th century, society had fallen into moral, economic, educational decay for the people of England. That's what John Wesley and his fellow "Methodists" knew when they came together to talk about how to bring the Good News to people. Like John Wesley and his cohorts, lots of church leaders have written books and articles about what is needed now. These days, there is a hearkening back to what those Methodists came to terms with. They knew the Gospel was what the people needed, and they clearly outlined what was needed to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

John Wesley outlined The Means of Grace: take the Lord's Supper regularly, read the Bible every day, meet regularly with other Christians for prayer and study and accountability, serving the poor, the hungry, the lonely the prisoner, attend worship regularly.

As I've sat in classes and workshops over the past 10 years or so, I see the church coming to terms with the fact that we've gotten way off the track John Wesley was on. We've grown a generation of people who are good church people, but who are not necessarily followers of Jesus, willing to commit their lives completely in surrender to God.

One church leader puts it this way: we've become people who make our choices based on *preference* rather than *mission*. If the only mission of the church is to "make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world," [current UMC mission], then we're way off track. Instead of making our decisions and choices in service of God, we have so often made our choices and decisions in service of our own preferences.

For example, several years ago, after a conversation with the Administrative Team about growing this congregation, the Trustees were asked to begin, as leaders of the congregation, to be the first to make sure the parking lot was kept free for guests on Sunday mornings. The response came back to the Administrative Team: "We think we should be able to park where we want to park." That's an example of making choices based on preference rather than mission.

When a congregation is invested in its mission, choices are made based on that mission. Then, our own preferences, as part of the community of faith, become secondary to the mission. We haven't made that transition here at Lake Merritt UMC.

One thing is for certain: we are not going back to who we were years ago! Times around us have changed. The 1950's, when people flocked back into the church with their families, ended a long time ago. Since that time, most congregations of mainline denominations have been declining in numbers, this congregation included.

We are not going back!!!! But – are we going forward?

Lake Merritt has been relatively stable in attendance for the last decade. However, our congregation looks quite different...we have become more diverse ethnically and racially, we have lost many of our older members (often members who tithed 10%). In a recent financial analysis of congregational giving, we learned that we have also been relatively stable, however, for years, we have not brought in enough through our offerings and building rental to maintain our currently level of expenditures. We are a generous congregation and we spend our money frugally. We have balanced our budgets for years out of our savings/bequests, but these resources are declining. If we continue to give and spend at our current rate, we will deplete all of our saving in 5-6 years. As I look at these numbers I think we can perhaps increase our rental income by 10%, and maybe some of us can give a bit more, but we will not close our gap unless we grow our congregation.

This is a wonderful congregation. I hear many of you say this often. We are diverse. I don't think we fully take advantage of our diversity. We are living in an increasingly polarized world where more and more people only talk with people like themselves. Here at Lake Merritt we have the perfect container for real and deep conversation with people who are not like us.

I believe each of us grows personally and spiritually through deep and meaningful interactions with others. This is a muscle we need to build at Lake Merritt. How do we create a place where people can practice sharing about our spiritual lives? How can we begin to take the risk of asking each other how our lives have grown in Jesus Christ in the last year? How can we begin to invest more in those who are not here or those who come as visitors...clearly seeking a community where they can grow spiritually?

We have visitors to worship every Sunday at Lake Merritt UMC. That is a given here that is not a given in many congregations. We have visitors – I like to call them our "guests," every Sunday. I reach out to every single one of them.

But who they want to know is YOU!

A new member has said something interesting to me. She says she can tell that people here like each other, but she hasn't found them to be too friendly to newcomers. She stayed because she has been part of many churches, and so she knows how to find her way around.

So the question is given: can we grow? I can honestly say, "I'm not sure." I know that when a congregation is committed to growth, every single person in the congregation must be part of the outreach for that growth. For example, on some Sundays, when a new person comes into the sanctuary, someone from the congregation will point that guest out to me! Instead, every single one of you would be looking for new people, our guests, and every single one of you would be committed to helping guests feel as welcome as possible. That means that you'd introduce yourself, sit with a new person, tell them why you like it here and ask what they'd like to know. That means there would be a group of trained people waiting just for new faces each Sunday, in the halls, ready to answer questions and to walk new people into the sanctuary.

Can we grow? I'm not sure! As your pastor, I'm not sure. Like many churches in this century, being the follower of Jesus has been delegated to one person – the pastor – and we haven't asked too much of anyone else. When the Ad Team suggests that we need to grow, then that means everyone needs to change their focus, from Trustees, to Sunday School, to greeters, to ushers. We have to give up our love of our preferences to be part of the mission of Jesus Christ in the world.

We have to start inviting our friends to church, to "come out" as followers of Jesus.

Can we grow? I'm not sure! Over the past 10 years, I have experienced a sea-change in the way people prioritize their lives. And I'd say the church comes in about 10th, if it's that high on the scale. Just this past week, I spoke to another valued leader who has had to withdraw from leadership because his family and work time does not allow him to be involved. He loves the church, but it's not that high on his priorities.

Can we grow? I'm not sure, when I see people show up for church once a month, or even less. I'm not sure, when we have delegated to just a few retirees the work that many people should be doing. I'm not sure, when we ask people to show up to train to be a greeter, and they say that if they have to sign up for once a month as a commitment, that's too much! I'm not sure! I'm not sure, when we pay someone to be nursery and preschool staff and to do our room set-ups for us, when that was done by church people years ago. I'm not sure, when I see how many events conflict with church times. I'm not sure, when people's personal preferences take precedence over being part of real church community.

I'm not sure, when many times a week I wonder who's going to show up to do the hard work we need to do?

In simple terms, the church of Jesus Christ is only about 3 things:

Falling in love with God

Growing in faith

Going into the world to serve

In simple terms, that would mean that we would stop being church people and instead, we'd get serious about our faith. I'm ready to work with people who want to grow spiritually. I'm ready to train leaders who can lead groups where people share openly and honestly about their faith – or lack of it.

This year, the Administrative Team has been making regular announcements about the financial realities of this congregation. I'm proud of their willingness to talk openly about finances. I think everyone needs to know that our important presence here will not be able to continue unless we begin to work together, to work hard together, to grow in many ways. We have to make a connection between the fact that

worship, this building, the Food Pantry, will not be here unless we are all willing to work hard together. I'm not convinced we have the wherewithal.

I am an optimist. I believe that this optimism often allows me to power through the tough times.

When my partner Cindy died, a Catholic sister handed me a hand written bookmark with Jeremiah 29:11 on it. This has become a very important text for me over the last 6 years...one that I have applied in my personal life and my work life.

For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

I believe that Lake Merritt has a future filled with hope...as future in which we become a place where individuals (those currently attending regularly and those in our community who need a place to heal and connect). We have a lot upon which we can build.

In order to grow and thrive I believe we need:

- Compelling worship
- Outstanding leaders...leaders who are within the congregation
- Several small groups (a la John Wesley) where each of us can grow in our own faith
- Engaging mission ministry

Now we have some of this...but not all. My challenge to each of you today is discern how you want to grow in your own faith, to consider becoming a leader in this congregation...perhaps leading a small group, commit to joining a small group as a way to deepen your connection to God and to this community and to commit to doing something that helps us grow this congregation.