

# **The State of the Church**

**Leadership Setup Meeting  
January 21, 2012**

It is my joy to have this unique privilege to report on the state of our mutual interest – Mt. Auburn United Methodist Church. I do not believe it is grandiose or an exaggeration to say that this congregation is one of the best in America today. There are bigger congregations, but few that are better. What God has built and is building here is wonderful to behold.

And make no mistake about this – God is building this congregation as He wills and desires. He does use us – you and me – to accomplish His purposes. But He builds it. As I have said many times previously, God could have chosen to save the world without us, but He gives us the high honor to be partners with Him to save the world He loves.

When we met in this room last year, the Holy Spirit was powerfully in our midst. Days later, Mary Ann Sutton was still basking in the glory and awe of that moment when she said to me: “It was like God was in that room telling us what we were to do.” Let’s hope that never changes and is just as true today.

Last year, I encouraged us to move ahead with the refurbishing of the former sanctuary for children’s worship. In less than a month’s time, a standing room only crowd of approximately 200 people voted unanimous approval. In July, we began the JAM worship for children.

I consider this to be one of the greatest accomplishments of my tenure here as Senior Pastor at Mt. Auburn. Here’s why. Everyone knows this had been a controversial and, at one point, a contentious project. We had made mistakes along the way in assuming too much and failing to bring the congregation along with us in the thought process. We had to delay the start of this project a whole year. Yet, in the end, we lost no one and the church grew in its understanding and commitment to children’s worship.

There is a lesson here that should not be lost. A church will have disagreements. It’s foolhardy not to expect them. The way to work through them is to let God be God – not run those off who disagree with us and say “my way or the highway.”

I rested in God's gracious, sovereign, and providential care for Mt. Auburn, not because I was a person of great faith, but because I came to see (*after our first vote*) that God had already placed in this congregation the person we would need to turn this vision into reality – Rev. John Wortinger. The late President Reagan was right when he said, "It's amazing what can be accomplished when you don't care who gets the credit." To God be the glory! (And also my good wife!)

2011 showed growth in both worship and Sunday School attendance. Our worship attendance growth was small, but the arrow still points in the right direction continuing almost 15 year's of increases. Sunday School attendance showed a big gain reflecting the positive effects of a full year of the Life Groups.

Our offerings continued amazingly strong considering the fact that 2011 was the 3<sup>rd</sup> consecutive year of an economic downturn, and that this was the first year since 2004 that didn't include a capital funds campaign. In the future, when one looks back on this recession era it will be difficult to say that Mt. Auburn participated. This fact speaks volumes about the depth of love and commitment to Jesus Christ by the people of the Mt. Auburn congregation.

The past year saw, in addition to the completion of the sanctuary renovation, the start of refurbishing the church offices and the finishing of the overhaul of our HVAC systems. There will always be work to do, but we have not only built a new building – almost doubling our space – but we have overseen the updating of the original building. This building that was started in 1968, added onto numerous times, and finally completely rebuilt following a tornado over 25 years ago is now better than it ever was.

We enter 2012 with our projected offerings a little weaker than I would have hoped. Our annual fall stewardship campaign showed the effects of the now 4<sup>th</sup> year of a recession. There are real people hurting in our congregation as a result of this economy. Yet, our faith is in God – not the Dow Jones Average or the Gross National Product. And, God is always faithful to Mt. Auburn, and He will always be as we continue to honor Him. So, in the words of another former President – Franklin Delano Roosevelt: "There is nothing to fear but fear itself." Amen.

Bishop Coyner has asked every United Methodist congregation in Indiana to set goals this year for growth in 5 specific areas that have shown to demonstrate vitality. It's called the Vital Congregations

Initiative. Our leadership met last fall and set goals for these 5 areas. You can find them in the packet you received today.

I want us to grow our worship attendance faster than the goal we projected. We have grown, but we have never had exponential growth. I think we may be poised for the greatest year of growth yet. On Sunday January 8, we had almost 600 in worship – about 250 in each of our worship services – and 90 in JAM. I think this was a vision of our future and the future is now.

Let's reach the goal of 100% of our people in Life Groups. Why not? Is there anyone who shouldn't be in a Life Group? Are you in one? Do you think we have become one of the best congregations in America today just because we have a pretty sanctuary and a pastor who is buff and handsome?

We want to keep growing in the number of people engaged each week in some mission for Christ outside the doors of this church building. In 2011, we experienced our 2<sup>nd</sup> "Week of Mission" and this continues to bless many and all who participate.

Our giving to second-mile mission projects is the one area of the budget that we are unashamed to say that we want to keep increasing dramatically. We really don't want to see the sewer, gas, or electricity budgets grow, but we want to see missions busting through the ceiling. We have grown substantially. Looking back, I'm not sure it was our good planning and visioning as much as it was that God kept thrusting new opportunities our way.

- Our Johnson County Cluster of 7 UM churches has been one source for growth in missions. We support local food pantries throughout the year. We built a house for Habitat for Humanity. We are enlarging the Kids Against Hunger project. And, there are dreams for a homeless shelter here in Johnson County.
- We are heavily involved in Uganda today simply because a retired missionary came to my office 6 years ago this month and asked me to go with him to train lay pastors. I immediately said "yes" and since that time we have built a church in Uganda, we are building leadership in the church for the next generation by supporting the ministerial education of four pastors there, and we have plans to build a second church in Uganda.
- I think this year will see us engage in an ambitious mission of evangelism in Uganda through OMS (One Mission Society) which has become a great partner to us since Bill and Joyce Oden began attending Mt. Auburn.

- Last November saw 11 men led by Pastor Ben go to Haiti to build 2 houses. This was an OMS affiliated mission.
- And, we have 3 people in our congregation who are now missionaries at OMS working to stop the worldwide trafficking of human beings – another OMS initiative. Thank God for Sandy Newcomer, Tom and Tonya Overton. May God bless them and may their numbers increase.
- Again, the outreach to the Indian people in our community was not something we envisioned and planned. God simply thrust it upon us. Mannubhai and Roshen Mecwan have a great heart for God and for their people. This is not an easy outreach. It's like plowing concrete and I will be the first to admit that we are struggling. If it were easy, everyone would be doing it, and God wouldn't have asked Mt. Auburn. But, I can see that God is again placing the people we need to make this ministry thrive. One day in the future, there will either be an Indian Methodist Church on the east side of Greenwood near Homecoming or there will be a sizable contingent of Indian Christians in the Mt. Auburn congregation.

Finally, we are praying for God to give us 25 brand new profession of faith every year. Maybe we should double that, because Mannubhai is praying for 25 from the Indian community to come to Christ this year. Honestly, we cannot save anyone. Only God can. But we can pray, love, serve, and share. If we are faithful planting the seeds, God will give the increase. Maybe He'll even give us more than we ask for.

There are two additional items that I want to place before you. First, I want us to refurbish the whole area used for children's ministry – except for The Chambers which has already been completed. This is Phase II in the original long-range plan, but I believe we can do this without new building by continuing to update and repurpose existing parts of our building. We have done this not only with the former sanctuary, but also with the former Teen Center upstairs which is now The Upper Rooms for adult ministry. We have received a grant from the Center for Congregations to study the possibilities, and I hope we will move ahead this year.

Second, I want us to stay focused like a laser beam on paying off the debt. Even though our fall stewardship campaign hasn't resulted in the numbers we would have liked yet, we still raised over \$500,000 for debt reduction. It is my hope to have our debt paid off by the time I retire. For me, that would be the icing on the cake.

The day is coming when I'll have to retire from active ministry. Then I will no longer be under appointment by the Bishop, and I will be free to do what I want. I won't retire from ministry. I am already seeking what God has for me in this coming phase of my life. I've been blessed. This is my 45<sup>th</sup> year in pastoral ministry. How many people do you know that get to do what they have loved to do for almost 50 years? And, I have been doubly blessed that God placed Mt. Auburn in my life. Back in 1990, all my friends told me not to accept this assignment, but I knew if this was the door God was opening He would be with me. And, He certainly has been.

When I hand the baton to my successor, I plan for it to be the most seamless transition ever. We already have in place a team of young leaders from the congregation working with the Conference in a Consultation for Fruitful Congregations. It is my prayer that this will be the beginning of a new vision for Mt. Auburn that will lead the congregation beyond the Hertel years.

There are things that I won't see with you. When there is a new sanctuary that will be the dream of others. I can see where it might go and what it could look like, but I won't be a part of building it. I do want to see the debt eliminated so that when the congregation wants to take that step, it can.

I would like to see essentially Phase II completed with the refurbishing of our children's ministry area, because children are the gift God has given us and we dare not fail them.

In the meantime, let's focus on the basics. The legendary coach, Vince Lombardi, said football was a simply game. It was, he said, all blocking and tackling. The team that blocked and tackled best would win. The mission of the church is simpler yet. It's not two things. It's only one – make disciples. Let's focus on that and God will give us all the desires of our heart.

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