

Pastor's Report to Charge Conference

Williamson's Chapel UMC

November 20, 2008

Last night I finished leading a five week study on the life of Jesus. After the class someone came up to me to ask a question. I had talked about the conflict that led to the death of Jesus. She wanted to know why Jesus didn't slow down the pace of his ministry. Since he was so young and he could have provided much more to convince the world of the truth of his mission, wouldn't it have been better if Jesus would not have provoked such animosity and allowed his ministry to continue longer?

It stimulated a few moments of rich conversation. We raised the question about how much more was there really to understand and how much did it come down to people simply opening their lives to God to be used by Him? I mentioned how many times the Gospel of Mark uses the word "immediately." Jesus operated with a sense of urgency in his ministry. It was as if there was no surplus of time. We considered the possibility that the message to us today might be that kingdom opportunities abound, but those opportunities don't last indefinitely.

As we talked she remembered an interview she heard one time with Billy Graham. He was asked about the return of Jesus and when the kingdom of God would fully arrive? Bill Graham said, "We can't know, but what we should do is live everyday as if the kingdom will come this day." We should every day as if the kingdom will come this day.

I want to report on the ministry of our church this year from that perspective because living everyday as if the kingdom will come this day means we live with a confident faith that God is at work, that we live in constant awareness of kingdom possibilities, and that we seek to respond to those opportunities with urgent hope. I believe we have lived in just such a manner this year.

First we have lived in that hope as we moved through a very significant transition of leadership. The church's growth during the ministry of Dr. Terry Moore was unprecedented. Williamson's Chapel became the seventh leading worship attendance church in our conference. This change of appointment was critical in many ways and not just a little unsettling to lots of people. Yet, I am proud to say the church pulled together and the leadership saw to it that there would be no slippage during this change. I want to thank the many people who helped make this transition as smooth as possible not only for our congregation but the Fuquays as well. Many of our people made meals to assist my family during our two months of living apart. Prayers and encouragement were in abundance and the welcome and assistance given as we purchased a new home were truly invaluable.

I want to particularly brag on the staff (*and don't respond just yet, but I would like for them to come up and stand behind me for a moment*) These folks went to great lengths to make me feel well received. From help moving into a temporary apartment, to a candy-covered welcome poster, this group made me feel like they were delighted to have me as

their new senior minister, and while I have been guilty at times of taking this for granted, I have never been ungrateful for it. This church is blessed to have a staff who work very hard and exercise great responsibility in their work. It is a pleasure to work with each of them and I thank you for supporting them.

Secondly, we can celebrate that we have not just survived but thrived this year. We have received 140 new members this year, 74 by transfer (34 of those from other United Methodist Churches and 40 from other denominations) and then we have received 66 on Profession of Faith. A good fifty of those were in this year's confirmation class, but that still represents roughly 11% of our new members being adults who made a first time profession of faith in Christ. Together with the confirmation class that means nearly half of our new members have come by Profession of Faith this year. That's a great celebration!

At the same time we decreased by 21 members, six by transfer to other UM churches, 3 to other denominations and 12 by death. That gives us a net gain of 119 new members and puts our current membership number at 1,826. The names of all these persons are attached to my report.

Our worship attendance to date has increased by about 11% over last year. Currently our average is just over 1200. A significant reason for this increase has to do with the willingness of the church to transition the Monday service to Saturday night. Now just 11 weeks old our Connexion at 6 service is averaging over 240 people. Tonight we can celebrate a year in which we have continued to grow and further our witness!

Thirdly, we can celebrate a strong year of stewardship. Despite a struggling economy our giving has been up by roughly \$1,000 each week, and our recent stewardship campaign has been hugely successful. To date our commitments to the 2009 General Budget of the church stand at 307 pledges totaling just over \$980,000. That puts us just over 65% of our total budget for next year and represents an 83% increase in pledges and a 77% increase in dollars. We can celebrate the faithfulness of God's people!

Connected to stewardship, our service commitments have grown significantly this year. We now have regular volunteers who have increased the workload in our office by an average of 20-30 hours a week. As Andrea shared, we began training and using Lay Pastors earlier this year which represents on average about 17 visits each week to homes and nursing homes, hospitals, and other facilities all across our region. I want to add to Andrea's recognition and thank Ceil Weber for her fine work in this area. And, finally, we had a large number of people respond to our Ministry Fair and other calls for service this year. So we celebrate tonight the faithfulness of Williamson's Chapel in using their gifts for ministry.

And as a final part of lifting up highlights from this year, I want to mention just a few other accomplishments:

- One, we filled two important staff positions: the Director of Pre-School, with Caryn Shelton, and my wife, Susan, in the Director of Adult Discipleship.

- Two, we secured an extra acre of unrestricted property given to the church by Claude Cashion.
- And three, we made a number of capital improvements such as renovations to the office building, the Archer property, and chapel; as well as a fence around the cemetery and office equipment upgrades.

So it has been a year of continued growth both in quantity and quality. Having moved through some uncomfortable issues related to change this summer, I feel our church is moving forward with a new momentum of unity and anticipation about the year ahead.

To capitalize on this we will launch a visioning process in 2009 that will look at our mission statement and begin dreaming what Williamson's Chapel will look like in the next five to ten years as we live out that mission. Hopeful outcomes of this process might be a projection of building needs that can be the ground work of a Long Range Building Plan; a staffing strategy for the future and goals for our ministry areas that pursue God-sized dreams for carrying out our mission into the future.

We, of course, want to keep worship strong and are underway planning series that will keep attracting new people into the church while challenging the congregation to new levels of faithfulness and devotion. We are particularly excited about an after-Easter series called "A Church Without Walls." This series will bring together many of our ministry areas as we spend several weeks considering what it means to be an Easter people who allow their faith to make a real and vital difference in the world. We will tackle and engage people in issues such as global/environmental stewardship, poverty and hunger awareness, and service to the community.

We will keep increasing the number of spiritual growth and small group opportunities that are the catalysts for real life change and faith development. I am very encouraged by the number of lay members we had leading such groups this fall, and we will build on that in 2009. Particularly we can look forward to the new emphasis on Christ Connection groups led by Gene Engle. This has the opportunity to be one of the strongest engines for numerical and spiritual growth in the church.

In children and youth ministries, lots of plans are underway for camps, mission trips, special events and strong weekly programming. I feel these two areas are the most important in our church. As we reach the kids around us, we will reach parents and families.

And finally, I anticipate another great year of missional outreach. Williamson's Chapel is active in serving the needs of our community and region, and based on the success of this year's Jamaica trip, our global outreach is going to keep growing stronger.

But what excites me most, what I really anticipate about the year ahead is the stories of faith and the life-transforming power of Jesus Christ I know we will hear as we live out our mission. Stories like this one...

Just over two months ago a man began attending church here and shortly after came to see me to share how he felt God was drawing him back to faith through Williamson's Chapel. Listen to his words as he describes his experience:

The weight on my shoulders was at times overwhelming. I had been carrying so many burdens for so many years, I did not realize the effects it had taken on me both physically and mentally.

When I was first invited to attend Williamson's Chapel, I was apprehensive. I had convinced myself that I no longer needed God in my life, and besides I had been to so many churches in the past, why should this church be any different? I put off attending as long as I could. As the invitations continued to come, my resistance began to wane. Finally I accepted and went to my first service. I was very nervous that first morning, but yet seeing the smiles on the faces and hearing the joy in the singing put me at ease. "Hey," I thought to myself, "this isn't too bad." There was a real spirit in the place, one I had not felt in a long time. I had felt it in my heart, but that was usually when I was alone, not within such a large body of other believers. Could this church really be that different? Was it just me feeling so emotional about being away so long?

The next Sunday, was different, I really wanted to go, almost a hunger, a longing to be back to see what was in store for me this week. The service did not disappoint, once again I felt myself being cradled in the arms of the Holy Spirit. It almost became too much at times, the feeling of wanting to let go of the heavy burden I was carrying and run to the altar was hard to ignore, but yet I did not go down, at least not that Sunday.

I continued to go, week after week, until I did run to the altar. It was a communion service where I finally did surrender. I knew that I could not partake of the holy sacrament without letting go of all the burdens I carried. Once there, I was joined by others, and then I felt the hand of the pastor on my shoulder as I prayed and as he prayed for me. It was a wonderful experience. One that I will not soon forget.

For so many years I have attended different churches and I wanted to experience a church that I felt comfortable enough to lay before God all the things that were troubling me, but many times, the invitation was given, but the spirit was not there to lead me to the altar. I have felt that spirit at Williamson's Chapel every time I walk through the doors. It challenges me in my spirit and strengthens me for my week ahead. I'm so thankful for the person that did not give up on me and most of all for this church.

Clearly that is evidence we are responding to kingdom opportunities. As we prepare for the year ahead and live as if the kingdom will come each day, how many more stories like this will we hear next Charge Conference?

In closing I want to share something with you. In my devotion time one morning a thought came to me that was so strong and so significant I had to write it down. This is it: "I may accomplish things for God by my effort, but it is only by God's blessing that it prevails. So, God, prevail in my effort." What that meant to me, was my dependence on

God is critical, but that doesn't mean I can relax. My effort, my work is important. But I must have God's blessing and power in order for my effort to prevail.

So must we. So may our prayer for the year ahead be the same: May God prevail in our efforts. Amen.

Robert E. Fuquay, Jr.
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