



STATE OF THE COMM-UNION

Matthew 5:1-12

What a shock the Beatitudes would have been in first century Galilee!

--Blessed are peacemakers? No way....not when we have had to fight wars to gain our independence as a nation....an independence we no longer have!

--What do you mean, “blessed are the meek”? Sounds like government and religious propaganda

to keep us quiet about exorbitant taxes!

--“Blessed are those who mourn?” There is no blessing in losing a young child...as I have!

--“Blessed are the poor in spirit”....“at least I understand the “poor” part, Jesus.”

We too have heard the Beatitudes....and they seem no more realistic to us than in Jesus’ day...but we

will return to the Beatitudes in a moment.

Completing a year as your interim pastor, I celebrate First United....and today I offer a perspective

to encourage you to do your own reflection about the present and future of this congregation.

Once a year the President of the United States gives the “State of the Union” address to the members

of Congress....outlining the President’s view of the country and its top priorities.

--Shamelessly imitating that pattern, here is my state of the comm-union address...for First United.

First, I am thankful to God for the resilient spirit of you, members, leaders, staff of this congregation.

--You have coped well with changes following the unexpected leaving of pastor Mark Ramsey.

You have experienced times of frustration, times of challenge.

--Through it all, you the members and the staff of this congregation have demonstrated faithfulness

and determination....and you are moving ahead!

Thanks be to God for all you have done to make this unwanted interim time productive...as you are

engaged in the search for a lead pastor.

Secondly, your Council and other leaders, with input from the congregation, chose to define the areas

of ministry on which your new pastor will focus....a step often neglected in pastoral searches.

Those areas in which the new pastor will focus, developed and voted by the Council and agreed to by

the Pastor Nominating Committee are:

1. Provide pastoral leadership for creating and maintaining a framework that inspires, informs, and nourishes the spiritual welfare of the congregation (WIG, Wildly Important Goal) through preaching, worship planning and leadership, Christian education, pastoral care, and effective administration.
2. Using a collegial, collaborative approach, develop, manage, and strengthen the church's committees, lay leadership, and staff.
3. Lead the congregation in being a welcoming community, growing its participation/ membership and finances consistent with the programs and theological mission of the church.
4. Lead the committees and staff in seeking new ways to communicate effectively with the congregation and make the decision-making process better coordinated, more consistent, and more transparent to the congregation.

By stating the areas on which your new pastor needs to focus, you have increased the chances for a

successful search and mutually satisfying pastorate.

--Your challenge is to be accountable, along with the new pastor, in making certain that these areas

of focus are what the new lead pastor actually does day by day!

Thirdly, you as a congregation have reversed years of using endowment funds as a means of funding

what have been unbalanced budgets....and thanks be to God for this change in financial practice!

There remain many financial challenges: there are far too many people who do not yet include generous giving to their church; stewardship at First United is a work in progress.

--Yet you have begun important steps in stewardship and financial accountability.

Fourthly, your Church Council meetings are focusing on major questions....moving away from “show

and tell” meetings—when committees and staff list their activities without having any Council level

actions for consideration.

--You are blessed with excellent leadership by your Church Council during these transition times!

Along with this congregation’s notable strengths, there are major challenges....I’ll highlight three.

First, what great strengths this congregation has in mission: PADS housing the homeless here two

nights a week...the Walk-In Ministry...the Food Pantry...dozens of other mission involvements!

You are known for mission....and I celebrate your mission emphasis!

--Your Faith in Action committee is working to focus current mission efforts by emphasizing certain missions: it is hard to generate excitement and support for dozens of missions.

--Their purpose is to increase participation in mission....because the purpose of mission in a church

is not just to channel funds to various missions but to grow disciples through increasing personal participation in mission activities.

The various missions in which you are involved are worthy of the time and effort given to them: the

challenge for First United is to ask what new forms of mission are needed for the 21st century. Being content to continue what exists without finding new forms of mission would be to succumb to a

a church disease called “we’ve always done it that way before.”

New forms of mission are decided by you, not by me; to stimulate your action, however, here is a 21st

century mission challenge.

In the weeks before Christmas, a letter was written to Christian leaders by 138 Muslim clerics and

scholars representing every branch of Islam.

--The letter said, "If Muslims and Christians are not at peace, the world cannot be at peace."

A response to this letter expressed gratitude for the letter...asked forgiveness for historical Christian

hostility toward Islam....and promised dialogue with Islamic and Jewish leaders that "seeks the

good of the other"...and asks how God "would have us fulfill the requirement that we love God and

one another."

No issue is more crucial for the world's future than relationships among Muslims, Jews and Christians.

--What mission can First United shape to create dialogue and mutual ministry among Muslims,

Jews and Christians in this community....within the metro area?

--Until such concerns move from First United's adult education program into mission action, the

impact of this congregation is less than it can be.

Make no mistake: doing this will take change from the usual mission patterns....yet nothing could

make a more crucial contribution to this community and world!

--What might happen if First United took a fresh look at what might become a new flagship ministry in this community....yes, even in this metro area?

You have strength in mission and the means to take a new step in mission...to add the next chapter in

First United's excellent history of faith lived out in mission and ministry!

A second challenge: on what sy-LAB-le you as a congregation choose to put the em-PHA-sis?

--For example, ministry with children is valued among us....including a half-time staff position in

children's ministry to help carry out that priority.

Ministry with youth is valued...and half of an Associate Pastor's time focuses on that ministry.

However, there are areas of ministry in which little is being done: ministry with older adults, ministry

with young adults, and a comprehensive ministry of care of congregational life and members are

three prominent gaps in emphasis and ministry here.

--You do not have leadership groups or staff focusing on those areas.

Are you satisfied with where congregational program and staffing priorities are at the moment?

--Are there unaddressed areas of ministry which are crucial for the future of this congregation?

No, you cannot be all things to all people.

--Yet there are stirrings of concern about gaps in First United's ministry, as indicated by the concern for ministry with older adults which led this to be one area of focus in Marylen's pastoral internship this year.

--Where will this lead....as part of a comprehensive look at priorities?

Please know I am not suggesting that the emphases on children and youth be reduced.

--I am suggesting that decisions about crucial areas of ministry such as young adults, overall congregational care, and ministries with older adults will shape the future of First United.

--On what sy-LAB-le you as a congregation choose to put the em-PHA-sis?

Thirdly, membership trends are a challenge at First United.

Here is some data: in 1996, the self-reported membership of First United was 1100: for 2006, the self-reported membership is 700.

--The membership trend at First United is neither upward nor stable; the trend is gradually down.

All signs are not bad: worship attendance is as high as it has ever been during these 10 years....and

enrollment in Christian education has increased.

--Your New Member committee is making good strides toward an improved process for welcoming

new members into the congregation....which is a vital step, yet only one part of the whole.

--Your Deacons are working to increase ways of caring ministries within the congregation
What is needed is to address membership trends and issues and reasons head on, rather than assuming that existing strengths are adequate to attract new participation and membership.

--I hope you will encourage the Pastor Nominating Committee to choose a pastor with a track record of growing a congregation numerically as well as spiritually...which your leadership has included as an area of focus for the new lead pastor.

First United has great strengths....but needs to build on those strengths rather than assuming "business as usual" is adequate.

--You have probably heard that definition of insanity: doing the same thing over and over but expecting a different result!

One aspect of membership needed at First United is a process involving members in ways that meet

their interests and needs....tracking the participation of members...being in touch with members

who are not finding satisfying involvement...reaching out to those not involved.

Let's return to the Beatitudes as we consider the state of this comm-union called First United.

--In the Beatitudes, Jesus is calling people to realize that God's purposes for human life are not

identical with conventional human ways: "business as usual" isn't adequate.

God is acting through Jesus to turn conventional human ways upside down.

--Those who are truly blessed are the poor in spirit, the peacemakers, those who are merciful, those

who hunger and thirst for God's way of living.

--AND THOSE WHO FOLLOW JESUS ARE TO BEGIN TO LIVE THIS WAY NOW!!

The Beatitudes may seem upside down, but, as seen in Jesus of Nazareth, in God's reality it is in fact

the right way up!

As this congregation moves ahead in its life, you will be even more blessed if these Beatitudes are used

to guide congregational life!

Let the Beatitudes become evaluation questions about the state of this comm-union.

--Are we as a congregation growing in being what the Beatitudes call "poor in spirit:" are we learning that our current ways of doing things are not necessarily God's....that we have much

to learn new as well as much to celebrate?

--Are we as a congregation learning new ways of being peacemakers in all areas of life, in a world

in which the greatest challenge involves relationships among Muslims, Jews and Christians?

--Are we finding ever new ways to be in caring ministry with all participants in First United?

--Are we finding ever more ways to grow our hearts and spirits so that we experience God's presence in our lives and in the life of the world around us?

The Beatitudes challenge us to not let "what is" become the enemy of what can be!

--If we pay attention to the Beatitudes, we dare not let "this is the way we've always done it" become the opponent of what God calls us to be and do!

In these and other ways, are we growing in being partners in God's Beatitudes reality?

--That is to be the true state of this comm-union called First United Church Oak Park!

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First United Church Oak Park
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