

PUTTING CHRIST IN THE LEAD

**A Study on the Mission and Core Values
of Clarkston United Methodist Church**

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Table of Contents

Introduction

Chapter 1.....The Mission

Chapter 2.....Committed to Christ

Chapter 3.....Worship That Makes a Difference

Chapter 4.....Biblical Hospitality

Chapter 5.....Making Disciples

Chapter 6.....Transformational Mission

Chapter 7.....Next Steps

Introduction

I wish I could tell you the moment that I heard God tell me to author this study. The truth is that I have never had one of the moments when time stood still and I heard God's voice. Epiphanies have come more often through the faithful nurturing of fellow Christians or as moments when I have looked back with wonder as I retraced how God had been working in my life. I remember being at the beach watching a young toddler play along the edge of the water under the watchful eye of his mother. As he concentrated on the sand in his bucket he never noticed the approaching wave. It was not a dangerous wave. But it was strong enough to pick the toddler up and push him several feet and to scatter his toys across the sand. When the boy had landed in his new play place, he gathered himself and looked around with great curiosity. He had not seen the wave coming. He had not expected to move from his chosen place but it **all had** happened just the same. As his mother came over to make sure he was okay, his face was filled with curiosity and surprise **as to what had happened**. That is often the look I have when **God has moved in my life**. God has acted in my life in ways that caught me as off guard as the little boy. **God has also acted after my prayerful pleading but never has God acted as I expected or to my command**.

In January of 2005 I offered a class for persons in the church who wanted to reflect on what it might mean for us to put Christ in the lead of our personal lives and over the ministry we share at Clarkston UMC. Eighty-six people took the class. They considered the characteristics of Christian leadership and reflected on the next steps necessary to follow Christ faithfully in the church. We were building upon the great work that had occurred over the past several years as the congregation wrote and claimed a mission statement. I believed as solid as the mission statement was, it would go the way of other mission statements unless we did the next steps of putting meat on its bones. I, like you, have worked hard to create mission statements only to see them paraded around for a while and then get filed away. Every once in a while someone who wanted a catchy way to promote a new event would use its language even if it may or may not have anything to do with the original intent of the mission statement. The purpose of the class was to keep that from happening to this mission statement.

My expectations for the class was that it would begin to lay a foundation of discussion that would continue over the next year until we could find some way to define specifically what we are to do at Clarkston UMC. That period of time would give us opportunities to address issues like stewardship, structure and space. I also thought the time would allow a greater opportunity to continue to develop trust between myself and the congregation I had been called to lead.

In the midst of my careful planning, God chose a different time line. Conversations of the class, with laity outside of the class and with staff identified many harmonious

thoughts. It was clear that there was no need to create a long process of discernment as to what God was saying. People were already sensing it. There was the need to give voice to common themes and to present them to the church in a tangible way. The fact that this harmony of thought resonated with my own heart song was a blessing as well!

I laid out the next level of ministry development to the leadership class in the form of Core Values which identified specifically the way in which we would go about mission fulfillment at our church.

These core values were readily embraced by those in the class, the staff and others who heard them. They were received so well exactly because they were the written symbols of the feelings and spirit that God is placing in us collectively.

From this time of affirmation, the next steps were to design a process that would allow the entire congregation to have access to hearing and shaping these core values. This included a congregational wide study of these core values:

- Committed to Christ
- Worship that makes a difference
- Biblical Hospitality
- Making Disciples
- Transformational Mission

The purpose of this study would be to introduce these core values and delve into 1) their necessity, 2) their meaning, 3) and consideration on how to live them out as a congregation and as individual members.

That is why I wrote this study and why you are now preparing to read and share in discussion and prayer with others about them.

I continue to feel like that boy at the beach. I am filled with awe, surprise, joy and anticipation as to what this action of God is doing and will do in the future. I only pray that these core values and mission statement, this study and all the personal connection that comes from it will place Christ more firmly in the Lead of our church and our personal lives. To God be the glory!

Chapter 1

The Mission

Clarkston UMC is vitally connecting people to people and people to God.

Biblical Mission

We are a people set forth to fulfill a mission. Biblical history is filled with powerful moments of mission assignment and the journeys they create. Abraham walked with God and was given the mission of becoming the father of a great nation, the chosen people of God. Moses went out to watch over a flock and was called to move out with the oppressed Hebrews into the wilderness and towards the Promised Land. David was given the gift of song and an assignment to lead the nation of Israel in battle and peace. John the Baptist was given the mission of proclaiming the message of repentance and pointing to the Way of the Lord. Jesus was born on a mission to become the Savior of the world. His mission to the Jews and Gentiles, to sinners and saints, to the privileged and poor all came about when he set out in specific directions and claimed specific responsibility to establish the Kingdom of God. In Luke 9:51, Jesus is said to have “set his face toward Jerusalem”. This was a pivotal moment in the history of the world because it was a specific action in the context of a greater mission. Jesus knew that he would have to go to Jerusalem to face the powers of this world and ultimately defeat them by his death and resurrection. When he determined to “set his face” he was claiming a specific leg of this mission, and one that would have lasting consequences for the world.

Jesus was also focused on sending his followers out to engage in their part of fulfilling the mission of bringing the Kingdom of God to others. Sometimes this was a direct assignment to care for individuals **such as commanding John to care for Mary after the crucifixion.** Sometimes it was a larger mission as in Mark 6: 7-13 where he sent out 12 disciples in his name to go on a mission of healing and repentance. The entire ministry of Jesus is a story of mission fulfillment and launching of others into mission.

Jesus' mission focus is what makes the actions of the disciples so intriguing following his resurrection. They are portrayed as hiding in the holy city of Jerusalem. Even after Jesus has appeared to them, they remained behind locked doors and to themselves. It is easy to imagine that the early Christian church could have remained a religious novelty in the area of Jerusalem until the disciples all passed away. However this mission-minded-Jesus was not content to allow that to happen. In his last appearance to the disciples recorded in Matthew, he gives them a particular assignment. *“¹⁶Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:16-20)*

This passage is filled with wonderful nuance and meaning. For many of us, it may be comforting to know that the chosen disciples of Jesus still struggled with doubt even as they worshipped the resurrected Lord who stood in their presence. Yet Jesus gave to those worshipping doubters the greatest and most compelling mission ever launched. They were given full authority to “make disciples of all the nations”. They were charged to baptize and teach all that they had learned and would learn in the days to come to the entire world! They were promised that in all moments of celebration and defeat Jesus would be with them.

The Mission of Christ’s Church

Living and sharing the good news of faith remains the primary mission of the church of Jesus Christ. It continues to call every church and each disciple to a life of mission fulfillment. It has been the experience of the Christian community that the best way to deal with the doubts we have about our worthiness to accomplish what Jesus asks of us is to humble ourselves to set out in mission. The early disciples could have chosen, and perhaps would preferred, to remain in Jerusalem with their doubtful worship. But when Jesus came and gave the Great Commission they went and in the going had their doubts replaced with experiences of divine grace and miraculous movements of the Spirit of God. They certainly faced hardships and setbacks. They failed often, yet found that in their weakness and struggles God’s grace was more than sufficient. In their moments of loss they became victors by the power and presence of Jesus who indeed remained with them.

The church in every age has been under that mandate of this Commission. At times the church has demonstrated great faith and commitment to winning the world for Christ. At other times we have had the tendency to become a group of religious practitioners who dabble in ritual and potlucks and remain spiritually stuck in neutral with our doubts and excuses. There is not time in this study to review the ways over the past 2000 years the church has soared when it has been faithful to the mission fulfillment it has been assigned and how it has failed when it tried to play it safe.

Those of us in the United Methodist church need only look at our own history to see the roller coaster ride that we have been on in our relatively brief history. We have moments to be proud of and others for which we have sought redemption. Our beginnings are grounded in the Holy Spirit blessed power of the Wesleyan movement in England in the 1700’s. John and Charles Wesley along with others began to ask deeper spiritual questions and demand higher personal accountability of Christians. Their passion and faith created a religious movement that extended into a powerful circle of evangelism and mission in the world. That infusion of grace, mercy and proclamation extended over to the colonies and made the Wesleyan movement, that ultimately became the Methodist Episcopal Church, one of the most powerful and effective witnesses for Christ on this continent. As we have engaged in mission for the **past 237 years** we have soared as we proclaimed the gospel, launched ministries of healing, education, social justice and salvation. We have also faltered when we have become complacent and sometimes compliant with social sins of racism, sexism, economic injustice and various forms of civil religion. Our denomination has ingrained itself into the fabric of the culture around us so deeply that, at times, we have lost sight of the need to fulfill the Great Commission. We have fallen

victim to borrowing the theological beliefs and attitudes of other faith communities without drawing from our own deep theological heritage and proclaiming the unique (not better than) voice that God has given to the people called United Methodists.

Over the past few decades, church observers and leaders have been warning us about the dwindling numbers and weakening influence the church is having in the world. There has been a flurry of denominational programs to turn the tide of fewer members and to instill the passion back into an institution that in many ways has become passive. Some of these attempts have had moderate success and some have simply come and gone with little impact. The truth is that the church was never intended to be an institution that relied on programs to help find its vitality. We will never have anything to offer of value to the world if we only yearn to for a return to the past or protect with passion our comfortable way of doing the same things we have always done.

The church is built upon the assumption of mission fulfillment. The church soars whenever the people of God truly lay claim to the mission that is theirs for the sake of Christ. People's lives are changed and the world is given a brighter hope when we humble ourselves to live as committed disciples of Jesus Christ. The larger church, each individual congregation and each member must take seriously the call to serve the larger mission that is given to us by Christ.

The Unique Mission of Each Church

Each church needs to discover the unique role and character which God has blessed them with to fulfill the Great Commission. The apostles Peter and Paul both gave their lives to that work but each was blessed in special ways to accomplish what Christ needed to be done. Peter was a preacher and called to minister to the Jewish communities around Jerusalem. Paul was a writer and traveled far and wide establishing Christian communities in primarily Gentile areas. Peter was not equipped with the skills of Paul to broaden the church to those who had no foundational knowledge of the faith upon which the message of Jesus was based. Paul, as far as we know, never preached a sermon like Peter that could ignite the church to come together as it did after Pentecost and increase its number by 3000 in one day. The mission of Jesus was fulfilled more completely because these two men claimed their own unique way of expressing and leading in faith.

Each denomination and individual church is blessed with gifts and perspective to express a faith in Christ that will touch specific people, accomplish particular mission and offer praise to God with a characteristic voice. This is not an elitist or divisive statement. Just as Christ welcomed all into his presence (an issue we will address more completely in the chapter on Hospitality) the entire church is under the mandate to reach out with baptismal waters, worship, fellowship and discipleship to *all*. However no one person or church can be all things to all people. Different voices, emphasis and opportunities types of ministry are required to offer openings to the world to become a part of the Body of Christ.

For the past two years I have had the privilege of attending a conference held by the United Methodist Church to focus on the unique ministry of large churches. I have observed ministry in ten different United Methodist congregations in Houston, Denver and Colorado Springs. Each of these churches had the commonality of being United Methodist and with

worship attendance averaging at least 350 or more each week. However, the facilities, worship styles, programs and missional outreach all varied greatly. This was because each church had discovered the uniqueness of their settings, blessings and calling by Christ for their mission. When these congregations get together, they can dialogue about many common issues and resource each other with new ideas and perspective. However, it would be a grave mistake for one church to simply decide one day to change who they are and become just like another church they admire. A downtown inner city church in Houston has a different mission based on need and resources than a church in the suburban outgrowth of Denver. They sing some of the same songs but not all. They carry out some of the same programs but many that are different. The clergy are all seminary-trained but each one has their own personalities, style and skill. Each of these churches thrive because they have laid claim to the Great Commission and the unique way each is able to carry it out in their setting.

Obviously this is true of any size congregation and any denomination. The rural church I served in North Carolina had a distinctive voice and style different than the one I first pastored in the Detroit Conference. Each of the four churches I have served have had a unique ministry to fulfill. The common denominator of vitalized ministry is found in the clarity of purpose these churches claim and the faithfulness they demonstrate in living it out their mission.

The Mission of Clarkston UMC

In 1841 the Clarkston Methodist Episcopal Church was chartered. There is little written to describe what those charter members thought their particular mission was as a church in the then rural countryside of Michigan. Over the years, the church offered worship, Christian education, fellowship and mission. It is safe to say that there were some years it has been impassioned in fulfilling mission and some that it was lost in complacency. Few churches, if any, avoid the roller coaster swings of faithfulness and spiritual vitality.

In the 1950's this congregation was an established presence in the community lodged in one of the great historic buildings on E. Church and Buffalo street. In the middle of that decade, something stirred to challenge the status quo of this church. The historical retelling of what happened is still available from a few who were there at the time. For those of us who came after that time, let me point out two significant facts.

The congregation made the decision to move from its long loved location and build a new church. This kind of decision never comes casually in the life of a church. Over the years members attach a great deal of importance on the places where they have worshiped, married, baptized, buried and celebrated resurrection. The only way to be able to find the way to leave such a sacred location is to discover a greater calling and purpose that compels a decision to move. When our spiritual parents made the decision to come down the hill to the present location of the church, they were literally taking a huge step of faith. There was no certainty that God would bless their action, that ministry would flourish or that others would come to share in the work. There was only the commitment to faithfully follow where they felt God was leading them.

The faithfulness of God quickly became evident by the vitality of ministry of the congregation. **The church grew from a membership of 430 in 1950 to 880 in 1960.** Some

might perceive that people were drawn to this church because of the beauty of the building or the charisma of certain pastors or church program. The truth is that this congregation grew because whenever the people of God act in faith as they engage in mission, a blessing follows.

Since that time, the church has maintained faithful ministry. Today we have grown to a membership near 1400 and a worship attendance of nearly 600. In the midst of national church decline in members and attendance this is an accomplishment on its own. Over **those 42 years** there have been the typical church life moments of comedy, pain, triumph and failure. Throughout it all, this congregation has had a significant presence in the community and engaged in quality ministry. . However, the world around us has changed and the county around us has exploded in population and evolved in character.

Northern Oakland County is a very different place since the early 60's and Clarkston has been on a fast track pace of change even more recently than that. The population growth of the area and the changing needs of the community, church and individuals led to a need to begin to raise questions concerning the future direction and mission of Clarkston UMC.

History of ACT and the Mission Statement

In the year 2000 the congregation intentionally entered into a time of trying to discern the long range direction of ministry. Out of the work of the Long Range Planning team, a decision was made to bring in conference leadership to assist in guiding a process that would clarify the direction of the ministry of the church. Dr. Colon Brown, Director of Church Redevelopment for the Detroit Conference of the United Methodist Church, was hired to provide assistance in allowing a vision to emerge from within the congregation. A three year plan was presented and agreed upon

Those who were designated to work closely with Dr. Brown began to meet quarterly to share common readings and discussion. They worked with several other United Methodist churches also going through the same process. The committee claimed the name ACT for themselves which came from one of their readings. The ACT committee agreed to uphold a covenant with each other and for the common good of their work. They agreed to: attend and honor meeting dates, keep scripture as a central part of their meetings, share communion at each meeting, regularly attend prayer meetings, and pray with each other. They also made a commitment to keep at least some of the following spiritual disciplines: prayer, scripture reading, holy communion, corporate worship, journaling, fasting, and faith sharing.

Focus groups representing about 10% of the congregation were created to help the ACT team identify the strengths and struggles of the ministry as it currently existed. In addition, a survey was shared with others to help chart how various components of ministry were being expressed in the congregation. These actions helped create a wealth of information which added a more objective understanding as to the health of the church's ministry.

After about twenty months, the ACT team had gained a lot of information but was felt it was no closer in claiming a vision. One night, after a time of prayer, sharing and silence, the movement of the Holy Spirit began to open up eyes and spirits to the gift God wanted to give the

church. One of the ACT members moved by a holy impatience went to the front of the room and wrote down, “We envision our church”, and then another voice continued adding, “vitality connecting”, and then another said, “people to people and people to God”.

The words of one who was there, “The room went silent. In one swift act there it was. We had been faithful, patient and trusting in God and we all knew immediately that this had come directly from God. It was perfect in every way. It summed up everything we had heard from the people of our church and felt in our hearts. There was no discussion, no changes and joy leaped into my heart. After twenty months we had found the answer and direction we needed. That was the shortest meeting we ever had.”

The church then went through a time of examination of the wording of this sentence and eventually adopted the following as the mission statement for the church:

Clarkston UMC is vitality connecting people to people and people to God

Church mission statements often fall into description statements. That is they describe how we see ourselves. It lifts up ongoing activities that we value and celebrate. Often mission statements become like personal descriptions found in on line dating services. They attempt to put the best face forward on who the people are, what they do and what they value. Some passively articulate what people are already doing or what they have already become.

One of the great blessings of the Clarkston UMC mission statement is that it does not try to describe what we are doing or even necessarily what we do best. A random survey of people as to what we do best would probably create a list of worship, youth ministry, ministry for children, music, etc. This mission statement calls us to look beyond what we are doing and consider why we are doing it. All of the ministry of our church has its own intrinsic value but also contributes to the mission of connecting people to each other and God. The mission statement helps us to measure if what we are doing has value in relationship to the common vision we believe God has given to us. If we engage in ministry that does not help connect people to each other or come into the presence of the Holy God (or both) then it is not helping us fulfill our mission. This mission statement holds us to a standard for what we value in ministry.

It also has the potential of being attractive to those outside of the church. It avoids church jargon and speaks to two of the great needs of the society around us. The first is the need for community and the second is the need for a spiritual journey that leads to God. In this ever increasing mobile society, more and more people are displaced because of work, education or other personal circumstances from family and friends. Some come to Oakland County from far away and some are local to the area but estranged from relationships that are nurturing and supportive to their life journey. People are in need of healthy and supportive relationships as well as mentoring on how to have them with others. Our mission calls us to speak to that need by connecting people to people. In the context of the Christian faith, this is more than casual proximity to each other. It is an invitation to come together in fullness and truth. It means we not only ask how each other is doing but truly care to listen to the answer. It means we will be honest about our own story even as we honor and treat properly the personal stories of others. It means we will care enough to pray for each other, encourage each other and when appropriate,

challenge each other. It is to care for each other at the deepest level with integrity and commitment.

We live in a spiritually starved and curious world. It is a truth that we live in an age where traditional church attendance is on the decline and sale of books of spirituality and self help books are sky rocketing. People are struggling with greater stress from all areas of life. Yet they are less and less inclined to turn to the church which has often appropriately been accused of trading in the Great Commission for Church Survival training. People have come looking for a people on a passionate, accessible spiritual journey and instead been offered committee work and offering envelopes. The church has often been more focused on teaching people how to do church rather than be equipped and prepared to be sent out into the world as Christ's ambassadors. At times, we have simply welcomed people in with the casualness of a civic focused club without addressing spiritual issues or placing our lives in context of the divine presence of the living God.

Our mission statement challenges all who come here to understand that we exist primarily to help people come into the holy presence of a living, loving and mighty God. If you pass through this church without experiencing that then we have failed in our mission. This is good news to a spiritually hungry but wary world. Some find it curious that we name God in our mission statement but do not specify Jesus Christ. One of the gifts in doing this is that it makes our mission statement and our church more accessible to the unchurched. Unfortunately, we like all past generations, live with the knowledge that how Jesus has been portrayed by some of his followers has made him less appealing to those who are looking for answers to life. The value in this mission statement is that it puts up front the focus of coming into the presence of God but hopefully allows people to come into relationship with us and the faith we share to determine the character and spirit of what that means.

Finally the mission statement is energized by the word that puts all the rest of the words in context – vitally. Our ministry is called to be an active, passionate and life changing ministry. Passivity has no place under a mission statement that sets an expectation of vitality. We are called to be intentionally seeking healthy relationships as we move towards a dynamic experience of God. In the context of a world that offers cheap short lived thrills this is truly Good News.

The Need for More – Naming the Core Values

Claimed by this Mission statement, our church has been moving forward on a journey of greater clarity since it was adopted. It was operative in recent pastoral change, staff hirers and program emphasis. These initial steps of growth have led to a heightened sense of expectation and anticipation as the mission of the church moves forward. However, there has been a need for more clarity as to the particular character and function of our mission. The mission statement provided an excellent skeleton but we needed to put meat on the bones to make it come to life. Questions as to how we will connect with each other and multiple questions about how we will approach God have risen. While we as a congregation have agreed on the mission statement and found new energy from it, there has been awareness that more is needed.

The more can be found in the naming of the Core Values that give support and deeper clarity to the Mission Statement. Core values are those key values that are central to the unique character of how an individual or organization operates. There are a countless number of values we can identify. There are many that we depend upon and live out every day. However core values are the foundational beliefs we commit to keep at the center of everything that we do. They become the cornerstone of every new idea and the litmus test of evaluation that determines the missional faithfulness of every event. They are not unique to those who claim them. However the way the core values interact and the way they are manifested in the actions and thoughts of those who claim them is unique. They define with greater clarity the mission they fall under even as they assist in accomplishing the mission.

The number of core values any person or organization has is not set in stone. However, when the number gets large enough to cover all the important values of life or mission, you no longer have a core to stand on. As you examine these five core values, you may wonder why some others are not included. While that consideration is valuable (and encouraged) it is important to avoid increasing the number beyond what can be focused on. When everything is a equally held value, then there is no clarity as to what specifically we are called to do or what shape the mission we are given will take.

How Were These Core Values Selected?

These core values come out of a shared dialogue among the leaders, staff and laity of the Clarkston UMC. They reflect the discernment of the common passions and spiritual awareness that continued to emerge in the comments, questions, reflections and yearnings in conversations over the past year. Five core values are listed not because the number five is somehow magical. They are listed because through prayerful discernment these are the five that were heard. These core values are what I believe to be the next steps for our spiritual maturing as a body of Christ and are critical if we are truly going to be a church vitally connecting people to people and people to God. I invite you to reflect on the following with an open heart to hearing what God may be saying to us all through these core values and how each of us is being called to respond in joy and faithfulness.

Chapter 2

”Committed to Christ”

The Way to God

“Who do you say that I am?”. Jesus asked the question to Peter following a sampling of what others were saying about him. It was discussed that some had said the Son of Man was the prophet Elijah, some said he was John the Baptist, and others pointed to Jeremiah. After the random poll of the general public was taken, Jesus got personal. He turned and looked Peter in the eye and asked him, “Who do you say that I am?”. The scriptures record in Mark 8:30 and Luke 9:20 Peter answering quickly, “You are the Messiah”. The term Messiah had several connotations but in this context two things stand out.

One, Peter was saying he believed that Jesus was the chosen one of God, the Son of God. This was a unique role in the cosmos for it meant that Jesus was more than just a prophet. He was God in action bringing salvation and deliverance. He was not just reflecting what God desired, he was the one who had come to fulfill the will of God. As great as the prophets of God were, the best they could do would be to point out what God wanted and where God was leading them. Jesus came to accomplish what ordinary people, even great spiritual leaders could not. He came to establish a new order, a new relationship between God and all of creation.

Secondly, the role of a disciple of a prophet or teacher is significantly different than that of a disciple of the Messiah. The disciple of a prophet was limited to try to copy perfectly the teaching and style of their master and then attempt to replay it as faithfully as possible. What the disciple learned from the prophet became the full range of knowledge and testimony that they would have to share. When the prophet they followed left for whatever reason, they were not free to make new discoveries or make more relevant the lessons they had learned no matter how long ago they had been taught them. Some eventually went searching after new teachers and prophets to follow. But the disciple of the Messiah was not limited to become the photocopy of the original teacher of truth. Instead, they were invited into a relationship that was dynamic. Disciples of the Messiah were always learning because the Messiah was always revealing. Peter was a disciple of Jesus the Messiah when he articulated this fundamental affirmation of faith. Yet it is clear from scripture that Peter still had a lot to learn about what it meant to be a Messiah and the Messiah’s disciple. The good news for him, and for us all, is that the Messiah we call Jesus has promised to never leave us. Even after his death, resurrection and ascension we remain in relationship with him through prayer, revelations of grace, sacrament and countless other ways.

When Peter professed Jesus as the Messiah, he took the step that all Christians who follow in his footsteps make when we offer our own affirmation. The declaration of Jesus as Lord is central to the Christian faith. However throughout all ages there has been different ways to articulate what this means specifically. Some emphasize the importance of Jesus as Lord is to be found in his being born as human flesh. This incarnation demonstrates to us what it means to be

faithful children of God in this world. Some emphasize his teaching and find in his message and example the pathway to living the abundant life he desires for us. Others focus on his death on the cross and the great sacrifice of suffering that he took upon himself to spare us the penalty of sin. Still others emphasize the power of the Resurrection and the opening of the doors of eternity and winning for us victory as the children of the resurrection in this world. The many ways people speak of Christ have understandably led people to be confused as to what is the “right way” to think about him.

Entering into Holy Relationship

It is significant to recognize that apart from this question to Peter, Jesus focused more on right relationship than right thinking. Certainly what one thinks is important, but often those who receive the harshest response from Jesus were those who were technically sound according to the traditions and teachings of the faith, but were relationally closed off and spiritually blind. The moments of joy in the Gospel are found when people enter into relationship with Jesus and proclaim him as Lord even before they fully knew what that meant. The Samaritan woman is not rewarded for right thinking or behavior. She is rewarded when she humbles herself to embrace Jesus and enter into relationship with him. This is true of the woman who anointed Jesus in the middle of a party, the so called sinners who gathered at Matthew’s house to feast with Jesus, Zacheaus who welcomed Jesus into his home, and Mary and Martha and Lazarus and so many more.

Entering into a relationship with Jesus always initiated change. The sick were made well, the lowly were made leaders, the afraid became bold and those formerly without hope were sent out to defeat the principalities and powers of the world. Those who entered into that relationship were as different and unique as any random group of people could be. They became connected to each other through one common experience, their relationship to Jesus Christ.

Our own tradition of the United Methodist church is born out of the experience of John Wesley who had been raised in the church, trained in theology in the best schools and ordained to ministry because of his demonstrated knowledge. His early ministry was filled with arrogance, judgment, insensitivity, ego and failure. It was not till after his humbled soul had been mentored lovingly by other Christians that he was prepared to receive Jesus as a personal savior. It was not until he went beyond *knowing* about Jesus and arrived at the point where he came to *know* Jesus that his heart “felt strangely warmed”. After that moment, his ministry took on the vitality to bring restoration to a country and launched the movement we now claim as the United Methodist Church.

Wesley later taught the Doctrine of Grace which is a way to see how God’s grace is experienced in life. The four types of grace identified in this doctrine are

- 1) Preventive Grace (the unconditional love of God we receive before we are aware of it),
- 2) Justifying Grace (the grace we respond to when we offer our profession of faith in Jesus),
- 3) Sanctifying Grace (the love of God that deepens in us as we grow in our relationship with Christ) and finally
- 4) Perfecting Grace (the arrival of being in perfect intimacy with God).

These expressions of God's unconditional, saving and empowering love reflect a joy of a life going on into eternity that is based in our relationship with Jesus Christ. They are foundational to understanding the way United Methodists see the world, others and themselves. This understanding of a grace that exists before we know it places us on equal footing with all of creation and gives God the credit for us being able to respond to enter into holy relationship. The presence of justifying grace is based upon an expectation that we are called to come to a decision point where we claim Christ as Lord whether that is a one time act of commitment or the ongoing decision for faithfulness we make daily. Sanctifying Grace is a calling for us to continually grow and spiritually mature after the initial decision to follow Christ. Perfection does not expect us to become perfect people but we can claim a goal of entering into complete harmony with Christ that is possible by the grace of God alone. This Doctrine of Grace gives us a map of understanding how we enter into holy relationship with God in Christ.

Knowing Christ at Clarkston UMC

The mission statement of Clarkston UMC calls for us to connect people to God. This implies relationship and the way to establish that is to enter into relationship with Jesus Christ. This is our experience of God, this is our witness. However, even as we say that, we acknowledge that we do not have the definitive word on all that it means to know Jesus. Our knowledge is limited to our experience of Jesus. The Doctrine of Grace tells us that the presence of Jesus, the grace of God is with us all before we are aware of it. That is our experience and the truth about others. As we engage with the world around us, we believe that Christ goes before us. Before we meet strangers, we know that Jesus is with them. They may not know it, but we do! This assurance and truth gives us excitement to meet others and to discover the presence of Christ with them as we share the Christ we have come to know. Of course, it is the same Jesus. But just as hearing how others experience a book, a miracle or a work of art adds to our understanding, so to our sharing with each other about the Christ we know deepens our collective witness.

Too often the perceived Christian witness in our society today carries a heavy load of judgment over those who do not share the same experience of God. If the secular world seems to be pulling away from the church it is because the church is preaching a message of judgment that is pushing it away. The Christian message over the airwaves, in the press and in our politics has built walls of isolation between segments of society. The perceived Christian voice is an emphasis on right ways of thinking, acting and even voting. The emphasis of much of the Christian message is often seen as lining up properly in theological doctrine, Biblical interpretation, or stances on social issues of the day.

We at Clarkston UMC believe that our mission is best fulfilled when we help connect people to God through the witness of Jesus Christ who ate with sinners, loved the outcast and invited all to come into relationship with him. To those who ask if there is a right way to live we answer yes. The right way to live is to know Christ and to love others as Christ loves you. That calls us to be as open as Jesus to welcoming all into our midst. This is an invitation to allow the moments of grace we will experience to draw us into a deeper relationship with each other and God. We expect that the common denominator of how we get to God is to follow Christ. This accepts with joy that people who share the love of Jesus may still be very different on a variety of issues.

It is that diversity that we celebrate and believe gives the greatest potential for spiritual maturity and witness to the world.

Steps in Getting to Know Christ

The steps of knowing about Jesus to getting to know Jesus are critical steps to finding the joy and power of the Christian faith. Our emphasis as a church is first to assist all persons to take those steps as they grow from seeker, to believer and to servant in the name of Jesus. Yet to design one particular path or program for everyone to follow to grow in relationship with Christ is problematic for one simple reason. We are not all the same.

How do you make friends? Are you the type to go up and introduce yourself to strangers in hopes of finding a friend? Or are you more likely to want to have someone come up and introduce themselves to you? Do you warm up quickly with people or prefer to take your time to see if you really can trust and really know a person before you list them as a friend? Neither way is right or wrong. Nor are the hundreds of other ways we all uniquely prefer to enter into relationship. The only sense of “wrongness” would be not to ever be willing to put forth the effort to have any friends or significant relationships at all. Whether we are comfortable with only a few friends or keep adding new names into our contact lists under the friends category, we all know that we are created to be in relationship with others.

The same is true about getting to know Jesus. Over the years I have seen people come into personal relationship with Christ in a variety of ways. Some have matured over the years gradually in their walk with Christ, while others have been overwhelmed by a dramatic spiritual experience. Many of us have been mentored into the faith by Christian friends and others came to know Jesus by learning and studying about him. Our goal at Clarkston UMC is to assist each person to grow in their relationship with Jesus in the manner that best fits them and is responsive to the way that Christ is leading them.

Each of the other four core values fall under the guidance of this passion for persons to be committed to Christ. The way we extend hospitality to both long time members and first time visitors or people on the street is born out of the hospitality that Christ offered to us first through his gift of unconditional love, forgiveness and acceptance. Worship that lifts us up and sends us out as a people armed with the joy of the Lord is a blessing that makes a difference in our life and the world and demonstrates our commitment to Christ. As we fulfill the command to “make disciples in my name”, we are walking in the pathway that Christ has set before us. As our church goes out in a variety of mission activities, we are not only taking Christ into the world, we are discovering the way Christ has gone before us and meets us in those encounters. As we expand on the other core values in the following chapters, you will see how all are geared to help each individual and the congregation as a whole deepen in their personal and corporate relationship with Jesus.

Finding Your Beginning Point

I love Mapquest. This is an internet program that will show you on a map the location of a residence or business simply by typing in the address. If you choose, you can also get

directions on how to get to that address by typing in your location. Once the information is entered, you can print out step by step directions on how to drive to your destination as well as follow a map that highlights your route. For a new resident in a new community it is a valuable resource.

Perhaps the best way for us to think about growing in relationship to Christ at Clarkston UMC is for us to encourage each person to begin with a spiritual mapquest. The assumption of this is that each of us begins by first identifying where we are in our relationship to Christ. Some are beginning from a position of wanting to know who Jesus is. Perhaps you have heard about Jesus but have little personal knowledge about him. Maybe you know some of the Biblical stories about him, but not well. Maybe you have been on a walk with Jesus for some time and have not done much recently to grow in depth with him. Perhaps you have lovingly studied diligently about him for years and offered many prayers but have never gone outside of your prayer room or study Bible to do something in his name in the world. Maybe you have engaged in good works of justice and service over the years but have not made the commitment to get to know Jesus intimately. Your beginning point might be that you have sat in pews and lead committees in the church with great passion but have no real confidence that you know Jesus.

These are only a few descriptions of where people in the church find themselves on any given day in their relationship to God. The question that matters the most in growing in relationship with Christ is where you are today. It is a question that many people avoid for several reasons. Some have never been challenged to think about the question at all. Others are afraid to ask the question for fear they will not like the answer. Some have mistakenly thought they should compare themselves to someone else's spiritual journey and have concluded they could never measure up to that example of discipleship. Some consciously or subconsciously have assumed that a deeper relationship with Christ will mean a change that they are not sure they are ready or want to make.

One of the tasks of the church is to encourage and challenge each person to reflect on the question of where they are in relationship to Christ. The delicate asking of this question comes to play in the way we ask it. When Jesus asked Peter for his answer to the question he was not concerned in the moment with what others thought nor did he place upon Peter an expectation that he would fail if he got the answer wrong. I believe the question was asked as a check point of reference. In the days that followed this encounter, the disciples would be challenged, taught, and called to grow in relationship with Christ. When Peter answered, "You are the Messiah", it was not graduation day nor failure day. It was a moment in time that was followed by Peter learning more and more what it the affirmation of Jesus as Lord truly meant. The importance of the moment was not that Peter got the answer somehow right as much as it was that he went on from that bench mark into deeper relationship with Christ. After the resurrection, I am sure he looked back on his answer to the question and realized that his affirmation was not so much of a moment complete understanding as much as it was a benchmark on a spiritual journey with Christ.

The question of where are you in relationship with Christ needs to be moved away from sounding like judgment. It needs to be asked as an invitation to help others find their current beginning point of where someone is on a life long (eternal long) relationship with Christ. When I was a teenager growing up I was asked in several settings as to what my relationship with

Christ was. In a church revival meeting I was asked if I was saved. Once while working third shift at a gas station I was asked if I knew Jesus. In each of the instances and many more, I felt like the person asking the question was ready to pounce on me if I did not answer to their satisfaction. If I got the answer “wrong” they were ready to correct me and tell me what I needed to do to grow in my relationship with Jesus and be saved. It always seemed to me that those asking the questions were convinced that my relationship with Jesus would only be valid if my answer reflected their own experience. They were more concerned to make sure my journey measured up to their experience than to listen to my questions and experience in an attempt to grow with me in Christ. As a result, I was admittedly turned away from a deeper experience of Christ because I felt judged and found unworthy. It was not until later where I was invited into relationship with others who loved and knew Jesus that I was given the freedom to ask my questions and grow in the way Christ was asking me to grow as a disciple of Christ.

The gospels reflect a Jesus who continually invited others into relationship with him. The invitations of Jesus were open doors for people to come in as they shared their life with Jesus. The invitations served as benchmarks for people to consider who Jesus was and what next steps they could take to grow in their spiritual journey. As a church and as individual members it is important for us to reflect on the answer to the question of where is our relationship with Jesus. Honest answers to that question can help each of us grow closer to each other, learn more about Jesus and help us to determine what next steps we are called to take to grow to the next level in our relationship with Christ.

The following questions are examples of ways to identify where we are in any given moment in our relationship with Jesus. They hopefully lead us to ask other questions that will push us to examine who we say Jesus is. These questions should never be asked with a sense of judgment or assumption that there is only one right way to answer. The goal of these questions is to help each individual answer for themselves where they currently are in relationship to Christ and what next steps they can take to grow deeper as Christ leads them.

- If asked the question that Peter was asked, “Who do you say Jesus was and is...” what would you say?
- What do you know about Jesus? What specifically could you teach someone else about Jesus from your own base of knowledge and experience?
- When was the last time you had a personal encounter with Jesus? What were the circumstances and what feelings did you experience?
- What of the following terms (or others) would you use to describe your relationship with Christ as it exists today? Is it: fictitious, casual, distant, growing, passionate, committed....?
- How frequently does your relationship with Christ affect your daily actions at home, work, and community or when you are alone?
- How is my relationship with Jesus shaping how I see myself, God and my world?

The joy of answering these questions is not in getting the answers correct. It is in getting an honest assessment of where your relationship with Christ currently is and then taking intentional steps in developing in areas where growth is needed. Everyone has a new beginning point in relationship to Christ every day and we all have steps we are called to take to grow as disciples

of Christ. Sometimes those steps are clear to us, sometimes we need the help of others to mentor us on our journey. What matters is that each of us make the commitment to take the steps necessary as we support each other on the journey of faith we share as the Body of Christ.

Our commitment at Clarkston UMC will be to challenge individuals to reflect on their relationship with Christ and create opportunities for persons to continually spiritually mature as they connect with God.

Chapter 3

Worship That Makes a Difference

Psalm 150

1 Praise the LORD!
Praise God in his sanctuary;
praise him in his mighty firmament!

2 Praise him for his mighty deeds;
praise him according to his surpassing greatness!

3 Praise him with trumpet sound;
praise him with lute and harp!

4 Praise him with tambourine and dance;
praise him with strings and pipe!

5 Praise him with clanging cymbals;
praise him with loud clashing cymbals!

6 Let everything that breathes praise the LORD!
Praise the LORD!

From the earliest of times, people have felt the need to worship. The purpose of worship is to come into the presence of God. Sometimes the primary objective is to give God thanks for blessings received. At other times it is to seek forgiveness, ask for help, celebrate community, or just to tell of God's greatness and worthiness to be praised. The style of worship has changed from generation to generation and from culture to culture. Worship changed dramatically in the Hebrew Scriptures from the time when Abraham sacrificed animals in the wilderness to please God to the time of King Solomon with the building of the great Temple of Jerusalem. Then it transitioned into worship in individual homes and places of worship called synagogues after the destruction of the temple and the scattering of the defeated chosen people of God into foreign lands. By the time of Jesus, worship consisted of sacrifice in the restored Temple in Jerusalem and reading of sacred scripture and teaching in local synagogues. Some worship had great drama and connected to large groups of people. Other worship was done quietly by individuals in personal moments. Prayer took on as many forms as any kind of communication and relationship may take. Some prayer was corporate, some individual. Some prayer was the reciting of the great words of faith passed down through the generations and some was extemporaneous offerings of personal thoughts, praise and pleas. The common denominator was the desire of people to find a forum where they could approach the holy presence of God.

This desire is common to all cultures, religions and eras of history. People still have a desire for worship in our culture. As a pastor, I have often been called upon to offer ritual that would bring God into the special moments of the unchurched such as marriage, birth and death. The fact that those making the request have not been taught all the meaning behind the drama of worship does not lessen that on some level they are asking for a God who will bless and help them. In those moments, there is no time to teach what God is fully doing or asks of them in

return. In a spirit of hope and hospitality I find myself often trying to offer whatever of God I can in a way that will speak to the real needs and hopes and hurts of the gathered. Sometimes such moments feel like a shot in the dark. When I remember that Christ really is with us all and able to do great miracles with little to work with, then I am given renewed hope that the best we can sometimes do is be faithful in the offering and trust the rest to God.

It may appear to some that in the mainline Christian church in America there is a lessening in that desire. Worship attendance has decreased among mainline churches in the last fifty years. However a number of denominations and independent churches have grown in worship attendance. One key reason for this is that they have designed worship styles that reflect the language and music of the times to speak to new generations. This has led some mainline churches to change their worship styles to mimic other successful growing congregations. This has been well received in some settings but it has also in other situations left a number of long time worshippers feeling misplaced. **It has also led to the mistaken interpretation that there is a best kind of worship.**

This assumption is to miss the Biblical example of what makes for good worship which is the ability to help people connect to God.

Worship in the Christian church often struggles to find a vitality and relevance for the people of today. The church has argued over what music to play, what theology to preach, and what kind of prayers to pray. When worship has not been strong we have tried to place the blame on uninspired preachers, music that is not our favorite, services that are either too emotional or too rational and on worshippers who are too apathetic. While any of these issues are critical to address, they do not of themselves determine the effectiveness of worship. Worship which makes a difference is not guaranteed when the sermon is deemed good, the music well performed and the congregation willing. Worship that makes a difference occurs when people come ready to catch the movement of God when the Spirit moves. Powerful and blessed worship occurs when we prepare to find ourselves in the presence of God and discover that God has been ready and waiting for us.

Over the past several years I have been blessed to share in transforming moments of worship in a wide variety of settings. I have danced to the passion of African American worship in Chicago, prayed in joyous rapture in the middle of a Korean service in Adrian, felt the power of God's peace enter my soul through the classical sounds of high church vespers in Houston, experienced the intimacy of holy grace in healing services where literally two or three were gathered and shared tears, laughter and spiritual awakening in my home congregation here at Clarkston UMC. What were the common denominators in these varied experiences?

First was the presence of God. This may seem obvious to say but I believe it may be one of the components we can easily forget. God is with us and desires our worship. We are not a people who need to conjure up a sleeping deity. Our God is alive and present with us in every here and now moment. When we chose to enter into worship, we can take assurance in the fact that God is with us. That knowledge means we no longer have to tentatively enter into worship wondering if God even hears us or is willing to both receive and respond to what we bring. Before we even considered sharing in worship, God was longing for us to offer it.

Second, the persons involved in those worship experiences came in humility and expectation of connecting with God. I believe they were doing the best they could to make worship meaningful. While we would like to think this happens in every worship setting I would challenge you to think about the recent times you have entered into a worship experience. Did you bring the best you could offer to the moment? Often the worship we share in follows a pattern that we are so familiar with that we could anticipate what is coming next without thinking about it. Familiarity is a good thing up to the point it leads us to complacency and then apathy. The truth is that it sometimes even the best intended worshippers may go through a worship experience on auto pilot. Worship leaders can fall into performance instead of praise. People in attendance can navigate through the experience with minds and souls cluttered with miscellaneous issues that keep us from being aware we are in the presence of the almighty God. Preachers can get caught up in trying to deliver great moments of oration void of reliance on the power of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps the ancient Jewish tradition of offering an unblemished animal for sacrifice at least served the purpose of forcing the one making the sacrifice to first focus on offering the best to God. When we come into the presence of God, it is our privilege to offer our gifts, our talents, our prayers and everything else we have to God. Worship is enhanced when we humbly offer with gratitude the fullness of our attention and the best of our efforts to honor God.

Finally, there was an expectation that something was going to happen to make a difference in the life of the worshippers. When the presence of God is brought together along with the best we can bring to the moment, it is reasonable to assume that something is going to happen. It is also scriptural. From the blessing given to Abraham, King David, Elijah, Mary, Peter, John and Paul, our heritage proclaims the truth that when we have entered into the presence of God, lives and for that matter the world is changed. When we gather for worship, it is the desire for holy presence and personal change that drives the drama we share. We are called to take on the roll of King Zedekiah when he came to the prophet Jeremiah and asked, "Is there any good word from the Lord?" The answer came back as a clear and resounding, "Yes, there is!" (Jeremiah 37:17) The answer remains yes today and it is our joy to do all that we can to enter into worship offering the best we can with an expectation that God will meet us there and give to us a good word.

Jesus give this teaching in John 4: 23-24, *"But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."* This teaching by Christ guides us as we plan and share in worship at Clarkston UMC. We commit ourselves to moments of worship that rely on the Spirit and never step back from addressing the truth of life in the Light of the Truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We believe the hour is now for us to commit our lives to engaging in worship that reflects the best of our faith tradition, the needs of those who come to worship and the vitality and newness of how God is reaching out to us.

Clarkston UMC sets as a core value the desire to engage in worship that makes a difference. That difference is manifested in the lives of those who come and worship at any of our worship services. That difference may serve as a place of respite from the stress of life. It may be found in the way it brings a diverse group of people into a common experience of God

and a commitment to serve as one in the name of Christ. It will be felt by those we encounter outside of worship when the power and grace we have received is now able to be passed on to others. It is our goal that worship always matters and makes a difference. Some of those differences can be anticipated as we plan and enter into worship and some will occur only after the serendipitous movement of the Holy Spirit takes us to places we could never anticipate.

While there is no formula that will always create this kind of worship, the establishment of this as a goal certainly does call for specific attention to the planning and sharing of worship in our church. It calls for those who are charged with the responsibility to never waiver from the commitment to make every worship experience the most faithful we can offer in giving witness to the Gospel. No service can be considered less important than any other and the primary objective of all will be to bring us into the Holy presence of God. Worship leaders are called upon to humbly offer the best they can to the moment of worship and diligently pray that any praise or glory of the moment go to God. Worship moments will strive to meet the worshipper where they are, lift them up to God and then send them back into the world better equipped and spiritually strengthened for the journey that awaits them.

Likewise, this core value places an expectation on the worshipping community as well. It challenges us to be present in the worship experiences and to offer our prayers and praise with an expectation of God. Over the years I have listened countless times to people tell me they experience God more out in the woods, in the deer blind, at the fishing hole or along the beach. To this I can only respond, that has often been my experience as well. But to say that is not to say that the moments of corporate worship where my soul has been blessed are less insignificant. It also may say more about the moments when the individual was willing to be open to God and not operating on auto pilot. Either way, corporate worship is not intended to compete with the special epiphanies of God we may experience in the out of doors or in other locations. It stands on its own as a place of holy importance. To those who tell me they experienced God in another setting, I respond by saying please come and bring your spirit and experiences to enhance our corporate worship. I believe the more open hearts and souls that enter into worship can only strengthen the experience for all.

When we join the church, each of us makes the commitment to support the church by our prayers, presence, gifts and service. The call for us to be present is not only an invitation to get our personal needs met. Some worship experiences I come spiritually dry and needing to be bathed in the refreshment of God. Other moments I come with my heart filled with joy and the power of God clearly blessing me. Both moments are important for me to be in worship. When I am spiritually needy I come to hopefully touch the hem of the garment of God. When I am spiritually rejoicing I come to be one of the many willing to be present in the worship experience and allow God to use me in whatever way is necessary to help others that day who have need. If worship is filled with only those who are spiritually hungry, who will sing the songs of faith with joy, share energy as they greet others and lead by example that there are those in the room who truly affirm that God is present?

How will we know when our worship is making a difference?

It is difficult to measure empirically the power of worship for several reasons. Some of the difference is so personal that we will not broadcast to everyone what is happening in our

personal story. There are times when the impact of worship is not brought to fruition till long after the benediction. Worship has a way of having a different impact on the individuals who share the moment. Some will walk out feeling little difference while their neighbor had a profound spiritual awakening. Then the reverse may occur the following week. God's Spirit and Truth is not to be controlled or manipulated.

However, worship that makes a difference has an energy that is unmistakable. It can be measured both inwardly and by those who are standing on the outside looking in. Worship makes a difference when:

- Worshippers have a passion and hunger for worship.
- It becomes a beacon of hope and joy to those who share it.
- The excitement is experienced whether the worship is loud and fast or reflective and quiet.
- Worship is filling spiritual hungers so powerfully that people will fit other events in their lives around worship and not commit to worship only when there are no other offerings to choose from.
- There is an openness in worship that is making a difference where people are warmly welcomed, respected and where the clear focus is on the relationship we have with God.
- When there are moments, phrases and tunes that remain with us in the days that follow and serve as a source of renewing strength and joy.

Worship that makes a difference also exists in an expectation of growth. That growth is both spiritual and numerical. When people first enter into that kind of worship they are welcomed where they are in their spiritual journey and invited to grow in the path that Christ sets before them. First time visitors and long time attendees equally are to be given the tools and opportunities in worship to humbly mature in their faith walk.

In addition, worship that makes a difference is an experience that is attractive to others. It speaks with authenticity and clarity to that inner desire for worship and spiritual joy that rests in us all. Not all worship experiences grow numerically at the same pace, but when ever the Spirit of God moves, scripture reflects that more are drawn together. As Jesus taught and lived his life of faith before us, the crowds around him grew. As the early apostles taught the Gospel, more and more responded. In an age of spiritual curiosity and hunger, worship that makes a difference will speak to the real needs of people and growth will occur.

In Acts 2, the Holy Spirit of God moved and worship broke out that made a difference. The people who experienced the holy presence of God were changed. The energy in the room was so strong that it appeared as if the room was on fire. Persons passing by were drawn in and wondered at what they saw. The spokesperson for the group, Peter, preached a simple sermon. What happened next is recorded at the end of the chapter. It says in Acts 2: 37-47...

³⁷Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, "Brothers and sisters what should we do?" ³⁸Peter said to them, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him." ⁴⁰And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation."

⁴¹So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. ⁴²They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

⁴³Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles.

⁴⁴All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

By any definition, that was an example of worship that made a difference. Our style and specific experience will not be the same nor should it be. But our hunger is for all of our worship to in some way reflect the joy, passion, purity, truth, grace, mercy and hope of that worship long ago. God is here, we are hungry. Let it begin now!

Chapter 4

Biblical Hospitality

If you had your choice between restaurants where the food was good but the staff was rude or one that had good food and friendly personnel, where would you go? The fact is that in some cases we would choose a place to eat where the food is marginal as long as we are treated well, respected and accepted. That is because Jesus had it right when he told us that we do not live by bread alone. We are creatures in need of relationships. Some crave many people in their life while others desire only one or two close friends. Regardless of the number, we need others who will care about us, include us and share in our life journey. Relationships are at the core of our mental, physical and spiritual health. We celebrate families that nurture us, loved ones who hug us and God who moves in us. These relationships have long lasting affects on our personal life that dramatically affect us.

How many of your decisions have been affected by relationships with others? Did others influence you on where you went to school, where you work or live or eat out or seek medical treatment or any of a hundred other critical areas of life? Relationships continue to be a primary motivator for what we do and in many ways for who we are. The decisions we make are often largely influenced by the relationships we have with others. I am part of the clergy today in large part because of my relationship with Dalton Bishop. He came as pastor to my home church shortly after the death of his wife. During the rest of his ministry he reached out to many youth and took the time to listen to them and guide them in wonderful and holy ways to spiritual maturity. His gentle caring led him to ask me the question if I had ever considered entering into ministry in the church. I believe ultimately that was a question God had for me but the embodiment of how the question was raised was found in the context of my relationship with that faithful servant of God.

The Biblical story is one of relationship. It is the story of how God continually reaches out to humanity. It is the story of our fumbled attempts to reach out to God and ultimately the act of love that is Jesus who makes the connection eternally possible. In that relationship, there is always the triangle of self, others and God. The ultimate expression of that relationship is the way in which God chose to take on human form in the person of Jesus Christ so that humanity could see, touch, and follow the example of a flesh and blood Savior. Jesus' ministry seems to be a never ending invitation for individuals and humanity as a whole to come into relationship with him. The fulfillment of our spiritual journey is to find ourselves in the presence of Christ and then offering invitational hospitality to others to come into relationship with us and Christ.

Part of the need for relationship comes from our struggle with fears and feelings of loneliness. Henri Nouwen captured this when he wrote about the pain of loneliness in his 1975 book, "Reaching Out". He wrote, "*...Loneliness is one of the most universal sources of human suffering today. Psychiatrists and clinical psychologists speak about it as the most frequently expressed complaint and the root not only of an increasing number of suicides but also of alcoholism, drug use, different psychosomatic symptoms—such as, headaches, stomach and low-*

back pains—and of a large number of traffic accidents. Children, adolescents, adults and old people are in growing degree exposed to the contagious disease of loneliness in a world in which a competitive individualism tries to reconcile itself with a culture that speaks about togetherness, unity and community as the ideals to strive for....

The language we use suggests anything but loneliness. “Please come in, it is so good to see you. . . Let me introduce you to this very special friend of mine, who will love to meet you. . . I have heard so much about you and I can’t say how pleased I am to see you now in person. . . What you are saying is most interesting, I wish more people could hear that. . . It was so great to talk to you and to have a chance to visit with you. . . I dearly hope we will meet again. Know that you are always welcome and don’t hesitate to bring a friend. . . Come back soon.” It is a language that reveals the desire to be close and receptive but that in our society sadly fails to heal the pains of our loneliness, because the real pain is felt where we can hardly allow anyone to enter.

The roots of loneliness are very deep and cannot be touched by optimistic advertisement, substitute love images or social togetherness. They find their food in the suspicion that there is no one who cares and offers love without conditions, and no place where we can be vulnerable without being used. The many small rejections of everyday—a sarcastic smile, a flippant remark, a brisk denial or a bitter silence—may all be quite innocent and hardly worth our attention if they did not constantly arouse our basic human fear of being left totally alone with “darkness. . . [as our] one companion left”.

We know the dance of seeking community and facing our own sense of being lonely. In that dance we can each testify to moments when we have not followed the beat of God and instead moved out of holy rhythm to search for community. When that happens we often make poor decisions that leave us feeling more lonely and desperate for relationship. It is often in hindsight that we discover in those moments that God has not left us. In fact it is our testimony to the intimacy of God that will not leave us even when we have wandered down wrong paths. The commitment that God offers to seek us out and receive us is a divine hospitality we are privilege to receive. It is also a joy to share with others.

Each of us can trace our relationship to the church to relationship with someone else. That may be our family, a friend, a church member or a direct encounter with God. One of the most compelling reasons to be part of a faith community are the human and divine relationships we share. It may seem like a logical conclusion that part of our mission is to invite others to come into relationship as well with us and God. Yet that is not always as easy as it sounds.

The Struggle to Offer Hospitality in the Church

Every self-evaluation I have ever seen a church complete included the belief that they are a friendly community. Every church that has described itself in such a manner believes that is true. In contrast, I have visited churches and felt very alone and disregarded. Were the people there truly uncaring and selfish? I doubt it. They were simply attending church, worshipping and doing what they may have done for years. Perhaps they took for granted that I knew the ins and outs of church life in that congregation. They may have assumed I was with someone else. They may have believed that if I really wanted to be greeted or know more about the church I

would ask. But they were wrong and ignoring the example of Christ who practiced radical hospitality.

The birth of Jesus was an act of radical hospitality. God initiated the gift of salvation by first creating us, loving us and then coming to us in human form. As Mary and Joseph were welcoming Jesus into their family, we were being welcomed into a new relationship with God and each other. As Jesus grew and carried out his mission, he extended open invitations for persons to follow him. He welcomed the lonely and ostracized into a community of acceptance and grace. He left us with the command to do the same by going to the entire world and offer holy relationships.

Evangelism is the term the church has used to refer to its attempts to reach out to those outside the church. Evangelism was often seen as an interaction that occurred between two distinct groups of people, church and unchurch – saved and unsaved. This assumption set up a spirit of condescending holiness as the church often went into the world with an attitude of superiority. This is in contrast to the humility that Christ practiced and taught. Taken to the extreme it also in some cases began to identify those outside of the church as persons without value or having anything of value to share with us. We often assumed that as the faith was shared with others it needed to be practiced exactly as we did. This meant we did more than share Jesus. We took it upon ourselves to not only invite people to worship, we set expectations as to how their worship should sound and look. In the quest to share faith we at times forced our cultural practices on others. Evangelism has a checkered past of moments of violence and compassion. In the name of sharing Christ, Christians launched the crusades, the Spanish Inquisition and oppression of foreign lands and people. These are moments that are regrettable and have gone a long way to hampering the sharing of the Christian faith.

However, not all of our efforts to share Christ have been tainted. Some have soared with holiness and grace as we have passed out food to the hungry, established hospitals and colleges, and spoke on behalf of the voiceless, marched alongside the oppressed and made crosses out of pop cycle sticks in Vacation Bible Schools. We have knocked on doors, circulated tracts and held revivals. Evangelism has also been as simple as inviting a friend to come to church, share in mission or study the Bible.

Today the word of evangelism is one that makes many people even in the church uncomfortable. In part, this may be because we fear repeating the mistakes of the past. It is also because the church often mistakenly asks us to try to follow models of the past that are no longer as effective in this generation. Perhaps the greatest source of discomfort comes when we feel like we are being pushed outside of our comfort zone to tell others about faith in Christ when we are not sure we have all the answers ourselves. Part of the struggle of evangelism that perpetuates a belief that there are those who know and those who do not is that not many are comfortable saying they know enough to be on display for others. As a result we back away from sharing faith, because we resist any notion that we are ready to mentor others. This gets translated in the ways we relate to others. We may stay away from serious conversations of faith because we feel inadequate in our own knowledge. We do not want to mislead others and it does not feel good to have to admit what we do not know. This is often carried over to church life.

When the church gathers, we enjoy seeing others that we count as friends and spiritual brothers and sisters.. We come and take joy in being with others who share our world view and life experiences. All of that is appropriate and holy. However in our desire to share in those relationships we may not go out of our way to welcome the stranger. Most visitors who walk out of churches feeling unwelcomed were not intentionally ignored. Perhaps they were simply standing next to others who were greeting old friends. Maybe the church just assumed that everyone would understand the language and symbols used in the worship. At times those who walk out without feeling a hospitable attitude are missing more than just a warm handshake or friendly smile. Some come to see if there is a God who can speak to their loneliness, heal their hurts and cleanse their souls. When they do not find those who worship God reaching out to them, they may draw the conclusion that God is not either. They walk out and have to make the decision whether to return and try another time or another church or decide the Christian faith was not concerned about them and they were not welcomed.

As a visitor I have been warmly greeted in both large and small congregations. I have been ignored in both as well. The size of the congregation does not determine its effectiveness in sharing faith. The intentionality of how focused the church is to share faith out in the world or with visitors in worship determines the consistency and quality of hospitality by the church. I believe the way we reach out to the world for Christ sake and welcome guests in the church has to be intentional if we truly desire to connect people to people and people to God. It is time to reclaim the way Jesus modeled radical hospitality in his ministry.

Practicing Biblical Hospitality

The mission statement of “connecting people to people and people to God” implies some level of hospitality. It would be easy to assume that this is a rather passive form of evangelism. Nothing could be further from the truth. As I have suggested, Biblical hospitality is intentional, passionate and persistent. God has never ceased offering holy space for us to connect with him. God has gone to unbelievable lengths to bring us into places where we can find peace and salvation. That is the kind of hospitality those who desire to follow Christ are called to share. To do this requires us to take intentional steps of outreach and invitation for others to come into the faith. We must claim with joy the gift of hospitality God has given to us and begin to see the commonalty we have with others. When these become clear to us, we will be compelled to reach out to others as God has reached out to us.

For us to be a community of Biblical hospitality, we will need to do more than establish a few new programs to improve how we greet visitors. We will need to experience a spiritual awareness of gratitude to God for the precious gift of divine hospitality that is ours in Christ. 1 John 4: 7-11 says it this way, *“⁷Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. ⁹God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. ¹⁰In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.”*

To live this out today means that first we will have to experience for ourselves the hospitality of God. Nothing is more critical in offering true hospitality than having first

experienced it yourself. When we remember the ways others and God have reached out to us, we are more excited to offer the same to others in Christ's name. When we remember the pain of our own loneliness, we are more sensitive to those who come seeking community. When we begin to live complacently and take for granted the love of Christ and the joy of being part of a church family, we lose our passion to share what we have. When we do this we become stumbling blocks that get in the way of the flow of God's grace. Our commitment is to celebrate the gift of faith that is ours and share that faith with others.

We must also begin to see the commonality we have with others. John Wesley, the spiritual father of Methodism, gave to us the Doctrine of Grace. This teaching focuses on claiming our spiritual life as a journey with no clear beginning point or end. Wesley believed we first receive the love of God before we are aware of it and continue on to a time of never ending growth in that relationship after we accept it. There is no sense of superiority on the journey since it all begins and ends with God. Those who are not even aware that God exists are surrounded by a grace that they are not aware of and it is the task of the church to help them discover the wonderful gift that is already given to them. Once they claim the gift which we know is Christ, they join with us in a life long journey of growing in knowledge and experience of God in Christ. As those who have accepted the love of Christ, we are honored to create space for others to come and grow with us. We trust that Christ is already with others whether they are aware of it or not. We lay claim to calling others our spiritual brothers and sisters whether they have accepted Christ or are in the beginning stages of seeking. We have a desire to extend hospitality to the world as we do when special guests and beloved friends and family are coming over to visit.

Hospitality in the Midst of a Lonely World

When we have accepted the hospitality of Christ and see others as Christ did we are ready to offer Biblical hospitality to the world. Nouwen described hospitality this way...."Hospitality...means primarily the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them a space where change can take place".

As Christians we affirm that God is the one who can bring change, redemption and hope. Our purpose is to passionately offer space to persons anywhere who are trapped and kept from connecting to God in Christ and from living the life for which they were created. In the context of truly connecting with people we begin to offer that free space where the grace of God can move. We offer that space committed for holy transformation to occur but trusting God to be in control of that change.

Clarkston United Methodist Church is in position to be a beacon of hospitality in the midst of a changing community and world. The best of what is celebrated in a small community is intimacy. It is knowing your neighbors, their children and maybe their parents. It is being part of a community that has a defining character and offers a sense of welcome and home in the midst of growth and change. People who have lived in Clarkston for generations may feel anxiety as they watch the area change in ways that make the old familiar places hard to remember. Others who are moving in come seeking friends and a sense of something they can call home.

We desire to offer a faith community where people feel warmly welcomed, respected and cared for as they are. Long time residents and new comers both can come to this church and find a place they can call home for themselves and their families. We want to create a community of faith that brings all people in who are seeking God and to become active members of a family of faith. As the community changes, so to will our congregation. However the consistency of hospitality and commitment to value each individual will remain as defining characteristics of our church. There was a day when everyone at Clarkston UMC knew everyone else. That day no longer exists and if we take Jesus seriously when he calls us to reach out to others we know it never can again. However that does not mean that we have to lose a feeling of intimacy or significance as individuals. In fact, if we are being a faithful congregation we will make sure that all persons are led to places of worth, growth and intimacy with God and others. It is critical that everyone is truly welcomed and known and finds significant relationships within the context of our faith family. In the church all people will be assisted to make lasting healthy friendships and find community. In the next chapter we will address the creation of Christian fellowship as a function of helping others become Christian disciples. But this begins as we serve God by continually reaching out to others with a commitment to offer Biblical Hospitality.

Chapter 5

”Making Disciples”

Once people have felt welcomed into the church, we are called to give them all the tools they need to be faithful disciples. Christ asked us to “make disciples in my name”. Instead the church has often concentrated more on increasing membership. Too often in all kinds of churches, people are added to the membership roles without any expectation of accountability on their part to the church and little for the church to them. We fall into the institutional trap of growing the church instead of making disciples. If we are to take Jesus seriously, it is more faithful to focus on worship attendance or missional outreach when we try to measure vitality in the church. That is because the goal Christ gave to us was to make disciples, not grow an institution. Certainly he did intend for us to be in community. But he also clearly expected individuals to grow in relationship to him, to mature spiritually and in mission to the world. The first disciples were expected to tell the story of salvation. They discovered their own development as witnesses and servants of mercy and grace as they remained in a committed relationship to Christ and each other.

The Gospels talk about a number of types of relationships people had with Jesus. Many engaged him with causal interest. Some came to him in a moment of desperation or need and asked for specific things from him. After their request was granted, we do not have record of their ongoing relationship with him. We can presume that some continued on their way grateful but otherwise unchanged. Some kept an interest in him until his approval rating began to slip. Some became part of the ever present crowd that always seemed to appear in the major moments of life. However a few changed their life for his sake. They committed themselves totally to his ministry and organized their life around his teaching. This included the disciples we call the apostles (those who later lead the church such as Peter, John James, Matthew, Luke, Mark, etc). There were also other disciples such as Mary and Martha, and later Dorcas, Barnabas, Timothy and Philemon among others. These names represent those who grew in relationship to Christ until the point they could make a life changing and life long commitment to serve Christ as disciples.

In the previous chapter, we looked at the core value of hospitality. The next step after entry in the church is to grow in knowledge, experience and service. To leave people without opportunities to grow as disciples would be like inviting people to a banquet and then not letting them eat the main course. Whenever we enter into a new relationship, we can choose to grow or stay the same. Either choice has its consequences.

When I got married on May 12, 1979, I became a husband. Twenty-six years later, I am still a husband. However, thanks to the diligent work of my wife Laura, I am not the same husband. Fortunately, Laura found me somewhat trainable and I have matured and developed under her tutelage.

In the same way, I became a member of the clergy in 1980. I am still ordained but in many ways I am a very different pastor. I not only have experienced many things since then, I

have learned from them and now engage in ministry differently than when I first started. For that matter, ministry itself has changed a great deal since I first entered it and if I had not been willing to learn, grow and mature I would be offering less effective leadership in my role as pastor.

You have countless examples of growth and maturity in your life. It is normal to expect it in others. Jesus expected it in those who came to follow him. As long as we are connected to the church we are expected to be in the process of growing as Christ's disciples. We are also called to claim as a core value the work of helping others grow as disciples. This includes the welcoming of new disciples, the teaching and empowering of persons along their spiritual journey and the mentoring and supportive role of those with long years of service and the wisdom that they bring.

When people join the church, we share in a variety of vows. Those who are joining make commitment to serve Christ and faithfully participate in the life of the church with their prayers, presence, gifts and service. The church in turn makes a promise to them. The congregation is asked, "Will you nurture one another in the Christian faith and life and include these persons now before you in your care?" To that we respond, "With God's help we will proclaim the good news and live according to the example of Christ. We will surround these persons with a community of love and forgiveness, that they may grow in their trust of God, and be found faithful in their service to others. We will pray for them, that they may be true disciples who walk in the way that leads to life." This sacred vow binds us to the joyful work of helping us to make sure that all persons are encouraged and assisted to grow as disciples of Christ. Clarkston United Methodist church is committed to offering a wide variety of experiences to assist people to grow as disciples of Jesus Christ. These areas include but are not limited to Christian fellowship, Christian Education and Spiritual formation, stewardship, and service and mission opportunities.

Christian Fellowship

In the previous chapter we discussed the core value of Biblical Hospitality. Christian fellowship is a continuation of hospitality as we move deeper into significant relationship in the Body of Christ. Our mission, "to connect people to people", calls us to continually create opportunities for people to enter into significant personal relationship with others. In many of our worship experiences we are given the chance to personally greet our brothers and sisters gathered around us. Christian fellowship begins with that greeting and continues as we enter into deeper significant relationships with others. Those relationships can be characterized as holy friendships where significantly connect with others. This may occur as we share in specific tasks in the church, serve on committees, and participate in a variety of groups that meet regularly, or bond with others in special moments such as mission trips, Christian education experiences or any of a hundred other ways.

Our goal is for all who desire to share in this ministry to be able to find a place where they can go beyond attending worship and become connected to an area of the ministry where they can share in Christian fellowship. Many of us who have been in the church for a long time treasure those who have become our closest spiritual friends. We pray that is an experience we will be able to offer to all who come into this ministry.

Christian fellowship serves two primary tasks. One, it can be a unique source of balance and renewal as we experience grace and acceptance that may be difficult for us to find elsewhere. Christian disciples need to have relationships that offer the support of others who see the world and each other through the eyes of Christ. Christian fellowship is based on the way Jesus treated his disciples and in the way he expected them to treat each other. It values compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, honesty, integrity, respect, affirmation, support and a commitment to desire the best of what God desires for each other. Christian fellowship rejects quarreling, jealousy, anger, selfishness, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder...and impurity. It is easy to see why these relationships are unique in the world today and become more precious to us as we grow in faith. It is also clear that none of us have mastered the full depth of Christian fellowship and all can continue to work of helping to assist each other as we grow in this area.

Secondly, Christian fellowship in the church can be a way for those who were not raised with or have experienced God-based holy relationships to learn how to have them in their families and other relationships. In a world where so many are walking victims of unhealthy and dysfunctional relationships, a church that can offer people the opportunity to learn how to live in healthy and holy ways will be a blessing to many. This is not to say that those of us in the church have been spared unhealthy relationships or are in some way have all been fully healed. It is to affirm that the work of Christian discipleship calls us to continually humbly work together to seek holy ways to care for and relate to each other. Our ongoing work in the church is to offer holy opportunities for Christian fellowship to all.

Christian Education and Spiritual Formation

Karl Barth was one of the most influential theologians of the twentieth century. A student once asked him if there was one clear truth that he could state to summarize the most important learning he had gained in his long illustrious career. He replied, "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so. Little ones to him belong, they are weak but he is strong. Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes Jesus loves me, the Bible tells me so". One of the greatest minds of his day, Barth sang a children's song of faith to speak to the eternal truth!

Do you know the song? If so, do you remember where you learned it? For many of us it was in church in a Sunday school class or Vacation Bible school. But for many more, there are no memories of being raised in church, attending Sunday Schools or having an adult teach them Bible stories or how to pray. We live in a post-modern era where those who attend church and who are learning the tools of faith are in the minority. For example, there once was a day when Biblical references were common in the language of the culture. Today, preachers can not be sure even in church that the majority understand what Biblical references mean. Biblical illiteracy is common place among those in the church and in the world. Many come into the church seeking to find a God who fits their world view instead of learning how people of faith have come to understand paradigms that God has give to us. Many see other tools of faith such as knowing how to pray, having personal devotions, or sharing faith with others far beyond their grasp.

This has left many in the church feeling ashamed and afraid that someone will discover how much they do not know about basics of faith. They feel intimidated by others who appear to know more and uncomfortable to risk studying the Bible or offering an opinion in a class for fear that they will look foolish. This truth has also left the church with fewer people who feel confident to help lead others who are coming to the church to grow in their faith. The combination of spiritual insecurity and dwindling numbers of those willing to lead and teach has placed Christian education in perilous danger of having no significant place in the life of the majority of those who attend church.

This cycle has to stop if the church is going to move forward in making disciples for Christ. I believe the first step in this is to quit putting the blame on individuals for not knowing basics of faith and for the church to take responsibility. For many years, our passion for members and not disciples downplayed the importance of Christian Education and Formation. I am a life long member of church and if I had not been called into ministry easily could see myself still not having read the Bible or learned to think theologically or embraced the joy of many of the spiritual disciplines. The church for many years did not make this an area of importance. Therefore individuals were never given the encouragement and possibilities of learning the basics before need to be let off the hook and given fresh opportunities to begin to learn now.

Churches must offer Christian education classes that begin with clearly identified levels of assumptions as to what is the knowledge base of those the class is intended to attract. There should be classes for those with no base knowledge and those with moderate or advanced background. Formats and times for these growth opportunities need to vary to meet the learning style and schedules of as many people as possible. Instead of just offering one hour classes attached to times of worship, opportunities for learning should be available during different times of the day and week. Some should be held at the church, some in homes and others in different settings. Some should be long term classes, some lasting for a few weeks and others held at on retreats.

To accomplish this requires the committed effort of an entire congregation in leading, supporting and participating in these experiences. No staff or committee will ever be able to fulfill the potential of Christian Education and Formation in a church until the whole church claims it as critical to the life of the church. But when that time comes, the church will be learning the tools of faith that serve as foundation required for any long lasting and vitalized ministry.

Stewardship

No other term in the language of the church draws more immediate internal reaction than stewardship. Perhaps that is because in the minds of many it is simply a fancy way to say the church needs your money. For years, the church held stewardship campaigns in the fall when the members would be asked to make plans for how much money they were going to give to the church to help meet the budget for the coming year. Often people running those campaigns were uncomfortable leading the effort and the membership felt the whole thing was at best a necessary inconvenience or at worst an invasion into the personal life of those being asked to contribute.

All of this is a direct result of the lack of education of the basics of faith and a radical misinterpretation of the teaching of Christ.

Stewardship is an expression of relationship. A steward is one who takes care of the possessions of the one they are serving. Christian stewardship is the acknowledgement that all we have is from God. It is an attitude of gratitude to the generosity of God to us and in turn the joy of giving to God a portion of what we have as faithful stewards. Stewardship is not about money alone. It covers all that we have including creation, family, friends, time, health, talents and everything else that is a gift from God. In matters of finance, stewardship is the defining of priorities and understanding that how we use, manage and spend our money all have a spiritual impact on others and ourselves. In all the other areas of life, stewardship is a Christian response as to the question of who is in charge and who really owns the things we are responsible for in this world. In every case, the Christian answers simply, God.

In this world of self fulfillment and instant gratification stewardship seems like a very foreign term and practice. The fact that it is the one topic Jesus spoke most about points to the need for this to be taught for people to understand. It is also the experience of the those how have been taught how to be faithful stewards that life really does have spiritual priorities that when put into practice bring personal deep peace and powerfully impacts those in your circle of influence. It is critical that the church teach and practice faithful Christian stewardship in order for those who come seeking faith experience the depth and miraculous power that can occur when we really live as if God is God and the truth of Christ can be believed.

Service and Mission

The next chapter will address the impact of faithful transformational mission can have in the church and the world. I list it here only to remind us that the process of maturing as a disciple of Christ is to move from being a seeker to eventually becoming a servant for others in the name of Christ. There are many moments in our life that bring the ecstasy of faith. This includes the first time we feel the love of God and every time we experience it thereafter. We discover it in moments of learning and worship. We discover it when we share a moment of faith with another believer or one who is coming to Christ for the first time. The goal of Christian discipleship is to continue on a life long journey of learning and experience that gives you the opportunity to find yourself in service and mission to others in the name of Christ. That is why the last thing that Jesus told the disciples was not to come to worship or sit in a class but to go. However they could not go until they had first become his disciples committed to a life of learning and service. May our commitment to discipleship and making of disciples ready us to go in Christ's name also.

Chapter 6

”Transformational Mission”

So what does a church that is committed to Christ, worshipping with passion, offering Biblical hospitality, and developing Christian disciples inevitably engage in? It has no choice with the energy and spiritual power that is created but to release it out into the world in acts of mission. Mission in this sense is used to describe the action of the church in meeting the needs of the world. The needs vary in different settings. Sometimes the needs are for basics of life such as food, shelter and clothing. At other times the needs are for rights of humanity such as justice, mercy and compassion. Some are calling out to the church for spiritual food, ethical direction and or simply the presence of those who care.

Of course mission work has been a part of church life since it began. As the first disciples shared the message of salvation they followed the example of Christ and met a variety of needs. Over the centuries, churches have developed world wide mission programs. These programs sought to improve life for persons and share the good news of Christ. The United Methodist church is born out of a long history of seeing mission as integral to the Christian walk of faith. The Holy Societies that Wesley began in England in the 1700's set as a foundational expectation that in addition to worship and personal spiritual disciplines, each member was expected to reach out to others in mission. The balance of personal and social piety in the United Methodist church historically has called us to be a leader in everything from overseas missional work to development of hospitals and colleges in our own country. We have worked hard to a voice for social justice in the nation. We are proud of that heritage and claim it as a vital part of our ministry today.

However, mission work can easily become abusive when we allow ourselves to miss the critical truth that it is never to be seen as those who have giving to those who have little or nothing. Mission is not charity in the traditional sense of that word. When we enter into life situation of others with an attitude that we are somehow more blessed or in any way ahead of the game over others we easily can begin to treat them without the respect and dignity they deserve. We may also set up an attitude where we will miss out on the great value of how we ourselves can be changed in the act sharing in mission.

Over several years I have led youth groups and confirmation classes into places of mission. The locations have varied from the rural south to the inner cities of the north. In most cases, those youth were coming from situations of affluence and opportunity in excess of those who we were coming to serve. This knowledge often created an air of superiority on the part of the youth (and the adults who traveled along) who felt that those we were serving should feel fortunate that we had taken our time, effort and resources to share with those less fortunate. This attitude is understandable but is violently offensive to those we serve and offensive to God in light of the example and teaching of Christ.

The Gospels are repetitive with actions of Christ meeting needs of people by not only offering healing but also respect and dignity. In his great teaching on our task of caring for other, he teaches us just how our attitude should be to those we reach out to in mission. In Matthew 25: 31-46 he gives us this lesson.

³¹“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. ³²All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ ³⁷Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ ⁴⁰And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’ ⁴¹Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; ⁴²for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ ⁴⁴Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ ⁴⁵Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ ⁴⁶And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

As familiar as this passage is to us, we easily forget that we are to approach those with whom we share mission as if they were Christ. In a real way they are. For as we share our life journey with them we put ourselves in position to receive back from them their life experiences. If we are willing to take the time to really listen and share we discover that we have more in common with than we may have thought with those we came to help. We will hear their perspective of the world, their way of seeing life and their experiences of God. They may share their talents and graces with us as well in ways that make our offerings seem meager by comparison. Certainly, if we dare risk being open we may find our world view and predetermined attitudes changed as well. In fact, we often find that our very lives are transformed so that when we return we are different. We may find our values gracefully changed and our passions reawakened to return again in mission not only to help others but to discover the unique joy that we find only when we are truly willing to become servants again.

I have seen youth and adults return from mission trips as different people than the ones who left. They have a greater intimacy and trust of each other. They have a new way of seeing themselves and the world. Along the way, they may also have a deeper understanding and connection to God.

Once, on the south side of Chicago, a group of youth was asked to help in a kitchen that serves lunch to homeless families. As the families began to come in to eat, the youth were

invited to scatter about the tables and eat with those they were serving. The impact that moment created in the lives of those youth was powerful. The day before these people would have been the ones who were walked by quickly, ignored or perhaps even the object of ridicule. But in the breaking of the bread, life stories were exchanged as the dichotomy of rich youth and homeless adults melted into a group of people sharing lunch. The conversation focused on common issues of family, relationships, and things each person enjoyed doing. The youth became aware of the fact that those they served had gifts, skills and faith worth getting to know. Those who had come feeling privileged and in some ways superior left feeling humbled and in awe of the determination and daily struggle that their new friends endure. The world changed that day for those youth and those youth had changed as well. That is transformational mission.

On another trip, we sat on porches in the rural south and were serenaded by song and story as those who lived in places we would be slow to call homes demonstrated that wealth is not measured by possessions. On one trip, one of our adults was changed so much that when we returned home, he had the drawings of his new home redone. He began to build a smaller home that met the needs of his family instead of automatically following the pattern of the community and building a bigger home just because that was the thing to do. That is transformational mission.

Clarkston is a rich community and our congregation is one blessed with great talent and potential resources. Churches like ours face the dangers of affluence where we begin to feel that somehow we have been blessed so that we can be those who enjoy the blessings. Our view of the world is easily turned by these blessings in a way that affects our missional outreach. We can begin to see it as charity work, something we do that helps out other people but is kept distant enough away from us so that we are barely affected. We find ourselves in a blessed region with areas to our north (Flint) and south (Pontiac and Detroit) that have fallen on hard times. It is easy to see opportunities to give assistance out of our abundance. But if this is all we do, we miss the point of what Christ meant for us about the least of these. It is in mission and service to others that we find the greatest fulfillment of living the Christian faith. It is when we are humbled enough to know that in sharing with others that we meet Christ in new ways. Transformational mission is the affirmation that as we go and try to change the world for Christ's sake it is us who are also changed to his glory.

Transformational mission is not just going on mission trips. It is an attitude of compassion and care that is expressed in our daily actions. It is born out of our relationship to Christ, inspired by worship, an extension of Biblical Hospitality and the fulfillment of Christian discipleship. Clarkston UMC sets as a core value transformational mission and encourages all persons to adopt it in their personal life journey and support all the ways we will live it out collectively as a congregation.

“Next Steps”

As this study comes to a close, I want to thank you for participating and adding your voice to the dialogue on these core values. I hope this has been a reflective time of connection with the others in your study group. I hope it has helped you to reflect on the direction of our church and encouraged you to make decisions as to how you will be able to be a vital part of this congregation. As a congregation we are poised to continue, deepen and expand the ministry and mission that is our privilege to share in Christ's name. The movement of God's spirit in the life of our ministry over the past few years has brought us to this place. But what are the next steps for us?

Specifically we are soon to participate in a time of celebration over the blessings that are ours and share in making a covenant to live out our mission. The congregation will be asked to adopt the core values that will guide us on our journey. Soon we will come together for two major events that will set the direction of the congregation over the next few years. The first is an all church celebration that we will hold either in late October or early November. (The specific date was still unknown at the time of this writing). This day of worship, feasting and celebration will be a wonderful way for our church family to come together as we take steps forward in faithful ministry. On November 20 we will hold our annual church conference following the morning worship. At that all congregational meeting we will officially take action on the core values and make decisions that will prepare us for ministry in 2006.

This fall we have already launched new programs that are changing the landscape of ministry at Clarkston UMC. Our fall initiatives in Christian Education, Confirmation, worship and mid week programming will raise the level of commitment and fellowship by those in the church. New energies in areas of communication and hospitality are increasing the effectiveness of telling our story and welcoming others into our fellowship.

Soon we will hold our annual stewardship campaign that will give each of us a chance to reflect on the priority of God over all our life. We will make decisions as to what we will do in the use of our prayers, time, talent and resources to help make our ministry strong and vital. The individual decisions we make in these areas are critical to our personal walk of faith and the collective ministry we share.

The organization of the church will begin to move to a style that encourages individuals to get involved in ministry. We will streamline our structure so trust built on shared faith and effective communication will mean fewer people will have to sit on committees so they can spend their time involved in doing ministry. We will become a permission giving congregation that enthusiastically offers support to those who come forward with ideas and passion for ministries that help to fulfill our mission and fall in line with our core values.

However the most important next step to be taken is the one you will take as part of this congregation. All summer we have been in prayer asking God two questions. The first asked God to help us know the next steps for us as a congregation. The second was asking God each

us are being called to do to help make that happen. My prayer now with you is that we can move forward and allow our actions to be the response we give to God. I look forward to the next steps with you and pray that in all and through all Christ will be praised.