

If you listen to the media and research agencies in regards to the mainline Protestant denominations, of which United Methodism is one, it would seem things are not looking very good for the church. The Pew Research Center, in a 2014 study, showed that the percentage of Americans who were United Methodist was 5.4% in 2007 but had dropped to 3.9% by 2014. If you look at our own denominations studies and self-reporting from churches, we have lost 1/3 of our membership since the merger that created the United Methodist Church in 1968. Within the next 20 years, 30% of our churches will close. Worship attendance in 2014 by members of the church dropped a full percentage point. The average age of United Methodists today is 60. Our professions of faith are down and if we are not doing evangelism and bringing in younger people, the math will eventually catch up to us. As I said, things are not looking very good.

Now, let me add to that doom and gloom the fact that General Conference is coming up in May and we have some sticky issues to deal with. The General Conference is the primary legislative body of The United Methodist Church and is the only body that speaks officially for the church. General Conference meets once every four years to determine legislation affecting connectional matters and is comprised of equal numbers of laity and clergy. General Conference will meet May 10-20 in Portland, Oregon.

At the conference, issues of sexuality will be discussed as well as legislature around ordination, guaranteed appointments and other things affecting the church. Because of the delicate nature of the subject and strong stands, there is talk of schism, a split of the denomination. Now, I don't think that is going to happen, but there is talk and it has been building steam. That's why we have been giving you information for the past few months about praying for General Conference, including today.

Again, with all of that data and information, it's not looking good. But let's look back to last week when Claude introduced the concept of hope. When we think of the word hope, most of us think of it in the context it is used on a regular basis meaning wishful thinking or desire. But Christian hope is different. Christian hope is trust and belief that something will happen because God has promised it. Christian hope is a confidence that something will come to pass because God has promised it will come to pass. Hope is a portion or part of faith. Hope is faith in the future tense. So, I do not believe that the church is doomed. I do not believe that all the statistics means trouble is brewing. I believe that there is hope for the church because I have faith in God.

In this morning's scripture lesson, we heard a passage about the disciples and Jesus. Jesus is asking them who all the people think Jesus is. They give the names of several prophets. But Jesus asks who it is the disciples think Jesus is. Peter steps up and declares that Jesus is the Messiah. Peter declares this after having spent time with Jesus and learning from him. Peter isn't answering a theological riddle. He is offering an expression of his faith through the personal relationship he has with Jesus. This is a significant response. To call Jesus "messiah" is to know that Jesus is Savior, the one who rescues the world in peril.

In response to Peter, Jesus says, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it." Peter is not blessed because of something he did, however. Knowledge of Jesus' saving role comes by divine revelation—as a gift, not attainment. In this, Peter is representative of Christian faith generally. It is by God's grace through our faith that we can know who Jesus is. And if you notice, not only does Jesus say that Peter is the rock on which he will build his church, he also says that the evil of this world will not destroy it.

It is significant for all of us that Peter is the one who recognized who Jesus was and spoke up. Peter, after all, was very human. He was the disciple who told Jesus if it was truly him to help him walk across the water. But Peter got scared and began to sink and called out for Jesus to help rather than trust. Peter is the one that said time and time again that he would not turn away from Jesus and then when he feared for himself, he denied Jesus and turned him over to be crucified. Doesn't that sound a little like most of us? When the going gets tough, we make the decision to protect ourselves rather than stand with Jesus?

However, Peter is the disciple that Jesus says the church will be built on. Peter is the one who has the authority to teach and show the people how to be faithful followers. Why is this significant? Because if Jesus, who knows all Peter's faults and humanness, can build his church on Peter, then Jesus' church can continue to build and grow on each one of us. Jesus knows who we are and what we can be. In order for us to reach this understanding ourselves, we need to understand who Jesus is and what promise he sees in us.

In this scripture, Jesus says Peter is the rock he, Jesus, will build his church on. We do not build the church. Jesus does. The church is not a human achievement or fellowship of like-minded individuals who have

formed a support group. The church is a community built on faith in God as revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Yes, Peter was the rock on which the church began to be built, but the church is not a building. Rather, the church is more like an army on the move. There is hope for the church because we are an ever changing entity.

I started by giving you all the bad statistics about the church. Let me share with you some of the good. The United Methodist Church released just last week the 2014 vitality report. Yes, it pointed out the decrease in professions of faith and worship attendance. But it also pointed out that the participation of worshippers in small groups increased from 59 to 61%. That might not seem like a lot but 2% of 7 million is an increase of almost 150,000 people now engaged in small groups. That includes Sunday school, Bible study, Disciple Bible Study, covenant groups. 150,000 more people are learning to be in community with one another and live into being faithful Christians. It also means almost 2/3 of the members are involved in small groups.

The report also noted that the percentage of worshippers engaged in hands on mission work increased from 38 to 48 percent. Almost half of all United Methodists are living out their faith by serving others. Half of United Methodists have realized that church is not about the building, it's not about

them, it's not about the size of the church, but it is about being the hands and feet of Christ. Half of United Methodists think of the church as mobile and on the move, deployed to go and do and share the gospel. And along with this, the report showed that congregations' giving to missions increased from 15% to 18%. These are exciting statistics about our denomination, all of the churches and people who call themselves United Methodist.

I hope this excites you as much as it excites me. In the words of Tom Long, "When the church wrestles with a controversial issue, tries to speak the gospel to one who is alienated from God, provides hospitality to a stranger, teaches the faith to a child, or cares for those in need, it is not just "playing church"; it is acting out God's future—the kingdom of heaven—in the present and, thereby, participating in the very life of God, sharing in the power of God."

There is hope for the church. But let me give you a little more insight into that hope. First, I believe the church will always exist. I believe there will be followers of Jesus Christ who will always gather together in community to worship and pray together and then disburse to serve and spread the gospel. I believe this because Jesus is the builder of the church, not you and me. The church has been in existence for over 2000 years and

has withstood many trials and tribulations so I do not believe anything we do today can destroy it completely. Second, I believe United Methodists as a denomination will be around for some time to come.

Now, here is the clarification on those two statements. In order for the church to continue to exist, we have to be willing to change and do things differently. We have to adapt to the culture in which we live and think about how Jesus would live in our context. I am not saying we compromise or change who or what Christianity is. What I am saying is that we have to be flexible in how we live it out. We have to allow the Spirit to guide us. The Christian church was started with Peter and the disciples. At that time, there were no church buildings. There were Jewish temples, yes, but no Christian church buildings. They met in what we would call house churches. A small group gathered in someone's home to hear about Jesus and to pray with one another. Through the years, even that changed. There have been times and places where proclaiming to be a Christian or gathering to study about Jesus would get you killed. There was a time when Protestantism did not exist and everyone was under the authority of the Pope. Christianity has had a lot of twists and turns in 2000 years. And it will continue to have a lot of twists and turns into the future.

Our version of Christianity, Methodism, has also had a lot of twists and turns. First, John Wesley, our founder, never intended to start a new denomination. He was an Anglican priest who started small groups, called societies, for those who wanted to grow deeper in their faith. These societies had some strict rules for membership and accountability was high. This morphed into the early Methodist Church in America. And there were many variations along the way. Many denominations you know of today, Wesleyan, Church of God, Church of Nazarene, Salvation Army, to name a few, were part of the evolution that became The United Methodist Church in 1968.

The key to the hope for the church is change and adaptability. I have done a lot of studying lately about church growth, not just for the sake of increasing numbers but how do we reach more people. Let me tell you that there is some really creative ministry going on within our connection. The churches and places that are growing and doing great things, the people who are making disciples are willing to fling open their doors, not just to welcome people in but to go out and worship and serve among them. They do not see the “outsiders” as wrong but different. They do not view the young people as ruining the world but looking at it in a different way. There are people who are holding Bible studies in coffee shops and bars. There

are churches who do not own their own building but rather worship in schools, warehouses and store fronts. There are groups of individuals who willingly go out into parks, to skid row, to sporting events, to homeless shelters not just to provide food, clothing and shelter to people but to offer them Christ.

As Christians, we are not called to come and sit in our comfy pews and hang out with our friends and people just like us. We are called to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ. We have shared this with you before but let me repeat it, the mission statement of the United Methodist Church is “to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” Our annual conference here in Western North Carolina has refined that a little more. We say, “Follow Jesus. Make disciples. Transform the world.” We, you and me, are to follow Jesus and live as faithful disciples. One way we follow Jesus is to come here, learn more through study and worship and share in accountability groups. But more importantly, we need to be willing to share the good news outside of this place. Let me share a little secret with all of you, most of the people seated here this morning, they know Jesus. They’ve made that decision to be a disciple. So where can we make disciples? Out there. And making disciples is what sustains the church. Remember, the church is not a building or a group of people that all look

and think just like you or me. The church is not just the music or programs you do. The church is the gathered community of believers and that community can, and should, gather where the word needs to be shared.

We, Main Street, as a community of believers are doing a pretty good job of reaching out. But our mission field is far greater than the property here at 306 South Main Street. Our mission field is down at Starbucks, over at Smitty's, on the fields at Redmon Sports Complex. Our mission field is where people who want and need to hear about Jesus are.

There is hope for the church if we, the Christians of the world, are willing to think beyond ourselves. There is hope for the church if we are willing to do things a little bit differently than we have always done them. There is hope for the church if we are willing to sacrifice our needs and wants for the desires of Jesus. There is hope for the church because Jesus said, "Peter, you are the rock and on you I will build my church." Amen.