

“Where do we go from here?”

August 25, 2019

Ron Sawdey

Before I start in earnest, I'd like to thank the other members of this congregation who have delivered sermons before me, Diane Forster-Burke and Ken Rockwell. To my thinking, this is very much in keeping with “the Congregational Way”. That is, this church is not simply this gathering of like-minded believers, but is a vital organization that asks for the active involvement of all who attend. I want to thank Ken Rockwell in particular, who in a short few months, has delivered two thoughtful sermons. Ken, I know this wasn't easy for you, and I admire your courage to stand before this congregation and share your thoughts. I very much appreciate the wisdom and insights that have been contained in those sermons. I can only hope to add a small measure of wisdom and insight today.

In preparing for my sermon today, I went back to the sermon I delivered in 2015 when I served as Moderator. As all of you are well aware, it is an unwritten mandate that each new Moderator deliver a sermon. Often, it is a story of their personal faith journey, and I shared a bit of mine in 2015. However, in re-reading my sermon entitled “How did we get here? I recalled that I chose to focus on how our church arrived at the particular state that we were in at that time. I am going to take the liberty of repeating some of the words from that sermon to you today and see if you can find any parallels to our situation today.

*“Though I am new to this church I am fully aware of the long legacy that First Congregational Church has created. To think that we were the first non-Mormon church in the Valley is quite amazing to me. The work of the original Congregational missionaries has continued to this day. To think that this church has sustained this mission for over 150 years, is nothing short of astounding. Many generations before us have attended service together, studied scriptures together, argued together, wept tears of joy at baptisms, laughed at weddings and wept tears of sorrow at funerals within the walls of what has been known as First Congregational Church. We are just the latest generation to continue these marvelous traditions. We should not forget this legacy anytime soon.*

*However, despite this legacy we now find ourselves a small and shrinking congregation. Our numbers have dwindled over the last couple of decades, and the end of that decline is nowhere in sight. On top of that, we recently had our pastor resign, leaving us with the unenviable task of scrambling to find an interim pastor, and the huge task of finding a full-time pastor for this congregation. Frankly, it is easy to become discouraged about our prospects and to wonder how much longer we can continue.*

*However, God is always at our side, and always encouraging us to go forward. As God told Joshua on the eve of the Israelites crossing the Jordan into the Promised Land, "Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go." (Joshua 1:9)*

Does any of this sound familiar? I would certainly hope so. In fact, I find the parallels quite amazing. We have continued to see a decline in our numbers, and have even weighed the possibility of closing our doors. Our settled pastor abruptly resigned recently and we once again are scrambling to find a suitable replacement. These are challenging times indeed.

In that 2015 sermon I also quoted extensively from a survey done by the Pew Research Group entitled, "America's Changing Religious Landscape." The point of my using this survey was to highlight the fact that we are not alone in our challenges. Specifically, all mainstream Protestant churches have been declining in recent years. The results of that survey were both stunning to me, and in an odd way reassuring. Please listen carefully to these numbers and think about them for a moment about them before I continue. Between 2007 and 2014, the percentage of the US population that considered themselves to be Christian fell from 78.4% to 70.6%, nearly an 8% drop in just 7 years. That is more than a 1% drop per year. Conversely, the percentage of Americans that describe themselves as "unaffiliated" to any faith tradition grew by 6.7% in that same 7 year period.

### **(Pause)**

As I read these numbers it would appear that if these trends were to continue, hardly anyone would attend church 50 years from. These numbers are truly sobering, but I don't share these numbers to discourage you. I share them to reassure all of us that the challenges we face are not unique to us. Many, if not most mainstream Protestant churches are

confronted with similar problems. However, I believe that there is hope for us and for our church. According to Paul in his letters to the Romans, “For in this hope we are saved. But hope that is seen is not hope at all. But if we hope for what we do not have, we wait for it patiently.” (Romans 8:24-25)

This brings me to the central theme of my sermon today: Where do we go from here?

I suspect that many of us can point to churches that are doing well. I know that I can. My last church, Wasatch Presbyterian, has seen an increase in attendance in the last several years. Friends who attend there tell me that it is due to the marvelous pastor that they hired, Scott Delgarno. Evidently, the message he delivers on each Sunday has resonated with many people. Interestingly, these same friends tell me that few of these new people who have begun attending Wasatch have actually joined. They are happy to attend most every Sunday, and even participate in some church outreach and fellowship activities, but most do not want to belong. Even so, it would appear that Wasatch has bucked the trend that was evidenced in the survey and has actually grown.

Looking at other churches may provide us with ideas about what kinds of strategies we could implement to enjoy similar success. However, I would like to suggest that rather than look elsewhere for ideas, that we first take a look inward to determine who we are as a people of God. To my thinking, this is why it is essential that we find an interim pastor who can lead us in the process of healing, and then in the process of carefully defining our mission. Once we have done these things, then I think we’ll be ready to hire a new, settled pastor and begin the next phase of our communal faith journey. And based on the success that Wasatch has enjoyed with a dynamic pastor, I think it is absolutely critical that we choose the best possible pastor for our church at this time. I trust that the current Pastoral Search Committee will do this in their search for an interim pastor. We simply need to give them time.

In the meantime, I think we can begin that process of defining who we are as a people of God. Now some of you might ask why we need to go through this exercise when we already have a mission statement. You can point to the copy of our mission statement printed in each Sunday’s

Bulletin. If you'd like please read along as I read that mission statement in its entirety:

"First Congregational Church is a welcoming Christian community, anchored in faith, community service and worship that:

- Encourages and values diversity of thought and belief,
- Supports each individual's faith journey, and
- Provides a spiritual home in which to find purpose and fellowship.

Sounds great; right? **(pause)** I'm not so sure.

I would argue that though it sounds good this mission statement does not paint a complete picture of who we are today or who we want to be. It has all of the right words like, "welcoming", "community service", "diversity", "faith journey" and "fellowship" but I can see these words applied to any number of churches in the Valley. Do these words truly define who we are, or who we aspire to be? I don't think so. I think that we are more than these nice words.

I'm not suggesting that we do away with our current mission statement. Our mission has many worthy aspirations. Instead I would like us to focus on what we can do to realize this vision that is expressed in these words. I think we need to expand on these words, to flesh them out, to "put meat on the bones" of this statement. This mission statement provides us a vision of "**what**" we want to be, but I think the next step for us is to define "**how**" we achieve this desire.

I'm back to the question I posed earlier; "Where do we go from here?"

I can't answer this question today, nor do I think that we as a congregation could come up with an answer to this question today. However, I'd like to suggest some ideas that might help us to start the process of answering this question. I think we can begin by breaking down our mission statement and trying to come up with answers to questions such as:

How do we show the larger community that we are a "welcoming Christian community"?

or

Just how do we “encourage and value diversity of thought and belief”?

I am not going to pretend that I have the answers to these questions, but I’d like to kick off this conversation with some thoughts that I have about these particular questions.

First, I would hope we could expand our thinking on the topic of being a welcoming church beyond having air conditioning. As the head of Trustees last year, I came to have a pretty myopic vision of our church, and that was that it was all about the building, and the primary concern about the building was the heating and cooling of our building. I’m not saying that this is not important, but if we limit ourselves to the notion that once we fix the current problems with heating and cooling the building that we have sufficiently addressed our goal of being a “welcoming Christian community” then I think we’re sadly mistaken.

Being welcoming means a lot more to me. **(Pause)**

As the father of a gay son I’ve given a lot of thought to how he is welcomed wherever he goes. Of course, he’s welcome in our home, and in the homes of our extended family. He’s welcomed by his friends and accepted in his workplace. He’s generally welcome in the community in which he lives, Chicago. After going to college at a small liberal arts college in rural Illinois, Evan has chosen to continue to carve out a life in the Chicago area. This is in no small part due to his perception that he can openly be who he is without retribution or judgement in that city. He believes that he would not feel as welcome in the state of Utah, and I can sympathize with him on that belief. I’m afraid there is a significant majority of people in this state who believe his sexuality is some sort of disease, and at best would pity him.

Closer to home; I wonder that if he were to attend a service with me in this sanctuary, would he feel welcome? Sure, he’s my son, and I’d hope that the people of this congregation would honor my relationship with him, but what if he showed up without me? Would people welcome him still? I’d like to think so. In fact, I’m fairly certain that this congregation would welcome him with open arms. Very likely someone would escort him through our hallways to coffee hour and ply him with cookies and coffee.

However, my next question is how does this church let the greater Salt Lake community know that we are such a welcoming Christian community? A quick response to this question is that we have a rainbow background on our electronic sign with the message that “All Are Welcome”. Certainly, this is one way to get this message out, and I suspect that it might have encouraged a few LGBTQ individuals to come to one or more of our services. But if we are really serious about reaching out to the LGBTQ community, is there more that we can do? There most certainly is!

However, is there more that we **want** to do as a faith community? I’m not as certain. Would we be open to having a gay wedding performed in this Sanctuary, one officiated by our pastor? Would we go so far as to openly announce our position? In other words; would we step beyond a rainbow background? I would hope so, but I’m not sure. Don’t worry; I’m not going to ask for a showing of hands today, but I believe that this is a discussion worth having. It’s a discussion that I think would help us to define one of the “how’s” of fulfilling our church’s mission statement. **(Pause)**

Next, how do we demonstrate that we “encourage and value diversity of thought and belief”? Again, I don’t profess to have the answer, but I’d like to share a discussion that I recently had with a Catholic friend of mine. In that discussion we both lamented the declining attendance in our respective churches. In particular we lamented that neither of us had had much success with getting our now adult children to attend church after raising them in our respective faith traditions. My friend acknowledged that the long list of episodes of clerical sex abuse has been a huge problem for the Catholic Church. However, he was just as concerned that the perceived religious dogma of the Catholic Church was causing young people to turn away. This led in to a discussion about the theology of my church, the Congregational Church. I did my best not to pervert the central tenants of our faith in my explanation to him of our approach to Christianity. And in the middle of that explanation my friend exclaimed that a church that encourages diversity of religious thought must have young people beating down the doors to get in. When I continued with my explanation and stated that as Congregationalists we are encouraged to pursue our own, personal relationship with God, and to pursue our own faith journey, he was dumbfounded by the fact that our membership has decreased over the

years. In his mind, such an open approach to Christianity would be the absolute right kind of Christian message to broadcast in today's world.

Frankly, I'm at a loss to explain to my friend or to you why our approach to Christianity has not been better received in our community. I'm back to, **"how"**. **(Pause)** How do we better articulate our message of diversity and individualism, and then; How do we get this message out to the larger community?

I'm not suggesting that my one conversation with a single Catholic friend should drive the future of our church, but that conversation brings up interesting questions that I believe we need to answer as a church as we define ourselves. I sincerely hope that we have the courage to ask these questions (and frankly many more questions). We need to have these conversations in an effort to better define who we are as a faith community. I believe that we must do so before we reach out to a new, settled pastor. We cannot blindly reach out to a potential pastor, and hope that this one individual will have all of the answers for us. The answers lie with each and every one of us. The people in this Sanctuary are First Congregational Church, and as such we all must help to define the steps we will need to take to become the church we hope to be. However, we must go beyond simply being here, regularly showing up for Sunday service. We must all take an active role in coming up with the answers to the questions of "how".

If we can do this, I am confident that this church will not only survive, but will thrive. Now I suspect that when I use the word "thrive" most of you are thinking that I mean that our membership will increase again. And like you I would love to see that happen. However, I think we need to be careful about making this our only measure of success. As I noted from the Pew Research Group survey results, we are swimming against a strong social tide that is taking people away from all churches not just our church. I believe that we must craft a realistic definition of what it means for this church to "thrive". Is it something that can only be measured by attendance? I think not. **(Pause)**

Now, after my moderator's sermon I had thought I was done with giving sermons, but Mr. Lehoux is very persuasive, so I am here again today. And for the record, I am not excited about preparing any more sermons. Frankly, it's hard work to put your thoughts to paper. However, as I

prepared the words that I shared with you today, and given the uncertain future we face as a faith community; I've already come up with the title for that next sermon.

“How do we know when we get there?” **(Pause)**

Amen

### BENEDICTION

As we leave today and go about our lives in this coming week, let us all look within ourselves at how we can take some individual initiative to help this church church. Also give thought to what we might do as a people of God to shape our future. **(Pause)** Go in peace.