

Pastor's Annual Report – 2009/2010

When I was hired as Pastor of the Federated Church of Ashland in 2005, it was for a three-year appointment with the possibility of renewal. The first three years were very rewarding, and since the decision to renew for another three years, every day has been a bonus. Even though I am in the building and/or talking with members and friends of the congregation almost every day, I still only hear highlights and see snapshots of what is swirling around me. Like many of us, I find myself piecing together the bigger picture of the church while trying not to be consumed with one compartment or another. In short, it is good when I step back and take time to appreciate the forest as a whole, not only the individual trees.

I sat with a senior church member recently and we discussed some of the specific changes in and around the church through the later half of the twentieth century, and this conversation prompted me to take a closer look at some of the vital statistics easily accessible today. Here is a broad view of some of my findings. In contrast with the mid 1960's, the world and town populations are twice as large in number, while the Federated Church membership is only 20% of what it was in 1965! In short, we have shrunk by eighty percent while the town and world have grown by 100%. If you were alive and well in the mid-twentieth century and are feeling a sense of loss, this is certainly understandable. However, this is not the end of the church or God's work in our lives. It does mean, however, our operating procedures may change, committees and the methods for accomplishing our goals may have to be resized to fit a membership of less than 150, rather than a membership of 750. I want to encourage you that fewer numbers does not diminish the quality of our congregation, or the power of God in our lives. Even though we will feel loss at times when we see fewer numbers in the pews compared with 1965, or we struggle to meet financial obligations, this is not a sign that we are inept or God has left us. It is a sign that we still have work to do. It is a sign to be thankful for who we are, what we have, and the extraordinary amount of faith we have to carry forth the love of God in the world.

Also, the town demographic has changed. A substantial number of businesses were manufacturing in the mid-twentieth century, and today virtually all the businesses in Ashland are service related. It makes sense then that people looking for a church today may view the congregation primarily as providing a service, to the point that customer service becomes an expectation for people when looking for a church to join. We certainly do provide a service to people in their lives, however it is more of an opportunity *to serve*, rather than a consumer-driven market of spiritual goods to consume.

In short, we are a congregation that provides a service to people by posturing ourselves to serve our community and world. I am thrilled to see a continued emphasis on supporting Christian Education. Our teachers are committed and

earnest. Our involvement in the IHN program has been embraced by various cross sections of the congregation and it is exciting to see people getting to know one another who might not otherwise. And, we are engaging in something so close to the heart of God – taking care of our neighbors. How can we not continue? How can we not be inspired to press on?

There are many stories being told about how involvement in The Federated Church is so meaningful. When Lois, Nick, and Busi gave their stewardship testimonies, I heard them say that this congregation is pivotal for their lives. I heard them say that stewardship is more than a financial pledge; it is the quality of relationships and the movement of God in their lives. I am certain this is true for many, and the heart of people for God and neighbors continues to be a blessing to us all. I will echo what I have said before, the Federated Church of Ashland is composed of some of the most talented and hard working people I know, and it is a joy to serve as your pastor.

Jason