***State of the Church Address****First United Methodist Church of Ann Arbor*Rev. Nancy S. Lynn
January 20, 2019

Welcome!

I am so glad that you all have taken the time to come tonight as we think about the future direction of our church. FUMC is almost 200 years old, and I believe the decisions we make over the next months can have a huge impact on the next 100 years. Now is a time for us to dream and vision about what we can be in the future. To consider what will meet the spiritual needs of our congregation but also of our community. To reflect on what will give meaning to our worship, learning, and service together. To do that, I think we all need an accurate picture of where we are as a church - both the great strengths we have and some of the challenges. So, that is my purpose for tonight.

Before I go on, I want to review with you what for several years has been our mission, our vision, and our journey statements. In case you didn’t know…Our mission is to grow a community that welcomes and engages all persons to be Christ followers. Our vision is to transform the world by transforming lives and building up the next generation of Christ followers. And our journey statement is Know God. Love Others. Serve the World.

I also want to talk for a minute about the upcoming special General Conference. During the fall, I did a series of talks to help you all be informed about the different proposals concerning the inclusion of LGBTQ folks in the United Methodist Church. Then, our Bishop came to talk about them, as well.

We don’t know what is going to happen in February, and it’s true that our denomination may split. We will possibly have decisions to make as a congregation about whether we will continue to be United Methodist - or what flavor of United Methodist we are going to be.

A lot of people have asked me if we should wait to start planning for our future until after the General Conference, and my feeling is no. No matter what happens in February, our church is still going to be here and the questions we have to answer about our ministry priorities, our buildings and properties, our finances - those questions aren’t going to change. So, let’s move forward figuring out how God is calling us to serve our community. We still have God’s work to do.

For all those reasons, I’m not going to talk a lot about the General Conference. I’m going to talk about our church - some of the great things we have to celebrate, some of the challenges in front of us, and the amazing opportunity we have to set the direction for the future of our congregation.

So, first, we have a lot to celebrate! You all already know that this is a great church and a lot of wonderful things are happening here. I’m not going to try to cover all the good that happens in all the ministry areas, but I’ll try to highlight a few happenings that reflect some of the most exciting ministry here.

In our children’s ministry, children are now participating in small groups on Sunday mornings. Each group is divided by age and gender and there are four adults that share leadership of the group. The idea is for children to build lasting relationships with each other and with adults in the church who will be part of their lives as they are growing up and for whole families to become more deeply engaged in the life of the church. The CM staff just thanked forty adult leaders with small gifts to show our appreciation of the time and commitment they share with these children. Also, the orange group of 1-3 grade boys was just honored for better than 80% attendance since the beginning of the year. At a time when the trend in the US is for families to attend church only once every four or five weeks, that’s an impressive statistic!

As you saw if you were here for dinner, our youth ministry program continues to thrive, as well. We have about 100 youth and 35 adult counselors active in our program. Youth attend classes on Sunday morning and then meet for youth group in the evening. Recently, we’ve started a youth leadership team. It consists of 8 10-12 graders who will help with planning programming and keeping the program relevant. Our youth plan mission trips to Northern Michigan and North Dakota this summer.

Our adult faith formation (formerly adult ed) has grown impressively under the leadership of Debbie Houghton. Where once Debbie was the one coming up with class and lesson ideas, now we have three standing classes - Science and Religion, Vital Conversations, and Spiritual Practices each of which is planned by a team of volunteers. Of course, we also offer disciple classes, retreats, prayer services, etc. And what an amazing year this is to have both Anne LaMott and Nadia Bolz-Weber speak in our sanctuary! Few churches can claim that!

Our outreach and mission programs continue to reach people in need both locally with programs like Love Thy Neighbor, Alpha House, and Habitat for Humanity, nationally and internationally - think of Henderson, Costa Rica, and Kenya.

Social justice ministries have focused primarily on welcoming our LGBTQ sisters and brothers through the efforts of Rainbow Crossing, supporting refugees and immigrants through the Immigrant Hospitality Team, and disability awareness through the work of the access team.

We also are actively involved in caring for each other. We have started Stephen Ministry again, and we now have 5 commissioned Stephen Ministers. We have just sent two people to be trained as Stephen Leaders so we can continue to grow the Stephen Ministry program. Our Neighborhood Care Groups continue to find ways to connect with their FUMC friends close by. Some groups have gathered in a home or park or at Green Wood for a potluck. Some groups have welcomed a new baby or someone who moved into their neighborhood, including a new pastor!

Some groups have been supportive for families during difficult times, such as surgery or death or when someone can’t drive. Some groups don’t interact regularly, but serve as another resource for congregational care to happen when the church discovers a family that needs the support of their church friends.

Our visitation team has made over 100 visits this year to those who have a difficult time coming to church. Our visitation team maintains a connection and enjoys the company of folks who have given a lot to our church in the past.

Uncommon Threads have supplied dozens of prayer shawls and prayer quilts to people who are hurting or ill while JOY lunch provided over 200 lunches for our friends over 60 years old.

Our music ministry continues to provide us with beautiful worship music with our chancel choir, first vocal ensemble, children’s choirs, and bell choirs. The chancel choir’s presentation of “Elijah” last spring was stunning! And, of course, we have two concert series - one at Green Wood and one here downtown.

Meanwhile, we have an amazing staff that is deeply committed to our mission as well as five administrative committees that care for the church behind the scenes - the trustees, finance committee, staff-parish relations committee, committee on lay leadership, and leadership council. These are the people who will us to faithfully steward the resources of the church and to keep us equipped for our mission.

It’s not hard to see that we are, in many ways, a healthy, vital, vibrant community of faith! Our challenge is - how are we going to stay that way? Over the last years, mainline churches, both Protestant and Catholic, have seen a steady decrease in attendance and giving. Until recently, we’ve been able to buck that trend. However, it’s starting to catch up to us. Let me tell you a little bit about some of the challenges in front of us. Let’s start with the bad news and then the good news about attendance. The bad news is that attendance has gone down steadily over the last few years and attendance at the 11:15 service is quite low. The good news is that we may have turned the tide. Attendance for the first six months of this fiscal year (July 1-December 31, 2018) was higher than for the same six months a year ago. Three of four Christmas Eve services had higher attendance than last year. And we seem to be following the U.S. trend in having about as many people engaged in the church - they just don’t come to worship as often.

In terms of giving, the bad news is giving has continued to go down even as attendance has started to get better. We ended the 2017-2018 year in the red, and we are already, six months into the fiscal year, $120,000 behind in giving. Both loose plate and pledged giving are down.

The good news where giving is concerned is we have received 225 pledges so far for 2019 including 42 people who pledged this year but didn’t pledge last year and 73 people who increased their pledge. We also continue to give generously to programs outside of the operations budget including mission and outreach programs and the music program.

The other challenge we face right now is our properties. The two parsonages are in very good condition thanks to work done by the trustees last summer. In 2010, we sold a parsonage and have used that money for the parsonage renovations that have been done since then.

At Green Wood, several projects have been completed in recent years including renovating the kitchen and resurfacing the floor. The major project before us know is resurfacing the parking lot at an estimated cost of $150,000. One option for the future is to make Green Wood a property we can rent out to nursery schools or other groups. To do that, we would need to make it ADA compliant. That would mean adding an elevator ($50,000), creating an accessible entrance ($10,000) and adding an accessible restroom ($10,000).

At the downtown church, there are several projects on the horizon in addition to our regular costs. These include:

* Exterior steel sash windows - $82,500
* Sanctuary AV, screen repair, mount removal - $5,000
* Sanctuary Railings, platform updates - $7,500
* Removal of asbestos-containing tiles - $25,000
* Education classroom updates - $15,000

The two biggest projects we need to plan for are reparation of the promenade and replacing the slate roof. One estimate for repairing the promenade is $2,500,000. It would be less expensive to fill it in, but I don’t have a quote for that at the moment. The roof will need to be replaced in about 20 years at a cost of approximately $500,000.

The great thing is that we are identifying the challenges now while we still have plenty of time and resources to address them. And, even better, there is so much potential for new directions that we could take that could help us reach more people, but we have some decisions to make.

Now is the time for two things.

1. Think creatively and strategically about how we can sustain the church financially for the long haul.
2. What are our ministry priorities/goals - what will we focus on for the next few years? To answer that, we need to ask ourselves who we are - what do we value? What do we do well? What strengths and resources do we have to build on?

Who is our neighbor and how do we reach out to our neighbor? Where is Ann Arbor growing? Is it near Green Wood - if so, how can we grow Green Wood and make better use of the facility? How will we respond to the 19 story building planned for across Washington Street from us?

Finally, and most importantly, who is God calling us to become? What is God calling us to do? What do we need to do to get there? How might we reach a new population of people or create new worship and ministries or become more mission-focused? We have so many opportunities right now, and I have never been more excited for the future of our church!

On February 23, we will hold a retreat where we try to answer these questions. Hopefully, we’ll come out of the retreat with about three goals to focus on. We’ll that create teams to develop how we will go about meeting each goal. They will work on developing specific plans over the course of the spring.