



**STATE OF THE CHURCH ADDRESS
11-23-08**

A few years ago, Dr. Spencer Johnson, M.D., wrote an insightful little book entitled **“Who Moved the Cheese?”** It is a creative and insightful parable about the conflicting emotions and reactions that take place when major changes take place in our personal – national or for us – our church life. We rarely volunteer for change – but change is simply an inevitable element in our journey of life. We can embrace it – endure it – or try to erase it in our lives – but we must deal with it.

One of my favorite spiritual writers and mentors is Eugene Peterson. I read and devour his books and articles. One of the things I have learned from him is not to overlook the obvious. He reminds us in church life to ask ‘Where are we – and where do we want to go.’ He further reminds us that becoming a truly human community under the lordship of Jesus Christ is a long – complex – messy business. Can I get an amen? Thankfully the Bible plunges us into the mess of working together.

In preparation for this written report – I reviewed the reports I have shared the past 3 years. I also took 10 minutes at our last Administrative Board meeting to ask four simple questions – and asked for your answers to help me focus my report this year. The questions were:

1. What are the five greatest **challenges** that our church needs to address in the next five years?
2. What are the five noticeable **weaknesses** about our church?
3. What are the five **best assets** about our church?
4. What are the five **best things** our church accomplished this past year?

The top five responses to the greatest challenges that our church needs to address in the next five years were:

1. Develop programs to inspire and motivate more of our members to active lay leadership, Christian service and volunteering – especially Sunday School teachers.
2. Attract younger people and younger families with children.
3. Develop a mind set/attitude that is open to change.
4. Start and staff another worship service to attract younger families.
5. Maintain our current membership level and grow.

The responses to our five noticeable weaknesses about our church were:

1. Unwillingness/resistance to change.
2. Aging population that affects attendance and ability to serve.
3. Lack of ability to reach younger families and couples.
4. Need to develop local, hands-on mission projects.
5. Develop younger leaders.

The five best assets of our church were:

1. Biblical preaching of senior Pastor.
2. Our organist – Senior Choir
3. Our 2 different worship services/ beautiful sanctuary
4. Our mission program – preschool – great youth leaders – Wednesday Night Alive.

The five best things our church accomplished this year:

1. Repainting of the sanctuary
2. The Bravura Brass services – especially Reformation Day
3. VBS program with Steve Courtney and LUMINA project
4. The ‘Fun in the Sun’ outreach program
5. The yearly service at Garden Spot Village Chapel.

There were other responses but these were the top five in each category as tabulated by Nancy Swanson, our church secretary.

The past three years found our church in a growth pattern in worship attendance and Sunday School attendance after 20 years of steady decline – fueled by the bold initiatives of our first Strategic Planning Committee. Sadly after three years of modest gains – we had a slight decline in both our overall membership and worship attendance this year. Deaths and our aging population are the reasons why.

Last year Ray and I shared that we had ridden the wave of growth and excitement that the initiatives of the Strategic Planning Committee had energized about as far as they could take us. Ray and I believe that the first worship service has probably reached the maximum level it can. There are Sundays when the room is not able to hold all who attend it. In church growth circles it is generally agreed when a room or parking lot is 80% full – people begin to look for another option. The service and its leadership have been excellent – however, it will either have to move to a larger room or offer another service opportunity beyond the 8:30 a.m. time slot.

Last year, Ray and I shared our concerns about the ‘graying’ of our church family. When we look in the mirror – we ourselves have turned ‘grayer’ in these 6 years. This insight was confirmed by our Administrative Board responses.

We realize the need – the challenge – but have not fully realized all that we need to do institutionally to turn it around. Like Dr. Spencer Johnson shared we have conflicting emotions about change.

Our Long-Term Strategic Planning Committee has chosen Bishop Robert Schnase's outstanding book, **FIVE PRACTICES OF FRUITFUL CONGREGATIONS** as our study book for our work together. On page 27 – Bishop Schnase shares “To become a vibrant – fruitful – growing congregation requires a change of attitudes – practices – and values. Good intentions are not enough. Too many churches want more young people as long as they act like old people – more newcomers as long as they act like old-timers – more children as long as they are as quiet as adults.”

I further endorse Bishop Schnase's insights that church members must move beyond scapegoating and blaming and move beyond ‘they ought to do something’ – to “I will.”

Ray and I and others of our leadership team here at EUM believe that EUMC does do some great things. We have much to offer. It would be a tragedy to let this vital church die. I also want to spend all my time and efforts building each other up in love – and never tearing any thing down – unless it is the walls that prevent us from being the body of Christ at work in the world.

Years ago, I learned a valuable lesson from the field of athletics. I learned the difference between a team that plays to win – and a team that plays not to lose. You can spot the difference in teams and churches. The great hockey player Wayne Gretsky once said, “One hundred percent of the shots on Goal not taken do not go in.”

We have been preaching and studying our way through the biblical book of the Acts of the Apostles this year here at EUMC. We learned that the church was birthed at Pentecost by the Holy Spirit – and driven out into the world by wind – fire – spirit. So we must be driven out today in mission and ministry. The disciples embraced the change brought on by the Holy Spirit – and have been turning the world upside down ever since. As the Holy Spirit transformed cautious and timid men and women into renewed and re-energized disciples of Jesus Christ – so we must yield and surrender to the call of the Spirit as well.

I shared with our District Superintendent in my yearly interview that Ray and I believe that our church is in a holding pattern. I vividly remember one occasion flying into Philadelphia airport. We lived then in the city of Chester. Air traffic was backed up between 45 minutes to an hour. Our plane went into a holding pattern. We flew around the area for that time period. We could see our house in Chester and Widener University where Mary attended school, but we might as well have been 100 miles away. We were so close, but to no avail.

As I shared earlier in my report, there have been bright spots even in a challenging year. I am looking forward to see how our additional service on Christmas

Eve designed for younger families with children will be received. We do believe there is a mission field right here in New Holland that we need to be intentional about reaching.

I know that Ray, Beth, Lois, and the Board of Trustees and others in our church family have worked very hard this year in the positions of leadership and responsibility given to them. I know they have not only worked harder – but smarter. I pray they, along with others, will not weary in their well-doing.

To be honest I don't know what the future holds – but I do know that I am part of a faith community that boldly proclaims that our awesome God does hold our future and our tomorrow. Such knowledge should never produce a prevent defense or cautious spirit – but a positive – bold response to the Great Commission and the Great Commandment. We must continue to work and labor and wait upon the Lord.

While this year did not yield apparent numerical advances for the kingdom of God – neither were we defeated. We are ready to live and fight, work and labor in 2009 and beyond.

May God give us the courage and grace so to do.

Faithfully,

Pastor Eric
November 23, 2008
Evangelical United Methodist Church – New Holland