

*What Do We Have to Offer?*

**2 Corinthians 2:14-3:6**

John Breon

A boy and girl were at the end of a date. Standing under the porch light of the girl's front door, the boy looked at her and said, "Can I kiss you?" The girl smiled demurely and said nothing. The boy tried again. "I mean *may* I kiss you?" Again the girl smiled and said nothing. So the boy asked, "Are you deaf?" And the girl replied, "Are you paralyzed?" (Leonard Sweet, Soul Tsunami website). Does it ever seem like the church is paralyzed? When we look at the challenges in the world today or we compare ourselves to other churches, other ministries, other Christians, we may wonder what we have to offer that matters, that makes a difference.

Why do you think people get involved in a church? Why did you become part of this church? Why are you still part of it? Why would someone new want to become involved with First UMC?

We live in a time when many people are spiritually hungry and seeking. A time when people want purpose and to be part of something that matters. A time when needy, broken people look for provision and healing. A time when, surrounded by death, people are looking for life.

This is the time when God calls us to be the church and to be in ministry. In some ways, it's different from any other time that God's people have been called to serve. But in many ways, the needs and longings of people are like those of any generation. What do we as the church have to offer in these days?

One consultant tells about meeting with a congregation and asking them about their vision for their church. They envisioned a sanctuary full of people who could help carry the financial burden of the church (Mike Regele, *Death of the Church* 232). Surely the church has more to offer people than a chance to help pay the bills!

First, we have to offer what the church has always had: the Good News of Jesus Christ and life in him and the ministry that flows from it. In the scripture we read, Paul is beginning a section where he talks about the ministry of apostles, himself in particular. Even as Paul defends his style of

ministry against some opponents in Corinth, he shows us something of the church's ministry. The church still has an apostolic ministry: We are rooted in the life and ministry of Jesus and in the teachings of the apostles and we are sent by God into service.

Paul begins talking about being Christ's captive. He says that God's presence spreads into the world through his life as Christ's captive. To those who receive it, it's life. To those who reject it, it's death. Then he asks, "Who is equal to such a task?" or "Who is sufficient for such a task?" Paul is implying that he is. But so they don't misunderstand and think he's boasting about himself and trying to commend himself to them, he interrupts himself and points out that he doesn't need any letters of reference to speak to the Corinthians. *They* are his letter, his proof of apostleship.

Then he comes back to the idea of confidence and being sufficient. As we see the needs, the challenges, and the opportunities for serving God in these days, we may begin to wonder, "Who is up to doing such things?" Who can really fulfill such a ministry? God is calling and we're the ones, but we feel inadequate. What can we do?

We can say with Paul, "Such confidence we have through Christ before God. Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant of the Spirit."

God is the "Sufficient One." In ourselves, we don't have anything of eternal value to offer. But we're not on our own. We are in Christ. We live in the presence of God. Our confidence in ministry is not self-confidence, but confidence based on God's enabling and empowering. Confidence means "with" (*con*) "faith" (*fide*). We enter into service and ministry as the church, not with faith in ourselves, but with faith in God who is known in Jesus Christ and who gives us his Spirit.

As ministers of the new covenant of the Spirit, we have to offer the promises of God and their fulfillment in Jesus Christ. As the prophets spoke of the new covenant, they included forgiveness, cleansing, and the Spirit of God living in his people, giving us the desire and the power to do God's will.

The law, on its own, as a way of salvation, is death. Any law people try to live by on their own is a law of sin and death. But the Holy Spirit gives life—eternal life, the life of God that belongs to eternity and that is now available through the Holy Spirit. As members of God’s church, we have received the Spirit and we are channels for the Spirit’s life-giving ministry. That’s what we have to offer.

Our primary allegiance is to God’s kingdom and our primary membership is in God’s church—the one, holy, worldwide and apostolic church. But we also belong to a unique expression of God’s church. What does the United Methodist Church have to offer in these days?

E. Stanley Jones put it this way: We are a church of the “warm heart” and the “world parish.” Those phrases come from John Wesley. The first is from Wesley’s experience at a small group Bible study in 1738. He says that while someone was reading about the change that God works in the heart through faith, “I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust Christ, Christ alone for salvation and an assurance was given me that he had taken away *my* sins, even *mine* and saved *me* from the law of sin and death.”

Throughout the rest of Wesley’s ministry, and at our best through Methodist history, we have emphasized heart-felt faith, personal experience of grace, present assurance of forgiveness, the witness of the Holy Spirit. We believe that people can have a vital personal experience of God and live a life of grace, empowered by the Holy Spirit.

The phrase “world parish” comes from later in Wesley’s ministry. He was ordained in the Church of England, but most of that church’s leaders disagreed with what he preached and taught about personal faith and assurance. So they began keeping him out of their churches and not allowing him to preach in them. Wesley preached wherever a crowd would gather to hear him: fields and streets, as well as some sympathetic churches.

One Anglican priest complained that by preaching in the fields near his church, Wesley was interfering with his parish (his assigned area of ministry) and that Wesley should stay in his own parish. Wesley’s response was that since he was an instructor at Oxford, he was not appointed to a

parish. Therefore, he said, "I look upon the world as my parish." Following his example, we might say there's no place we can't take the gospel.

Here are a few examples of how John and Charles Wesley and the early Methodists took the gospel out of the church and into the world: preaching in fields, town squares, houses, wherever; almost constant travel; schools, orphanages, medical dispensaries; publications; visiting prisons; collecting food and clothes, or money to buy them, for the poor.

One of Wesley's favorite verses summarizes this holding together experiencing and doing faith: "The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love" (Galatians 5:6).

At our best, UMs offer experience of God through vital personal faith and expressions of love through works of mercy and compassion.

But back to our original questions. Why be involved in First UMC? What do we have to offer in this world of abundant choices?

My first answer is, all of the above. As part of the UM connection and as part of the wider church, we play a part in fulfilling God's purposes for the church.

Last year, we asked you to name "What I Love about My Church." Here are some of the things you said:

Fellowship

Welcoming, open doors

Loving, caring church family

Spiritual leaders

Biblical teaching

The friendliness of the members and staff and their willingness to help others

The youth program—my child loves going to youth

The opportunity for children to acolyte and usher (be part of the service)

Sunday School class is wonderful—members are truly an extended family

Different type of worship services

I know through the spirit of our church I am not alone

Choir, Bell Choir, Baby Bells  
We give our tithe to the Lord to do his work  
I love being able to share Jesus with others  
The inclusiveness of our church  
The many who serve in so many ways  
God loves me  
The cross reminds me of the great sacrifice Jesus made for me  
The music  
The devotion and commitment to God  
The desire to serve and help others  
Communion  
Kid's Church

As a local church, we have a purpose: To make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. We aim to help people meet Jesus and get to know him. Part of how we do that is to live as the body of Christ—head, heart, hands; thinking, loving and serving like Jesus.

We do that through our witness. We tell the story of what God does in Jesus Christ. We invite people. We show hospitality.

We do it as we gather for worship. Worship does more for us than we know, physically as well as spiritually. One time when I was the speaker at a youth retreat, I was sick with a sore throat and such. But when we sang praise songs, my throat didn't hurt and I was able to speak. The songs of worship stay with us throughout our lives and continue to influence us. You've probably heard about people who lost their speech and yet they could keep singing the hymns they learned as children.

We offer three different and distinct worship experiences. The style of worship is not so important. What's important is that we worship in the Spirit and in truth. God is seeking people who will worship like that (John 4:24).

We make disciples as we get together in fellowship. The most repeated thing you said that you love about this church is that it's friendly, it's family; you feel that you belong; there's genuine care here. That's wonderful, but it takes extra effort to invite and involve new people in that,

to help them experience it the way we do. That means going outside ourselves and getting to know people beyond the church.

We make disciples through education and spiritual formation. We have classes on Sunday mornings, Wednesday nights, and occasionally other times. As we make decisions we seek to allow our lives to be shaped by Christ's life. Just as each of us has a unique personality and character, a church has its own personality and character. Just as each of us is being made like Christ, we want the church to become more and more Christlike.

We make disciples as we go in service. Find a need in the community and pray for God's guidance and resources to meet that need. Go on a short-term Volunteer In Missions trip. Pray for missionaries. Give generously to support local and state and worldwide ministries and missions. Listen for God's call to service wherever he leads.

N. T. Wright admits that the word "church" carries a lot of baggage for some people. Too often, we've presented a negative image. Then he goes on:

But there is another side to it, a side which shows all the signs of wind and fire, of the bird brooding over the waters and bringing new life. For many, "church" means just the opposite of that negative image. It's a place of welcome and laughter, of healing and hope, of friends and family and justice and new life. It's where the homeless drop in for a bowl of soup and the elderly stop by for a chat. It's where one group is working to help drug addicts and another is campaigning for global justice. It's where you'll find people learning to pray, coming to faith, struggling with temptation, finding new purpose, and getting in touch with a new power to carry that purpose out. It's where people bring their own small faith and discover, in getting together with others to worship the one true God, that the whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts. No church is like this all the time. But a remarkable number of churches are partly like that for quite a lot of the time. (*Simply Christian* 123)

We offer people the opportunity to be part of something like that. Let's be confident because God is the Sufficient One who makes us capable of serving as people of the new covenant.