

# **The State of the Congregation**

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Psalm 131  
Isaiah 49:8-16  
Matthew 6:24-34

On this federal holiday weekend and living in the heart of the empire — it is appropriate to be more “governmental” today. I have prepared a “State of the Congregation” address if you will. (Doubtless, most of you have seen these kinds of addresses. If you are uncertain when to stand and clap then just look to our congressional — I mean congregational leaders — here and follow their lead. Please do not feel obligated to divide yourselves by party on either side of the aisle.)

I am happy to report that the state of our congregation is strong.

From the outside some may imagine that we are hobbled by the conference discipline we received 2 ½ years ago, but we know that our life together is vital and healthy.

As we prepare for our congregational meetings the next two Sundays, it is a good time to look back, look forward and listen together for the voice of the Spirit. We will review the past more fully in the June 1 and 8 meetings, but here is the shortened version:

Almost 5 years ago, in August 2003, we began two years of conversations and meetings with Allegheny Mennonite Conference leaders and representatives. The topic was Hyattsville Mennonite’s then 17-year practice (now 22 years) of welcoming gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Christians

as full members with all the rights and responsibilities that membership entails. This process came with conflict of course and it was exhausting at times, but the congregation stayed involved. We were challenged to define who we are as Christians and Mennonites. We responded by engaging with scripture, by extending greater levels of hospitality to those in the congregation and the larger community. Our prayer life deepened, attendance at congregational meetings skyrocketed, our corporate worship life was rich and people gave freely of their time and energy to the congregation, community and conference.

Since that process ended in November 2005, we have experienced a number of changes as a congregation. Besides the resulting discipline by the Allegheny Conference, Joe Roos, my pastoral colleague, answered a call with his wife Cheri, to ministry in India in October 06. In February 07 we hired Patricia Barth, an intentional interim pastor, to work along side me for nine months and in November 07 we brought Adam on board as associate pastor. Besides changes in leadership we have even gotten two new hymnals.

Change like this may make us want to hold on to what we know in our life together. We want to sing the familiar hymns and worship together in the ways we have grown accustomed. We might be expected to turn inward and abandon our outward focus, to be less hospitable to newcomers. We might offer less grace to each other, we might grumble and complain about change.

But through all these changes we have maintained that we are the body of Christ to each other and for the world.

We host Warm Nights (families that are in need of housing stay at the church for a week.) We serve a hot lunch for those who need it at Community Café six times a year. We welcome new people into our midst. We learn and study together in bible studies. A dynamic young adult group has formed; a record number of people are involved in small groups; we have steady attendance at conference meetings; we are resettling a refugee family of nine from Afghanistan; half a dozen folks are going to Colombia to visit our sister church; we are engaged in talks about deeper collaboration with UPCOB and a building committee is active once again.

We are the Body of Christ and girl, we are busy.

So who is this body of Christ? Who is this Hyattsville Mennonite Church?

This congregation began in 1952 as a small group of young adults that wanted to be a more inclusive church. In those years inclusion meant that no particular clothing or family name was required. But the group was clear from the beginning that it was Mennonite and they made a conscious decision to affiliate with the Allegheny Mennonite Conference. They saw themselves as an inclusive gathering of Mennonites in the diaspora of the Washington, D.C., area. Though the last of those nine young people retired away from the city four years ago, their original idea has stayed with us. Inclusive hospitality has become our charism, our spiritual gift that we give to each other and indeed to the larger church.

Our mission statement from 1990 says it this way. Hyattsville Mennonite Church is an urban Christian congregation committed to making Mennonite

traditions and beliefs relevant in the cultural setting of the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area.

So if we, mostly, know who we are, where are we called to be 10-20 years from now? And how are we going to get there?

It is almost 10 years ago now that a consultant specializing in church growth told us that if we did not make changes to our facility new people would be driven away. This has not exactly proven to be true though we don't know how many people might be here if we had built a bigger building. But given our growth the past 10 years (our weekly attendance is about 15-20% more than it was 10 years ago) will this building be adequate for the next 50 years?

For almost 20 years, we have been talking about what to do with this church building, how to make it more functional for the congregation as well as ministries we want to be part of. We have often gotten stuck with county permitting and code issues. Other sticking points are theological. We ask each other if spending money, time and energy on a building is good stewardship. (We heard the gospel reading this morning — you can't serve God and money.) And of course sometimes as we have been ready to tackle those questions, we have felt disrupted by factors outside the congregation, like conference relations.

As we reflect on the past and look toward the future, we do well to keep the story of God's people in mind. We are not the first followers to have difficult decisions put before them. Every generation seeks God's guidance anew. Our story, while personal to us, is not unique to history or to God.

Isaiah 49, the second servant song, begins by testifying to the fact that the servant is called even before birth. And though the servant is called, s/he doesn't always remember the calling, s/he sometimes has to be reminded. "Oh yes, I was called before I was born, God formed me in the womb to be God's servant."

So why has God formed the servant? To what does God call the servant? The servant is called to remember the covenant, to tell the prisoners to "come out," to invite those in the dark to come out and into the light, to show themselves.

This sounds much like the text that Jesus read from Isaiah in the temple as he began his own ministry.

*The Spirit of our God is upon me,  
because the Most High has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
God has sent me to proclaim liberty to those held captive  
and release to those in prison...*

But in Isaiah 49 we still hear uncertainty; doubting and complaining — "God has forgotten me, God has forsaken me." Then we hear the voice of God once again:

*You are not forgotten. A mother cannot forget the child at her breast and I will not forget you. And even if a mother should forget, as unlikely as that is, I will not forget my children. How can I? You are written, in permanent ink, on the palm of my hand, a tattoo perhaps? on the palm of God's hand.*

In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus uses a different image, still part of the natural world order, to remind his disciples of God's care. Jesus' disciples are beginning to wonder how this will all turn out. They are on the road, having left

their own homes. To us they may look faithful but Jesus sees their worry about money, food and clothing. He calls them “ones of little faith.”

*Look at the birds. They don't worry about how they will survive. Look at the flowers. Lilies don't worry about keeping up with the latest fashions. They are happily dependent on God, on the natural order and rhythm of things. Worry is not the path to faithful discipleship.*

As we look to the future are we anxious about what tomorrow may bring? Well, shouldn't we be? Isn't Jesus' advice to have no concern for tomorrow a bit naïve if not irresponsible?

But Isaiah and Jesus are not encouraging us to be foolish or ignore what is before us. God calls the servant saying,

*I will keep you and appoint you to be a covenant people.  
I will restore the land, and assign you the properties that have lain waste;  
<sup>9</sup>I will say to the prisoners, “Come out,”  
to those who are in darkness, “Show yourselves.” Congested roadways  
will become places where they can safely graze,  
and barren heights will become lush pastureland for them; <sup>10</sup>they will  
never hunger or thirst...*

If the people do not come out — they will not see the road that is prepared for them, they will not see the food and water that God has provided. To stop worrying is not naïve, it is not to ignore God; to stop worrying is to follow God's invitation and to become all the more aware of what God is doing and join in that work.

The birds do not sit on their nests waiting for God to drop worms in the mouths of their babies. They go about their work, what they are called to do — tending their young without fear or worry. The lilies grow. They do the work to which they are called. It is joyful work to grow and be beautiful.

So if we do what we are called to do and be who Jesus asks us to be, will life be as trouble-free and fine as it is for the lilies? It's not quite that simple; the servant song is sung by the "suffering" servant after all. It may seem a romantic notion to be called a "light to the nations." But commentator Gene Tucker gives this reality check:

"To be a 'light to the nations' ... means bearing affliction and hardship — brought about on account of obedience to God — and precisely thereby conveying the knowledge of God. To witness to the God of Israel is not to share information with others but to be faithful to God in such a way that confrontation will occur but will not be an end in itself." (New Interpreters Bible Commentary)

We understand ourselves as lights for peace, as workers for justice. We have something to share with the neighborhood, with the church, with the world. If what Tucker says is true then this work for peace and justice is not without conflict. As we discern the future, we may ponder some difficult options.

We may experience internal conflicts as we discern our future with UPCOB, CFMS or other churches and organizations. We may have serious disagreements about building and property issues.

No doubt we will experience external conflict with Allegheny Conference around issues of hospitality, polity and theology.

Can we see these potential conflicts not as distractions, but as part of the ministry to which we are called?

I think of my time this week with some of the members of the Afghani family. Our task was to take the bus to the Halal market. In my mind this meant

that we were to get there in good time, find the meat that they were looking for, buy that meat and come home. I was thinking about this as an activity that might take two hours.

As it happens we missed every bus connection by mere minutes so we spent quite a lot of time waiting for busses. When we finally got to the market it was quite small, the shopkeeper not all that friendly, and we bought nothing.

Four hours later we returned to the house carrying nothing to show for our time. Okay, we had picked up a handful of bus schedules. We also learned which busses to take (or not to take.) And we had a new understanding of the bus transfer system. They had a conversation in Farsi with a local business owner, and I began building a friendship with one of the daughters in the family. These were not necessarily the things that I had been seeking. And yet it was what I was given, and I am grateful to have received it. I only hope Frishta, Ahmed Ali and GulJan also found something to take away from our time. It is tempting to worry for this family. But I trust that all of us working together are helping them find their way in the United States.

The way ahead as a congregation is not always clear. Exploring collaboration with other groups is painstaking and deliberate work, but we are building relationships along the way and perhaps showing the way for other churches in the future.

The issues with the conference often seem like an impediment to other ministry we would rather be engaged in. We experience conference conversations and conflict as a disruption. But like it or not, this is the ministry to



which we have been called for over 50 years: to be an unapologetic, inclusive church. This is our spiritual gift so we can let our light shine.

The phrase in Isaiah, being a “light to the nations,” sounds so self-important. We ought not take ourselves too seriously. On the other hand, people across the larger church do take notice of Hyattsville Mennonite. There are those who watch us to see what discipleship looks like. We cannot be naïve but neither do we need to worry when we are doing the work to which God has called us.

The State of our Congregation continues to be strong.

Let us carry on — not as politicians, but like joyful blooming flowers, trusting in God to provide and guide.