

## State of the Congregation

Pastor Cynthia Lap and Associate Pastor Adam M.L. Tice  
Jan. 29, 2012

Psalm 111  
Mark 1:21-28

**Cindy:** My friends, it is our 60th anniversary year as a congregation and the state of the congregation is strong.

Sixty years ago, in April 1952, a group of nine young adults decided that they no longer wanted to be bound by the restrictive dress code and boundaries that dictated who was in and who was out of the true Mennonite fold. They left a Lancaster Conference church worshipping in nearby Cottage City and began this congregation in a rented room above a coffee shop in Georgetown. Within six years they had purchased land and built this building in the rural suburbs of Hyattsville.

Almost four years ago, the State of the Congregation address came as we were beginning to consider a building project. This morning we can celebrate the distance we have come together as we prepare for a temporary move during this long awaited renovation. Today we remember who we are, name and reclaim our commitments, and look to the future.

There is a misperception by many folks outside this congregation, both in the Mennonite church and those who have only heard of us through the press, that we are a “one issue” church. Like it or not, we are known as the “gay church.” I am known as the gay pastor and did you know that all of you are gay as well? And while I consider this misperception quite a compliment, it is not exactly true.

**Adam:** When I first came to Hyattsville I frequently heard guests cite our welcoming stance as their reason for coming. Lately that hasn't been the case. It tells

me that our reputation is expanding. People know us for our music and arts and our commitments to healing the world.

**Cindy:** Each week a little banner on the front of the bulletin says that we are “A Christ-centered welcoming church with commitments to peace and justice.” This captures some of who we are, but I propose that in our 60th year, we might want to get a facelift, not only for our building but for our guiding statement as well. Let me test this with you. Maybe we need to expand this statement to include our commitments to beauty and hospitality, as well as peace and justice.

Often the first thing you see when you enter the sanctuary on Sunday morning is the magnificent worship arts display. Each week I look forward to seeing what feast for the eyes has been prepared for us. Early in the service we join our voices in song to invite the Holy One among us, to praise that mystery we may not know, but that nevertheless brings us together. It is a blessing to be part of a congregation that pays attention to beauty. It is through our eyes and ears, sometimes even through smell, taste and movement, that we are reminded of our connection with the Holy Creativity that moves in and among us.

**Adam:** But I was struck when we discussed planning for our building renovation that many folks who had been around a long time focused on the beauty of this space, while those of us who are newer focused on its deficiencies. Look at the tile under our feet. Look at the paint job. Look at the exposed wire.

**Cindy:** When people visit the building during the week, I often feel the need to explain or apologize that this is not how it always looks. It does not always seem so

empty of spirit or beauty. We know what beauty is here. We do have a good sense of aesthetics. We are not so abstract as to be plain.

**Adam:** I suspect that the more time someone spends worshipping in this space, the more their experience shapes their perception. Those of us who are newer need the old-timers to help us see the space as beautiful. Those who have been around longer need the new folks to help them see what still has potential to become more beautiful.

**Cindy:** Several years ago, the femtheo bible study group read poet John O'Donohue's book *Beauty: The Invisible Embrace*. O'Donohue says: "Thomas Aquinas and the medieval thinkers wisely recognized that beauty (is) was at the heart of reality; it (is) was where truth, unity, goodness and presence come together. Without beauty [truth, unity, goodness and presence] would be separate and inclined toward destructive conflict with each other... There is a profound equality at the heart of beauty; a graciousness which recognizes and encourages the call of individuality, but invites it to serve the dream and creative vision of community." (p.222-223)

I believe this is how we experience beauty here at Hyattsville Mennonite. It draws us together. Each week there is an offering of beauty, freely shared, and it is received with wonder and gratitude.

**Adam:** Yes, we develop our life together in the sharing of beauty; but if that beauty doesn't have a capacity for messiness, it is dishonest. And dishonesty isn't beautiful. Part of seeing the world through a Godly lens is learning to perceive messiness as contributing to beauty rather than detracting from it. We often hear from visitors about how beautiful our singing is. And it really is. But there are places in the congregation where the objective, aesthetic beauty may be more difficult to perceive. If

you sit in one area you might miss the melody because there are no sopranos nearby. If you're in the back left section, you may have a cry-room counterpoint. And if you're in the back right you'll have the addition of Charlie's singing from the back room. Do we have an understanding of beauty that has the capacity to incorporate those unexpected elements? Can we hear those added or missing voices as contributing to our song rather than detracting from it? Can we welcome a voice like Charlie's into our music?

**Cindy:** I hope we can. Welcome and hospitality have become a renewed part of our life together since we had a series in adult education on the topic nearly 10 years ago. I foolishly thought that this was a redundant topic for Mennonites. We like to eat together, what more could there be? But that study of hospitality and all its implications was the beginning of a new kind of attitude around here.

We began to welcome each other with new energy, we began to greet our guests with real joy, we began to understand in a new way that hospitality and welcome are at the heart of what it means to be followers of Jesus. This renewed commitment to hospitality as part of the gospel, to understanding welcome as a justice issue, bolstered us during difficult conversations about sexuality with the conference. It is this commitment to hospitality as a central issue of our faith that helped us to realize that we must have a lift or an elevator so that all people — whether in wheelchairs, on crutches, with knee and hip replacements or in strollers — are able to worship and fellowship here in freedom.

A commitment to hospitality does come with a price. In a few weeks, we will find out the monetary value of hospitality when we open the bids for the renovation. Some

might also say that we have paid a price with the conference and larger church for welcoming LGBT people into the congregation.

Our commitment to hospitality brings with it a whole range of benefits as well, some that cause other pastors to commit the sin of envy. Sisters and brothers, we are bursting at the seams. We don't have enough room in the parking lot. Many Sundays the sanctuary is full. How long we can sustain this kind of growth?

**Adam:** It is remarkable the change that has occurred just in my four and a half years here. As attendance has grown, I think we've jumped from one kind of congregation to another without really recognizing or naming it. We had been a small church where everyone knows everyone. But now we have regular attendance such that knowing everyone is practically impossible. Just ask whoever is in charge of the guest book on a Sunday morning! The problem is that we still operate as though everyone ought to know everyone else. How do we take the next step beyond hospitality, so that the new faces become familiar? That was much easier when our average attendance was 110 instead of 130. And our roster of regular attenders has grown from around 190 to 250. We'd really be in trouble if our regulars were even more regular! How do we not only welcome our guests, but make them a part of our household? How do we cultivate and thrive as community, while at the same time adding to our family all those who wish to embrace our mission? And yes, our capacity has become a real issue; the best kind of problem for a church to have. Anyone who has arrived late over the last few months can testify to the difficulty of finding a spot in the back pews.

**Cindy:** Church growth gurus say there are three ways to solve this “problem.”

The first is to have two services, an early and a late service. Worship earlier than 11 a.m.? A hard sell with you all, unless we tried really early, like 5 p.m. Saturday evening. The second option is to build, which we are doing, but unfortunately our renovation doesn't really give us more space for worship or in the fellowship hall and doesn't give us classrooms for Sunday school.

The third option is to “plant” a new church. We could send out a team of folks from this congregation that would begin another worshipping community in a nearby neighborhood.

**Adam:** There is another option: we could gin up some church conflict and split.

**Cindy:** Let's not go there.

I have been thinking about this third option for quite a few years. The idea has been nibbling away in me, but I have always pushed it far away. The past year the nibbling has become a slight gnawing, and I have begun to articulate the idea, very tentatively, to people outside the congregation. Today I test it aloud with you. What would it look like for us to start a church like Hyattsville, committed to beauty, hospitality and peace in Washington, D.C.? Already almost 40 percent of the congregation drives from D.C. or through D.C. to get here. It seems like people are hungry for a church that provides community, works for justice, while also paying attention to beauty and the Mennonite tradition. Can we begin to imagine that we, as silly as it may sound to a bunch of people who can't stand the idea of being missionaries, can start a new church? Would people join us?

I have no details to share, no ideas of where this might happen or even which 50 of us might be the seeds for this new church. (I say 50 because when Cesar Garcia of Mennonite World Conference was here the other week, he said he and his wife started a new church in Bogota with 12 people. While it is a Biblical number, he said 50 would have worked much better.)

Let's not fight and split, but are we ready to prayerfully ponder a new church as part of hospitality?

**Adam:** There are a lot of logistics to consider, and I imagine we could quickly get bogged down in them. That's what we do best. But I wonder if we could take the next several months while we are out of our building to dream and imagine what this might look like. Let's not dive into the details too much yet, but rather let's discuss what new pathways God might be opening up to us. How might this possibility enhance our mission as a church? Would this proposal, or something altogether different, best enable us to be who God is calling us to be?

**Cindy:** The last of our three commitments that we are naming today, though certainly not the least, is peace. We are unapologetically Mennonite and peace is our moniker. For many Mennonites across the country, peace has become an afterthought. Here at HMC we have consciously kept Mennonite in our name. Often people say they are looking for a peace church and they find us because "Mennonite" is code for peace.

**Adam:** We've got a pattern going here — you've suggested three things that are central to our life as a congregation — beauty, hospitality and peace. But when you spoke of beauty, I brought up messiness. When you spoke of hospitality, I brought up community. Each of these coins has a flip-side that we need to embrace.

**Cindy:** So for peace, what? War? Please don't bring up the idea of church conflict again.

**Adam:** No, but I do think that our current statement about being committed to "Peace AND Justice" gets it right — we don't simply cry "Peace, peace" where there is no peace. Without justice, peace is an illusion. The word "peace" is derived from the Latin pax, as in "Pax Romana." It implies absence of conflict and war, but it is an imposed peace. We currently live in a similar "Pax Americana." A peace built upon the imposition of American military and economic will worldwide. The Biblical concept of Shalom is much more holistic — it is not simply the absence of conflict, but the presence of order and flourishing of justice.

**Cindy:** Sometimes we work so hard for peace — and justice — marching, writing letters, providing food, offering shelter, reaching out to the stranger — that we forget that peace is not just an outward action, but an inward journey as well. We see this in the gospel passage this morning. The person possessed names Jesus, sees him for who he is and yet she is not experiencing an internal peace. Somehow in Jesus' words and actions she is emptied of what is causing internal distress, finds inner peace and is returned to her place in the community. How do we, who are so committed to action, also cultivate a spirit of peace inside ourselves? There must be a way that we can nurture the seeds of the peace of Christ in ourselves, if only or perhaps mostly, to counter the face-paced and violent world in which we live.

**Adam:** The state of our congregation is strong. It is flourishing. It is beautiful and messy, it is hospitable and nourishing, it is peace-pursuing and justice-building. The big challenges that have faced us over the past decade — discipline from the conference



and building issues in particular — appear to be on the verge of healthy resolution. That tells me that we need to be ready for a new challenge. What will it be? What will our next 10 years look like? Our next 60? Where is God calling us now? One of the beautiful things about this church is that we as the pastors do not ultimately shape or implement our shared vision. We can suggest and prod, but it is up to our collective body to make God's call a reality in our work together. I hope all of you — long-time members to first-time guests — will be a part of our dreaming.

**Cindy:** Thank you, God bless Hyattsville Mennonite Church, and God bless the whole world!