

REFLECTIONS ON MISSION

Jim Dean

Salem United Church of Christ, Sunday, January 9, 2011

The name of our Church is SALEM UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST. The church was founded in 1884. We trace our history back to the German Reformed Church and the Evangelical Reformed Church. The name “Salem” is of Hebrew origin meaning “Peace.” It is related to “Shalom” which was later identified with Jerusalem.

For the last few years, many of us have asked the question, “What is Salem’s purpose or mission?”

As the Bylaws Committee looked at revising Salem’s Bylaws, we looked at all the things in which Salem’s members and friends are engaged at and through the Church. We were also reminded that several years ago Salem developed and adopted a Mission Statement. This was one of those “the light goes on” moments because, although we keep asking the question, we as a congregation answered the question in the Mission Statement.

As a people, we worship God, we follow Jesus who we believe is the Christ, and we respond in love to the power of the Holy Spirit. We accept the Risen Christ’s call to, “*Go into all the world and preach the good news to the whole creation.*”

So what does that really mean? Are not we to encourage faithful and thoughtful study of scripture and joyful worship of God, and celebrate, welcome and affirm the dignity of all as God’s children?

The United Church of Christ recognizes freedom and diversity. We are called upon to affirm that.

We are also called upon to demonstrate the Christian faith through service to the wider community, the nation and the world. To do this we need to study and act on the biblical call for mission. We need to do our part to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome new persons who are strangers to us, clothe the naked, visit the sick and afflicted, and go to those in prison or who are confined in other institutions. In short, we are to help people in need whether they be persons among us or persons in other parts of the community, the nation and the world.

Part of that is to nurture our Members and others who have a relationship with Salem. We should recognize and nurture God’s loving purposes in our individual lives, our personal relationships, our communities, and among the nations of the world, all the while recognizing, understanding and respecting that God’s presence is expressed in love of one another.

It is important for us to look after one another. We have a warm, concerned and caring congregation. We should express the warmth, concern and caring through our programs from the past, in the present and in the future.

Our nurturing of ourselves is not all we should do. We need to take our faith beyond the walls of our building. To do that, we should encourage and walk with each person's spiritual journey. We should increase the love of God and neighbor through Salem's activities.

We should respect other Christian traditions, and I would submit the traditions of others who are not Christian. It would do we adults well to follow the leadership of the Christian Education folks who are working with the younger ones among us in studying Judaism, Islam and Native American religions. If we understand the traditions of those around us, perhaps we can have an easier job in trying to be witnesses for God in interacting with people in other traditions.

We need to demonstrate justice and peace and seek to serve the world through hospitality, love, healing, justice and peace.

In all of this we need to act as faithful stewards of the earth and all of God's creation.

As a church, we seek to welcome all people to join us in our mission. We seek to value the benefits that diversity can bring to our Church family.

All of this is the Mission Statement contained in the new Constitution and Bylaws which we recently adopted. There is a broad statement that Salem reaches out to people here and everywhere. If you look at all that goes on in this church community, despite our relatively small size, we have our hearts and hands in many diverse activities, all of which reflect the mission of Salem.

This community found its mission many years ago and has pursued it ever sense. It is all about things such as the food closet, the comfort blankets, the Wednesday night dinners, prayer for those in need, calling on those who are homebound, our special monthly offerings, our donations to the wider church community through the Rocky Mountain Conference and the National United Church of Christ, working in many community activities to support people who are not as well off as we are, being involved in issues that affect our community and the world, and constantly seeking for new and better ways to demonstrate God's love to the world.

When we ask the question, "What is Salem's purpose and mission?" we are perhaps asking the wrong question. We have a statement of our mission. Perhaps the better question is, "How do we carry the mission out?" Is not that what we are really asking?

As we proceed forward with our new organizational structure for Salem, let us examine a conclusion of the Bylaws Committee that by creating the various ministries, the duties of the ministries would not be as overwhelming as the duties have been for the Elders, the Deacons and the Trustees.

It is suggested that, as the current activities are spread from those three groups (plus Christian Education) to the new ministries, one of the things the new ministries could do is to review the current activities at Salem in light of the Mission Statement in the Constitution and Bylaws to determine if the activities are furthering the mission of Salem. Also, with guidance from the Mission Statement, we can perhaps become aware of new possibilities, but before undertaking new directions, we need to ask if the directions will further Salem's mission and are the best uses of Salem's limited resources, both financial and human.

God is in this place. Love is in this place.

As the reading from Leviticus illustrates, our Hebrew forebears saw offerings and sacrifices as the way to honor God. In our times, as illustrated by the reading from Matthew, we have come to believe that service to our fellow human beings and to this earth which we all inhabit is what God would ask of us.

Let us not waste time and energy on seeking Salem's mission. We found it long ago, wrote it down several years ago, and with a few tweaks, reaffirmed the mission when we adopted the new Constitution and Bylaws on November 14, 2010.

Let us all become familiar with the Mission Statement and now carry forward with the programs that currently exist and that will be developed in the future to show that we are serious about our mission as a church family.

This is not necessarily easy, but if we ask the right questions, we are more likely to find what it is God would have us do. We are in a new era of Salem's life as a church. Let us not cling to those things that do not advance Salem's mission. Let us be open to new things that may help us advance the mission. Let us, however, seek open, careful and compassionate discussion about the activities at Salem and seek to find mutual understanding, respect and love for one another in all aspects of our church's life for, as we often say here, "In all things love," – among people and for the earth that all people inhabit together. If we do these things, God will be with us and we will honor God through our efforts.

In the next few weeks many of you will be asked to serve as officers and members of ministries under the new Constitution and Bylaws. Please, give prayerful consideration to doing so. Some

people have suggested we will not be able to find enough people to fill all the positions under the new structure. Let us prove to ourselves that is not true. Volunteers are welcome. If you see a place for your talents, please, tell someone on Council.

This is not a call or suggestion that those who spend a great deal of time in the life of Salem need to do more. I remember a church I attended before I joined Salem. Every Sunday a minister would say the congregation needed to get out and do more and more and more. At the time I was offended because I was involved in several volunteer activities for the community and simply had no more time for other activities.

You are not being asked to do more if you are already “doing.” In fact, it is hoped that less time and energy will need to be expended under Salem’s new structure but that the time and energy that will be expended will be more focused, efficient, meaningful and better coordinated with all the activities at Salem.

Amen.