

## Meadowbrook Congregational Church

### “Answering the Call”

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#### **Jeremiah 1:4-10**

*4 Now the word of the LORD came to me saying,*

*5 ‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,  
and before you were born I consecrated you;  
I appointed you a prophet to the nations.’*

*6 Then I said, ‘Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.’<sup>7</sup> But  
the LORD said to me,  
‘Do not say, “I am only a boy”;  
for you shall go to all to whom I send you,  
and you shall speak whatever I command you.*

*8 Do not be afraid of them,  
for I am with you to deliver you,*

*says the LORD.’*

*9 Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the LORD said  
to me,*

*‘Now I have put my words in your mouth.*

*10 See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms,  
to pluck up and to pull down,  
to destroy and to overthrow,  
to build and to plant.’*

In preparing for the observance and celebration of the significant events of Meadowbrook, Barbara Miller gave me a copy of the order of worship for January 30, 2005. Right away my eye moved down the page to see what Rev. Neil Hunt’s sermon topic was that morning. The title was “The State of the Church- Time for Change.” I wish I could have found a copy to read over. Perhaps some of you remember what Neil said that day.

When I was called to Meadowbrook, there was a lot of talk from you about change. I suppose every church is like that when a new minister arrives. He or she is supposed to be the agent of change. Perhaps some of you think too much has changed. I only have to go back to what I heard about last Sunday’s gathering songs to be certain of that. Rest assured we will approach changes in music a bit differently in the future. Maybe others believe things haven’t changed enough. I try to be a cautious person. I believe real change comes when there is a consensus to move from within. I do however try to prod people into at least trying new things. I hope that by now you

trust me enough to know that I am not the kind of person who walks into a situation and immediately alters something to suit my taste.

I struggled with my own sermon topic this morning. I had chosen to use the assigned Old Testament lectionary reading from Jeremiah and write a sermon on calling. Yet because politicians on every level use this time of year to present their State of the Union, State, or City speeches, and given that our annual meeting follows this service I was tempted, much like Rev. Hunt, to offer instead a state of the church address. But I was fearful such words would lead me too far from the Scripture text.

While at the computer keyboard, I read again the call of Jeremiah, in fact a call of a young man to ministry. The words suddenly became more personal. After all, I once was a young man. The Word of the Lord came and said, "I have always known you. Before you were born I consecrated you. I have appointed you to speak for me. Don't be afraid of what is in your heart. Don't be afraid of what you will say. I am with you. Your words might upset a few kingdoms and challenge some authority. But you need to be honest with yourself and your call because it has come from me."

With those words resonating in my heart, like the reluctant Jeremiah, I will share some of my thoughts with you this morning. I offer these words not as sacred wisdom, but as my educated opinion, my personal gut feelings based on twenty-five years of ministry. Today I would propose three words for us to consider, to reflect upon, and to perhaps even use as our mantra in 2010. At this stage of my ministry here, these words are becoming most important to me.

The first word I would emphasize today is vision. It was at the heart of what Jeremiah was asked to preach and call the people to follow. Here at Meadowbrook, we must be clearer about our purpose-about the reason we are here and why we choose to make this our church home. A few years ago it was popular for organizations to write a vision statement. I know that Meadowbrook has one. Although most of those statements were put aside and sometimes forgotten, the process of developing a vision is helpful. We must have clarity of our vision. Why do we exist as a church? Why do we do things as we do? Churches that grow are clear about why they exist and about what they are to be doing. We need to be clearer about both. In my eyes, this church needs to be a place which develops worship and programs and experiences in which people can find a deepening relationship with God. We then must create opportunities for people to serve others and one another.

Our vision should include growth, not only growth in numbers but growth in our understanding of God and our relationship to God. And we must understand what seeking growth in membership might mean. The Kingdom of God does not grow by keeping things exactly as they are. If we truly desire to grow, we must change. We will have to experience things that challenge us just a bit. A colleague of mine attended a seminar where he was told that by the year 2020, most church will not use paper worship bulletins. That is hard for me to imagine but I suppose it could be true. I think I can safely say that in a dozen years, the church will worship differently than we worship today. In ten years, professional ministry will look different that it is today. In five years, Christian Education and church government will be different than it is today.

We make jokes about how we can't do things at church simply because it has never been done that way before. We laugh but it really isn't funny. The church of today is not the church in which we grew up. Meadowbrook of the future cannot be the

Meadowbrook it is today. We cannot believe we are already where we are supposed to be. If we stay parked at the curb on the side of the street, we will be left behind. We need to vision a destination and always keep moving forward toward it.

Vision means making decisions that lead to a planned future. Like some of you, I grew up in a traditional church in the most traditional of Sunday School and worship. I was educated to minister to a traditional church in traditional seminary ways. The changes in church worship, in church government, and in church programming frighten me-sometimes even make me angry. But I believe I am wise enough to realize that if I remain the same and minister in the same way that I will be overcome by the tides of change and less relevant to my call in the future. For a church to grow we cannot make our decisions based on what is comfortable for us today. The future of our church resides in people who have not yet walked through our doors. For a church to grow we cannot continue to do what we have always done. God doesn't stop moving and speaking. God moves on and we need to be open to change if we intend to follow God. That is vision-clarity of purpose and desire to move in a new direction.

The second word is passion. We have to develop an environment of passion. People want to come to a place where there is excitement and purpose. People support, with their attendance and their giving, things about which they feel strongly. People are looking for worshipping communities where they experience God in the welcome of others, in the energy of the music, in the sincerity of the prayers, and in the word of God as heard in the preaching. In a study of American churches that I shared with our Advisory Board last summer, it was reported that a congregation which describes its worship as "joyful" is more likely to experience growth. Those describing worship as "reverent" were more likely to be in decline.

I sincerely believe that people today are not looking for churches where most of the talk and energy is about maintaining tradition, about paying the mortgage, about keeping a certain décor and decoration, about attending endless meetings, about financing the budget, and about following the by-laws. All of those things may be necessary but they are not magnets that will attract seekers. In his book *The Church Growth Handbook*, William Easum says that churches grow when they intentionally concentrate on reaching people rather than concentrating on institutional needs. People are sincerely interested and attracted to authentic hospitality, vibrant worship, spiritual formation, and meaningful opportunities to serve.

How do we attract people to Meadowbrook? We create places in which they can find their passion, whether it be in spirituality, service, worship, music or education. And we allow others to bring new ideas blessed by the refreshment of the Holy Spirit, even though it may be a bit outside the box. We listen to new ideas without being first critical. We make worship, spiritual development and service opportunities higher priorities than our institutional survival. These are the things of passion in today's church.

A final word to present today would be harmony. All of us care a great deal about our church. I appreciate your commitment because without it, this church would cease to be. Sometimes that caring gets a bit personal and some toes get stepped upon. Sometimes a word is said or written and feelings are hurt. Sometimes sacred turf is protected or threatened. Sometimes our personal preference gets in the way of what is best for the church as a whole. We are imperfect human beings. Our emotions

often get the best of us. We say things we should not say. We act in a manner that we later regret.

But we are all that God has here at Meadowbrook Congregational Church. To build the Kingdom of God in this place, God has given us the blessing of one another. And that is a good thing because I could not find the presence of God without all of you neither could I serve God without all of you.

I would urge us all to consider why we are here- to build our relationship with God and to serve others in the spirit of Christ. I would urge us all to keep our focus on the big picture, on what each small but important contribution can mean in the building of God's Kingdom. To move forward, we must move in harmony. The apostle Paul said it best in his letter to the church at Ephesus, "Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you."

As I was driving down Meadowbrook last week, returning to the church, I noticed a window sticker on a car waiting at Nine Mile stop light. It said, "More Wags, Less Barks." Being a dog lover, this bumper sticker spoke my language. We need more kind words than bitter ones.

I would ask us to seek ways to work in harmony. Let go of that which you feel you must protect. Allow others who think and act differently to have a say. If you disagree, which will certainly be the case from time to time, disagree politely and constructively. All of us, including me, spend a lot of time complaining. It might be healthy to let off steam but after a while it is not beneficial. It becomes contagious. It wears out those who have to listen to it. It weighs all of us down. It keeps the complainer from finding God's grace in the very next moment. The building of the Kingdom of God is not a game where there are winners and losers. In the year ahead, let's pledge to lessen or eliminate negative talk-complaining, speaking ill about others behind their back, and hurtful threats to withdraw your support or participation if you don't get your way. That is not the way of Jesus nor should it be the way of the church. Pray about your differences. Pray for those with whom you disagree. Allow room for God to work in your heart, your thoughts and your actions.

Vision. Passion. Harmony. Do we know why we are here and are we following a vision from God rather than standing still? Are we creating space for those who enter our doors to build a relationship with God? Are we modeling Christian love in the way we treat one another in ministry together? Vision. Passion. Harmony. Those are the words I would like us to embrace in 2010.

Meadowbrook Congregational Church has been blessed with a remarkable history and tradition. Today we best honor that history not by keeping it safe and secure but by seeking where God leads us by taking the same risks of faith that our spiritual mothers and fathers did. Meadowbrook Congregational Church has been blessed with ministries that have brought people to faith and moved others to explore and examine their relationship with God. Today we must seek ministries that nurture the same kind of passion in people we perhaps have not yet met. Meadowbrook Congregational Church has been blessed with gracious and caring people, called to higher service in this most special place. Today we must all consider our own call, just as the prophet Jeremiah, and come together in ways that build up one another as we build the Kingdom of God.