

Sermon 092318 Vitality
Scripture 2Peter 1:1-15
Sermon Title Church Vitality

We have in the second letter of Peter that we heard this morning, a call to do a healthy thing, or maybe three healthy things. Peter calls his people to do three things: 1) look back from whence you came, 2) look at your current situation, and 3) look forward to where you are headed.

This is what we have been doing here over the last few years at Union Church. We call it our church vitality program. It started with a visit we had from our then Area Minister, Don Remick. Don has since moved up the ladder and is now the Interim Conference Minister for the MA Conference of the United Church of Christ.

Don came and preached then met with church leadership in an after-church meeting. Don's presentations inspired our Moderator, Jamie Micheson, to lead the church in a program to revitalize Union Church. We are moving through the program at pace.

An early initiative was to bring the church through an Open and Affirming program. We had numerous informational meetings and many discussions. The church voted to become Open and Affirming at Annual Meeting in Feb 2017. If you don't know, Opening and Affirming means that we welcome not only all races and ethnic people, but

people of any sexual orientation and gender identification. You will notice the rainbow on the sign out front.

We also had a night of church history, complete with a visit from Theodore Roosevelt direct from 'Night at the Museum.' It was a fun and interesting night to look back and tell stories.

We did the survey during worship. The survey was done before us by many churches across different denominations. The overall results told us that it is time to chart some new and fresh courses. A small group of us met every week for eight weeks. We came up with a list of initiatives that we think we can pursue to enrich the life of Union Church.

When you have a well-established church with many long-standing members like ours, there is a comfort level reached by the membership. Sunday morning worship becomes like slipping on an old favorite pair of shoes. There is something wonderful about that, but it has its downsides.

Now, what I say next might come as a surprise to you. It will come as a surprise because I always hear from our regulars that Union Church is a warm and welcoming church.

Visitors and new members sense the comradery among the established members and have a hard time finding a sense of belonging. Let me be quick to point out that there is no malice on either side; it is

all innocent. In fact, Union Church scored relatively high in being a welcoming church. There is opportunity to build on that strength.

It is incumbent upon our established members to recognize that behavior in themselves. This means members getting out of their comfort zone and reaching out to folks that are unfamiliar to you.

A reason that we have done all the hard work in the Church Vitality program is to grow Union Church, not only spiritually but in numbers of members. We miss a golden opportunity if we do not reach out to visitors and new folks to let them know that they are welcome. This is our best opportunity to give people a sense of belonging.

One of the initiatives is for the church to develop a program of welcoming new members in a more organized way. Not only to walk up to someone new and talk to them to let them know that they are welcome here but to develop a packet with information about Union Church that folks can leave with.

Let's make this happen, folks. This is a wonderful church. Let's show that to all who enter here. Remember what we hear every week, "No matter who you are, no matter where you are in your journey of life, here you are welcome." This is not just a call from me and the Vitality Committee. It is a call from Jesus himself. If he did not set the example by reaching out to others, none of us would be here today.

Let me tell you about some other things that we are planning. Doing a program like we've been through brings into focus our church and where it is at today and what it might be going forward. Here is an example: Annually, we have a Sunday when we recognize the Boy Scouts. We sponsor Troop 29. We also do a recognition of the Fire Fighters and first responders. Our own Lt. Dave Repeta of the EB Fire Department reads the Fireman's Prayer, which always brings a tear to my eye.

What we have failed to do is spend time recognizing our Food Pantry. This is an ongoing ministry that helps some of the neediest families in our town. There are many dedicated folks who are doing this ministry under the radar screen. No more. Watch for 'Food Pantry Sunday' at least once a year going forward.

A take away from the survey is that we need to take better care of ourselves. Everyone here should have a secure sense of belonging. This represents an opportunity to grow the spirituality of Union Church. We are doing two initiatives that we will roll out in October. Meg is going to take the lead on the first one.

We will start a 'Secret Prayer Partner' program. We hope that all will partake in this program, young and old, long standing and new folks. You will be praying for someone and they will not know it is you praying for them. Likewise, you will have someone praying for you and you will

not know who that is. In the Spring, we will have an event, maybe a luncheon after worship in which the respective identities will be revealed.

I have participated in this sort of program in two different churches. It is a wonderful program in many ways. I'll mention a few. It gets everyone in the church praying more. If you don't do daily prayer, it's a good way to start. If you already pray daily, it will enrich your prayer time in extraordinary ways. The unveiling day is joyful.

The other program, we are calling 'The Ministry of Caring.' We already have a lot of people caring for others in our church in many ways. How often do we hear of church members bringing meals to folks that are going through rough times? Also, there is an under the radar program of ride sharing that is not organized. It happens because people in our church care about each other.

We also have a wonderful caring ministry that is highly organized. It is the Stephan Ministry. The Stephan Ministry is around four years old here at Union Church, but it is an international, multidenominational program that has been around for decades. Stephan Ministry is a program geared to help folks who enter into grief, for whatever reason; death of a loved one, loss of a job, eviction, whatever. A well-trained Stephan Minister is matched with the person

entering into grief and meets with them for roughly an hour a week. Sometime the formal relationship will go a year or more.

The Stephan Ministry at Union Church is alive and well. Here's the situation. We started out with ten Stephan Ministers. Now, there are five. Due to illness and one couple moving away, our group is cut in half.

Therefore, out of our Vitality Committee, an idea was advanced to come up with a less formal (and less expensive) program to visit with and give some Christian love to folks who may be shut ins, or in nursing homes, or could just use some special attention. I do this sort of thing but it would be best if people know that it's not just the Pastor caring for them.

There is a mature program of this sort at the church where Meg and I met. I'm in contact with the folks who do this in order to get some ideas on how we might best do it here. I'm not interested in copying their program exactly. We can do our own thing. I just want to get good ideas on best practices and challenges. If a ministry like this interests you, please let me know.

So, these are a few of the things that we are working on to bring more vitality to Union Church. They are a few early efforts. There is more to come.

So, back to our call from Peter to look back, look at today, and look forward turns out to be a healthy thing for us to do. It is our prayer that our already wonderful church moves forward with renewed vitality. We do this by following the example of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. AMEN