

New Leadership for a New Year

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At this time yesterday, I had a sermon all ready to go for you, but I'm not going to preach it. Instead, I want to speak with you this morning about the church council, their retreat yesterday, and why I left it feeling more hopeful and positive about Faith for the coming year than I have for some time. Here's the way it went down.

MLC – and for those not familiar with our terminology, those letters stand for the Ministry Leadership Council, whom we normally call simply MLC – MLC had its annual all-day retreat yesterday at Ursuline College. MLC is the body that the members of this church elect each year at their annual meeting to provide leadership for this congregation. Just to remind everyone, the members of MLC do not run Faith Church – you do. They do not own Faith Church – you do. And all the decisions they make, they make on your behalf.

These ten people – Deanne Carroll, Jim Christensen, Carol Cover, Scott Dorey, Kaye Gardiner, Dave Holtz, Phil Juarez, Ron Ober, Chris Wilkinson, and Gail Yusko – are those who, with me as your pastor, have accepted the responsibility for helping you fulfill what you feel God is calling this church to do as its mission in the world. It is not their job or mine to fulfill that mission for you – that's your job – but it is our job to help create the conditions under which you can respond faithfully to that calling. That's what leadership is.

MLC meets on the second Tuesday of every other month, and the sub-committees that will be boring down into the details of various projects will be meeting on the second Tuesdays of the alternate months. MLC's meetings are not closed, and any member of the congregation is welcome to attend. I should warn you, however, that if you get a bee in your bonnet about something and decide to make yourself obnoxious by attending MLC meetings regularly and offering your opinion about MLC's deliberations, you are likely to be punished – you'll be elected to MLC.

There are no secret deliberations at MLC meetings; in the eleven years I've been here, MLC has never gone into executive session, and there is no provision for such closed sessions in our constitution. We have nothing to hide when we discuss the church's business, and we hide nothing when we make decisions. All of MLC's official actions are recorded in its minutes, and those minutes are made available to all members of the congregation within a couple of weeks after each meeting, after a draft has been circulated to correct mistakes, typos, and muddles. Jim Christensen is the secretary for both MLC and the congregation when it meets in April, August, and December, and Jim takes very thorough minutes. You can find Jim's minutes on the Members' Access page of our website or in the church office, and if you're having trouble falling asleep, they make excellent reading.

But here's why I'm preaching about MLC. First, I would like for you to remember who these people are -- Deanne Carroll, Jim Christensen, Carol Cover, Scott Dorey, Kaye Gardiner, Dave Holtz, Phil Juarez, Ron Ober, Chris Wilkinson, and Gail Yusko – and I would like for you to pray for them and for me. We all need your prayers. We need to know

that you take your church seriously enough to pray for its leaders. Next week, when the members of MLC are officially installed during worship, you will be asked to pray for them again in a prayer provided in the liturgy. But we will be grateful for your prayers all throughout the coming year.

The other reason I'm lifting up MLC in my message this morning is to tell you that you have reason to be hopeful and excited about the coming year's leadership, and that hope and excitement come from the council's grounding its work in its spiritual and theological vision for this church.

We had a theological conversation yesterday morning lasting nearly two hours about young people and how they find meaning in their lives and how our church can help them find that meaning. We didn't come up with all the answers – we don't even know all the questions – but what felt new to me at least was a church council not spending all its deliberative time and energies on its trustee functions. Let me say a word about those functions, because they're important.

As a council, we must exercise the trustee functions that, for example, led to the new roof we all have over our heads at this moment. A worn-out roof needs to be repaired or replaced, and someone has to do the research, the negotiations, and the deliberations that make a new roof possible – and a repaired chimney and a safe parking lot and a restored pipe organ. Every congregation gathers somewhere, and maintaining the fabric of that somewhere is the responsibility of the church council. And we spent a fair chunk of yesterday assessing and addressing those responsibilities.

But only a chunk. More than half the day passed before the word deficit was introduced into the conversation. We began the day by reading aloud and together from the prophet Isaiah, "Do not be afraid. I have redeemed you. I have called you by name, and you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you, and when you go through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you. . . . Do not be afraid, for I am with you." And then we prayed for the world, for all of you, and for the work that we have to do to fulfill our mission as a church.

Yes, we talked about this church's mission, and we talked about its mission statement, and we asked if what we have and do now is advancing that mission. We discussed and debated and decided that the answer is in some ways yes and in some ways no, and so we'll be asking you in the coming year to consider making some changes at Faith. We'll be asking you to use your imaginations to envision what Faith might be in five, ten, twenty, or thirty years from now, when virtually all of us will be gone. What kind of church are we creating today that we'll be leaving to someone tomorrow? Answering that question involves how we use the building and how we market ourselves to the world.

Does the word "market" make you a bit uncomfortable applied to our identity as a church? It makes me very uncomfortable, but one of the realities we have to face is that our church is trying to reach people who have been shaped profoundly by a deeply consumerist society, which plays by its own rules, and trying to keep being our grandmother's church – much as we loved both Granny and her church – will not do. How do we, we asked ourselves as a church council, help orient Faith Church not simply toward the needs of the present, but for the possibilities of the future? What new thing is God creating in our midst that we haven't yet spotted? What fears do we need to overcome to fit ourselves for the work of ministry in a world increasingly geared toward people considerably younger than most of us?

Those were the sorts of questions that drove much of our conversation yesterday, and we did not ask them with a sense of helplessness or despair. We said that faithfulness to our calling to make disciples for Jesus means taking concrete steps to see

why the young people who were raised in this church seem to have such little use for it now. I made the personal commitment to have conversations with any of the young people I've married in the last couple of years, and others of their age cohort, who will be willing to help me answer that question.

What is our mission? Our mission is to live out the gospel. What is the gospel? It's the good news of God's reconciling love for all creation. How might we phrase that as a thirty-second elevator speech? By quoting Jesus's prayer for his disciples from the Gospel of John, which just happens to be the motto of the United Church of Christ, "That they may all be one." It was suggested at yesterday's retreat that we could do much worse than that for our mission statement. It was suggested, and not by me.

I'm here this morning to deliver the good news to you that your church council gets it. They're not perfect, but they get it. They get what it means to be a church. They get what it means to serve others in the service of Christ. They get what it means to gain the world while losing your soul.

They get all of that and a great deal more, which makes us a very blessed congregation. So I would ask you to pray that the Spirit who has already provided so much for this church will continue to nourish and sustain us all. Listen to that Spirit's voice, share what you hear in your heart with those ten people on MLC -- Deanne Carroll, Jim Christensen, Carol Cover, Scott Dorey, Kaye Gardiner, Dave Holtz, Phil Juarez, Ron Ober, Chris Wilkinson, and Gail Yusko -- and then, as my old pal Peter Gomes used to say, "Never give up, never give out, never give in."