

Our Next Faithful Step: FUMC Past and Future

James 2:14-26

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When I first came to this church as the associate pastor eleven years ago, one of my responsibilities, of course, was to officiate memorial services. When I plan a memorial service, I like to spend a good deal of time talking with the family about what is important to include in the service and, of course, about the person who has passed away. This is how I came to know a number of people who grew up in this church but had moved away as adults. The funny thing was that inevitably, as I talked with them about their memories of FUMC, sometime in the conversation I would hear about the youth roll bakes.

Now, mind you, I had absolutely no idea what a roll bake was. The first time or two it came up I thought it was some small event that a couple of youth alumni happened to remember. Oh no! For more than thirty years, roll bakes were the major fundraiser for our youth program. Each month during the school year, youth would gather on a Saturday morning to bake bread rolls. They started at 5:00 a.m. and finished sometime in the late afternoon or early evening and they would bake somewhere between 600 and 1200 dozen. The youth took pre-orders before the bake and delivered those rolls to people's homes as the day went on. However, they also made extra to sell after worship the next morning.

And what did the youth do with the money they raised? They went on trips - usually two weeks long with one week of fun and travel time and one week in service to another community. They did home repairs on the Blackfeet Native American Reservation, built a camp in Mexico, painted churches in New England, and reached out in relationship and service to inner-city neighborhoods in Brooklyn and Detroit.

These trips took place decades ago, yet the tradition of our youth in mission and service continues today. Just this week our senior high youth have been doing a stay-at-home mission week. Since they weren't able to plan a trip because of Covid, they have spent this week working on the food pantry at Hope Clinic and doing service projects for Community Action Network.

I am proud to be the lead pastor of a church with such a legacy of serving the world and, simultaneously, of outstanding youth programming! I think these are two of the defining characteristics of our church, and today I'd like to share a bit about these and other parts of who we are that define our identity here at First United Methodist Church of Ann Arbor.

Over the last couple of weeks, I've been preaching a sermon series called "Our Next Faithful Step" because as we come out of the Covid-19 pandemic, this is an important time for us to ask what God is calling us to do in the future. One way to discern our next faithful step is to look at what we've done and who we've been leading up to this day. How has God used our church in the past to do God's kingdom work? What might that tell us about what comes next?

One answer to these questions can be found in these words from our scripture reading today: "Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead." A starting point for

considering who we are is to say FUMC has always been a church that both nurtured faith and put faith into action.

From very early on in our history, we have been a church that was committed to faith formation. We have worked hard at developing creative and relevant programming for our kids. For example, we benefited for years from Carole Hulbert's innovative rotation model of teaching scripture to children. More recently, we have been on the forefront of using small groups to connect with young children and help them build relationships with adults that will last throughout their elementary years.

For our youth, we have consistently offered creative approaches to Confirmation, which now takes the form of our two-year Explorers class. Mission trips and retreats have continued to be a staple of our youth program, and soon we anticipate the youth will be able to return to their Sunday evening dinner and program together. Yet, even during this time when they haven't been able to meet, our youth directors and counselors have worked hard to find new ways to keep the youth engaged and in relationship with each other and the church.

In addition to children and youth programming, in the last decade, we've developed a robust set of faith formation opportunities for adults, as well. Under the leadership of Debbie Houghton, we now have Disciple classes, Sunday morning classes, day time and evening Bible study, and amazing speakers who come to share with us. We've also launched a small group ministry for adults. Now, we are working on developing a spiritual formation pathway for adults which will include opportunities to grow in our knowledge of God, love of others, and service to the world. In addition, we are a compassionate congregation that cares for each other, our older members, and our community.

Long before the youth roll bakes, service and mission were already part of our identity. Our church was founded as a Methodist society made up of five people in 1827. By 1847, we were already involved in missions, and we sent off one of our younger members, Judson Collins, to do mission work in China. A number of our church members served in China as missionaries over the following decades. Of course, the church sponsored mission work in a number of other countries, as well, including Korea, Bolivia, Japan, and Haiti.

Over time, the nature of how churches reach out globally has changed to focus more on relationships and sustainable help and less on conversion. Today, we have a long-standing relationship with one community in Kenya, Meru, where we have built a thriving secondary school, established a feeding program for younger children, and worked to strengthen and support the area primary schools. In addition, we have sent a number of work teams to Costa Rica in recent years to help build a Methodist orphanage there.

Naturally, some of our efforts in service have been more local. In 1960, our church sponsored a refugee family from Holland. We found a house for them, and members of the church furnished it. The MYF did yard work and repairs on the house, and the UMW filled the fridge. In 1970, one of our church members, Janet Crabtree, came up with the idea of the House By The Side of the Road, which we have supported financially and with volunteers ever since.

In more recent years, we have taken four weeks of providing food and supplies to Alpha House each year, started the Love Thy Neighbor lunch program for the homeless, provided

Christmas gifts for children at Bryant Community Center, supported the work of the Hope Clinic, Community Action Network, Food Gatherers, and other local service agencies.

But our outreach hasn't been limited to service and mission. Social justice has also been an important part of our calling here at FUMC. If you happen to read the 1990 history of our church, you'll discover that in 1963, Pastor Hoover Rupert read the Ann Arbor Council of Churches Fair Housing Manifesto to the congregation from the pulpit, which led to members of our church picketing City Hall each Monday night that the City Council met.

We had our own chapter of the United Methodist Commission on Race and Religion as well as a group which focused specifically on hunger. In the late 1960's the church had a very active Peace Committee which sent letters to Congress and the President opposing the Vietnam War. Peace became an important topic again in the late 80's when a Sunday Morning Peace Class and Peace Study and Action Committee was formed and studied a number of peace related issues including the Israeli/Palestine conflict, Central American peace initiatives, and the Rail-based MX missile.

Meanwhile, the Church and Society Committee, which we now call the Justice League, held Sunday brunches for the congregation to study and take action on homelessness, poverty, capital punishment, environmental concerns, as well as others. They also supported the Hunger Coalition and the Arms Control Coalition.

Of course, in more recent years, we have taken a stance on LGBTQ+ inclusion in the church by passing our welcoming statement in 2007. Some ten years later, a group formed to address issues around immigration and, with their help, we voted to be a Solidarity Sanctuary church and to support sanctuary churches with our time and resources. That group became the Immigration Hospitality Team, which is looking now at other ways we can support immigrants. Now, in the wake of the killing of George Floyd, we are going back to the work begun by our church in the 1960's and actively addressing racial injustice.

The last characteristic of our church that has been an important part of our identity is outstanding music and worship. We have been blessed with excellent choirs and organists to lead us in worship for many, many years. In fact, back in the sixties, we not only had a more formal worship service as the forerunner to our current 9:30 service, we also had a thriving contemporary worship service led by the youth choir!

Spiritual formation and care, missions and service, social justice, and relevant and meaningful worship. These are four cornerstones of our life together at First United Methodist Church of Ann Arbor. They are characteristics that have been part of our identity for almost 200 years. Two focus on how we care for ourselves and those who become part of our church family. Two focus on how we care for others.

God has used these four characteristics of our identity to guide our journey as a congregation, to help us know each next step we will take together. Throughout our history, we have both helped each other to grow to be more Christ-like and looked to the world around us to see where we might be Christ to the world.

I am honored to serve such a faithful church, a compassionate church, a worshipful church, and an inclusive, welcoming church. As we look at our needs as a congregation and the needs of our neighbors, our country, and our world, what is our next faithful step in nurturing faith and putting faith into action?

May we listen for God's voice to nudge and direct us, shape and form us, inspire and ignite us. Amen.