

Tabor Heights UMC All Church Conference October 20, 2008

PASTOR'S REPORT

The autumn season is one of my favorite times of the year, especially for hiking. The fall colors this year are particularly striking. However, what especially got my attention on a hike last week was something that I could easily have walked by and missed.

That would have been a shame because it was a work of dazzling beauty. The morning light happened to fall on it at just the right angle. I couldn't miss it; in fact the sight stopped me in my tracks. The remarkable sight I observed was a spider's web, with its radiating support strands, linked together, with ring after ring of concentric circles.

When nature sprinkles such a web with perfectly spaced and placed dew-diamonds and lights it up with a morning sunbeam, the effect is one of shimmering elegance.

A web also happens to be an impressive building project of unexpected strength. The simple, everyday spider web is generated awe and wonder in the most advanced laboratories of today's bioengineers. These scientists have determined that the chemical makeup of an ordinary strand of spider's web is five to ten times stronger than steel.

No wonder bioengineers are determined to see if they can crack the spider's genetic code so that they can create a bio-chemically engineered polymer that is stronger than the steel that holds up our tallest skyscrapers or that supports our longest bridges.

When you combine the innate strength of each strand with the engineering design of a spider's web, you have the single strongest structure in nature. In fact, someone has computed that a pencil-thick strand of silk could stop a Boeing 747 in flight.

What those bioengineers don't know is that there is already in existence a structure that successfully imitates the interwoven strength of a spider's web. It has demonstrated enduring elasticity and strength, and when the light shines through, it too can be a work of stunning beauty.

This web can even stretch its silken cords of connection back into the past and shoot them far forward into the future.

This structure, this intricately woven web, is called the body of Christ, the community of faith, the church. The web-weaver is the Holy Spirit. The Spirit weaves a web of witness and commitment between believers.

Each of us is here tonight because certain people believed in us, prayed for us, sacrificed for us, and used our gifts to build us up.

The only way church can truly fulfill the mission God has given us is if we realize that the most important Person in the universe believes in us - indeed, believes in us more than we believe in ourselves.

That Someone is, of course, Jesus Christ. The future strength of the web of faith is created as we each experience Christ's ongoing, future-leading presence in our lives. It is this shared experience of faith that creates the web of hope for future generations. Our prayers, presence, gifts and service are woven together by the Spirit to build up this web, this body, which is the church.

As believers, we can rightly claim for ourselves membership in the first and still most important web sight on an internet that was established more than two thousand years ago. While the technological realm can boast of the connective powers and possibilities of the electronic internet, its capabilities are paltry, and its vision is puny compared to the church's "web connections." Our "web site" is not limited by our geographical location, it stretches through space and time and beyond.

It is all brought together by the master web-weaver, the Holy Spirit, who weaves a web of love and compassion into the strongest structure of them all - the church of Jesus Christ.

We are hearing more and more these about "connectivity." That is word that is used in modern communications. Connectivity is the ability to communicate with another system, or piece of hardware, or software, or with an Internet site.

The church of Jesus Christ is all about a special kind of spiritual "connectivity" - one that links us with others in living out God's purpose in community. Where do we see a growing, dynamic level of "connectivity" in our congregation and in our denomination?

Here are some of the areas where I observe it:

- **A very successful Vacation Bible School in July**
- **The Common Cup youth group program.**
- **the intensive use of our facility by the larger community**
- **The Care Team/ prayer chain ministry which continues to develop**
- **Our staff that supports and resources our programs**

- The reconstituted cub scout pack on Wednesday evenings.
- The Ad Council's plans for a long range planning retreat in March.

What are some of the challenges and opportunities to "weaving the web" of our congregational life together?

The economic recession has already posed concerns about the budget. The Building Endowment Fund has lost ground with the fall of the stock market putting even more pressure on our annual budget.

The congregation has faced more budgetary pressures including a very key piece of our "connectivity" - the payment in full of our Shared Ministries apportionments. The lay leadership and pastor must continue to address this issue in terms of education and stewardship.

Sustainability is becoming a key concept in our culture today. We will exploring that concept as part of our mission strategy. What are the key elements of a mission strategy?

One key factor is to ensure a sustainable church on this site is an effective outreach to the neighborhood around us. I have proposed the formation of a Welcoming Team which would include both invitation and hospitality. This group would set priorities, formulate and carry out both short-term and long range welcoming strategies.

While we face these and other challenges, I am thankful that we are "connected" and do not face them alone!

Our site in will present us with wonderful opportunities to minister to minister to children, youth, younger adults as well as to the seniors in the retirement facilities which surround us.

Thanks be to God that we have been brought together into the world's first and most enduring "web site" - the Church of Jesus Christ. It may at times seem fragile, even tattered, blown by contrary winds that threaten to prevail against it. But it is strong, so very strong, that not even the gates of hell can prevail against it. This web of life is still so beautiful when the light of God shines through it!

Rev. Don Barnhart