



## DEXTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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### **Where do we go from Here?**

**January 7, 2007**

**Eric Walterdorf**

**Matthew 28:18**

175. 175! That number is significant to this congregation, this year. It is this year that the congregations will celebrate 175 years together. We've moved from a few families gathering in Judge Dexter's barn, to formal white clapboard church buildings downtown to a Boy-Scout camp on the banks of the Huron River. There is a strong legacy of Methodism here in this place built on an even more important strong foundation of Christ-Following. And it's a mess. And it's supposed to be.

We've just spent a year in the messiness of service to others. If I had to pick a phrase that summed up last year for this congregation it might be "Service over Self". It was the intersection of where our love for Jesus met the lives of those we became connected to. There is a spirit in this place of not choosing who, or when, or what. But rather, just trying to be obedient and answering the call to love, in service, to others. That spirit is God's. He's called the Holy Spirit. He is present here by the Grace of God.

Service over Self. We've always had a strong tradition of this. It was one of the things that drew me in. This past fall we spent 40 days rediscovering this throughout the church and hopefully laid a foundation of service-over-self in a new generation. We started early.

- You responded to the Hurricanes in late 2005 & early 2006
- You sent record number of students on summer missions projects
- You continued to feed the hungry in the region with our assistance to the food pantries and the once a month emphasis of Brown Bag Sunday
- You set a new record of money raised during the Crop Walk
- You served the Dexter community in the "Detailing Dexter" project
- You operated Blood Drives and Blood pressure checkups
- You brightened a child's eyes across the world through Operation Christmas Child (shoeboxes) and close to home with Angel Tree ministries

These are just the highlights. These are just a glimpse. Well done church. Don't stop now. Don't rest on last year. There's more of Jesus' love to be shared in service to others.

What messes do we have to look forward to in 2007? Let's remind ourselves of what it is we are supposed to be doing.

The mission of every local United Methodist Congregation is to "Go Make Disciples".

We've developed a vision of what this will look like here at Dexter UMC.

"The vision of Dexter UMC is to become a regional equipping center for Christ-focused life transformation reaching the unconnected thousands."

If I could put my own turn of phrase on this it would be three words. Come, Grow, Go

Come meet the one who will satisfy your deepest hunger and thirst. Come meet the one who's gift for you is greater than any cheap imitation this world has to offer. Come meet Jesus.

Grow in the life giving knowledge of the Bible. Discover your God created shape; your gifts and talents. Grow to become more like Jesus himself.

Go make disciples. Repeating the cycle by sharing the Gospel with others; where they are at.

Come, Grow, Go.

We get this mission and the inspiration for this vision from scripture; from the commandment of Jesus himself. We find this in Matt. 28:18-20. Lets take a look.

*MT 28:16 Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. <sup>17</sup> When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. <sup>18</sup> Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup> Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup> and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."*

The eleven (Judas was no longer with them) met Jesus where he told them to go. They came believing he was alive, and some came to confirm it. (...but some doubted). If these first-disciples could have doubts, there's hope for us. Jesus goes on to remind them of who he really is. He is the one who has demonstrated to have power over life itself. He was crucified, dead and buried. He rose on the 3<sup>rd</sup> day. He now stands before them.

"GO make disciples of all nations." The question church is where are these nations today? Where does Dexter UMC need to GO this year? Is it to the distant country, or as Ben Bringardner pointed out last year, the world has come to our door step in two great Universities. One, in beautiful shades of Green and White (Eastern Michigan University). The other one has something to do with blue and yellow. Is one of the nations in the next town, the next county, the next country, or next door? Were do we go to make disciples in 2007?

"Baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." We are called to be intentional in our sharing of the Life giving Gospel of Jesus. This is called evangelism and it's become a dirty word in our society. Yet that does not change our mission. How does this church need to share the Gospel this year? Is it the same as we've always done? Are there new methods required to reach new generations. Do we keep asking you to invite people here so that the Pastors can introduce them to Jesus, or do we put more emphasis on training you in friendship evangelism, growing relationships over time so that when it's the right time you will be prepared to share Jesus with someone you've grown close to.

"...teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you". We have a fancy name for this in the church. We call this Discipleship. It means becoming more like Jesus, and it's a life long process and a life long pursuit. How do we Disciple new and existing believers in 2007? Has anything changed in the culture we need to be aware of and adapt to? Notice I did not say conform to. The messy reality is that Discipleship happens up close. I believe we've taken hold of the notion that making disciples will happen outside of 20-30 minutes on Sunday morning from the pulpit. No offense to Steve or Matt. It's already happening in our small Life Groups for adults. This isn't a once a year emphasis for 40 days. We now have small group coordinators to continue training new and existing leaders, and look at what new groups should form this year. The only way we will grow is to get smaller. The expectation is that everyone should be in a small Life Group.

And finally Jesus closes what we call the Great Commission by saying "... You're all on your own, Good Night!" Thankfully no, that's not where we are left. "Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." Not "I will be with you someday when you are ready". "I am with you" NOW. We are not alone in this mission. That's Good News.

As a leadership team we've been wrestling with these and other questions.

To start to answer some of these questions we've recently reorganized two of our cell groups, Adult Ministries and Discipleship. We are launching "Adult Discipleship" and "Hospitality and Evangelism".

And the whole notion of discipleship and membership is being thought through, challenged, brain-stormed, prayed over as we work to embrace the new spiritual seeker's entering these doors and the doors of our home-based Life Groups. Why? Let me share a quick story.

One of the most enjoyable evenings I've spent leading the Administrative Council this year took place earlier in the year where Pastor Steve and Jan Alford related the story of a membership class that did not end the way it was expected. You might think that having started in a membership class and seeing it all the way that the end was a forgone conclusion; membership for all who were in the class. This one did not end that way. One person was brave enough to say "I'm not ready". My heart jumped at hearing this. I was almost gleeful, I had a hard time containing myself. "This is good" my heart was saying. Maybe people that night though I was a little nuts, maybe you do right now. But that single conversation has woven itself into the thoughts of what does "Evangelism" and "Discipleship" look like at this time, in 2007? It has spurred a lot of good conversation, reflective of a lot of self-challenging and God challenging.

We must embrace today's spiritual seeker. They may think differently than we are used to. They may have a different learning process and different history a different tradition. Some have not had a lot of firm foundations in their lives except our Society telling them that it's all about them. We have to prepare for and engage in a different conversation. Our words, our methods and approaches, our expectations will all be challenged in the process. I believe this past year we started to recognize it. This year we must step up and meet the challenge and engage this new spiritual seeker.

If you are one of these brave souls and you'd like to take part in educating me and others in your approach to things spiritual, I'd love to talk with you. If you're wondering if there really is a God, a God who knows you the best, and still loves you the most; if you are wondering if He really exists, this is the place for you. Seek your answers; test them; turn them over and re-examine them. Wrestle with it here. My friend, Jesus came for you; he died for you, he rose for you, and he wants to spend every day with you. He's that crazy about you.

If you are already a believer, but have some questions, maybe some doubts we want you here! Perhaps you've been sitting on the sidelines waiting for the right time to really become part of the community. This is exactly the right place to wrestle with the tough questions and conditions that life throws at us and that a relationship with God can answer. There is a family here to support you along the way. You don't have to rehearse, study up, or dress up. You don't need to know the answers already. Phil. 1:6 tells us we can be confident that "*He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus*". In addition to the small Life Groups, we are also revitalizing our Adult study options. There will be a spot where you can plug in and take the next step forward in discovering your unique God created Shape and become more like Jesus along the way. If you are not finding what you need, please don't find your way out the back door. Tell me, tell our Pastors tell our Adult Discipleship servant leader Doug Smith.

To the believing member of this body...

Following on the discussion of our Last Administrative Council Meeting, Pastor Steve reported on the re-forming of the Adult Ministries and Discipleship Cells, into Hospitality and Evangelism, Adult Discipleship. Out of that report and the discussion that followed there was a notion that perhaps it was time to challenge what we've come to call membership in Dexter UMC. What it means, What it requires, What we would like it to develop into. This has occupied a significant part of my thinking since. Every member a Minister. It is a foundational calling of John Wesley and the Methodism. Every member a Minister. What does that really look like? What does it look like for Dexter UMC today? What do we desire it to be? More importantly what does God want it to look like in this body of believers?

Maybe the challenge begins with our vernacular as it represents our thoughts and our traditions. We often speak of "Volunteers". This notion was challenged a few years ago when several of us read Mike Slaughter's book "Spiritual Entrepreneurs". I've personally can't find anywhere in the Word of God where

Jesus speaks of the Church as “The 501c3 non-profit volunteer religious institution of God”. In fact, I know Jesus often spoke of and taught those would listen about “The Kingdom of God”. Let’s cut to the chase, “Kingdom and Volunteers” just don’t seem to fit together. Kingdom suggests a different vocabulary and a different spirit of service. I realize Jesus spoke into the times he walked the earth and the words used reflect those times. Even though we don’t have a kingdom system of government, we can all still recognize what that looks like. I believe we also know what it implies, even if we don’t like it, or it makes uncomfortable.

As I said before this is not only reflective of Jesus’s teaching to those immediately surround him back in the day, but that message is timeless and in fact is a foundational statement of Methodism in John Wesley’s pronouncement “Every Member a Minister”

The word Minister is often strongly associated with another, “Calling”. If each one member is a minister than each member has a calling. It is the work of the church therefore to help each member discover, nurture, develop and express that calling in the church and in the world. I’m excited about the re-formation of our Adult ministry cells, but I also suggest that this is an essential part of the Discovery process in Youth Ministry.

I don’t often have many original thoughts and this is one of those times. After we’ve jointly learned and expressed this in our two 40 Days Campaigns. However, it’s time to move beyond what we know and start making more of what we do. We’ve make significant strides in 2006 along these lines. In 2007 we need to build on that foundation and keep the momentum moving forward; moving us closer to the church God had in mind. And heaven will say “That’s Church!”