

State of the Church Address

By Pastor Rob Hamilton

January 23, 2022

Reflecting on August 2021- January 2022

Siblings in Christ,

Grace and peace to you in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

I have found it helpful for the church for me to provide a honest review and update of the ministries of the church on a regular basis. Sometimes the fall Annual Church Conference serves as the best time for this kind of address. Sometimes, the timing of the national tradition of the State of the Union address coming off the excitement of Christmas and while the new year and newly elected leadership are fresh is the best time for such an address. Clearly this year it is the later.

If you are new or exploring a connection to the United Methodist Church of Geneva, I hope you find this message interesting and I would welcome to share more conversation with you one-on-one if you are curious about that which I name today. I also want you to know that I consider the target audience for this message to be those persons who have an established connection to UMCG.

Unlike the State of the Union address given by the President, I am not expecting rebuttal, applause, support or commentary. Though I welcome conversation and I will point you how to best engage in conversation later in this address. In the next 30 minutes or so, I want to share with you some important observations that I have made in my first six months as your lead pastor and cast vision for where I believe God is leading us as a church in the near term.

Before I dive in, I want to share some of my onboarding experience with you because I see it reflected in the lives of others. First, it doesn't feel like I have been serving as your Senior Pastor for only 6 months. Having the unique opportunity of returning to pastor UMCG again, effects both how to count the years of ministry we share and in some ways to me it doesn't feel like I ever left. In returning, I am grateful for the prolonged, generous and genuine welcome extended to my family and I. I feel like we have taken to each other well as pastor and congregation. I credit past familiarity to the smoothness of transition and the kindness so many have extended.

I believe our shared familiarity and past history serves to our advantage. I think this familiarity and history have allowed us to accelerate ministry in transition, when typically ministry slows down until a new pastor and congregation are more familiar and comfortable with each other. Instead of slowing, I have heard many say it feel's like a new day and there is a new energy in returning to in-person ministry after so many months being remote due to COVID.

At the same time with the comfort of familiarity and new energy driving us forward, I have been surprised by the grief I have experienced in returning. First, there is the grief of those I enjoyed sharing ministry with when I was the Associate Pastor, but who have now died. We grieve them and give God thanks for their example of faith. There is also the grief for those who have not died, but no longer engage in ministry at UMCG. Last fall, I sent a letter to nearly a hundred of these persons and I have only heard back from about a dozen and a half. A good number of these persons, I knew well from my first tenure as pastor and I grieve their absence and I also pray for them wherever God has led them to disciple in community now. I have also learned I am not alone in feeling the grief of these losses. This is one motivation for our sermon series on grief this past fall, to help us all bear our griefs together. There are also ministries that have concluded their service that I miss, which is another point of grief.

I want to pause here in the midst of grief in prayer before moving on. Will you please pray with me.

God, our help in ages past and our hope for years to come. We praise you and thank you for those people and ministries we remember but see no more. We pause in the silence of this moment to name those that are near and dear to our hearts. We thank you for those people and ministries that gave us life, led us to a closer relationship with you and connected us with the needs of our community and world. Comfort and strengthen us to carry on the legacy these faithful people and ministry have left for us to carry to new people and new ministries all to share the love of your Son, Jesus Christ in whose name we pray. Amen.

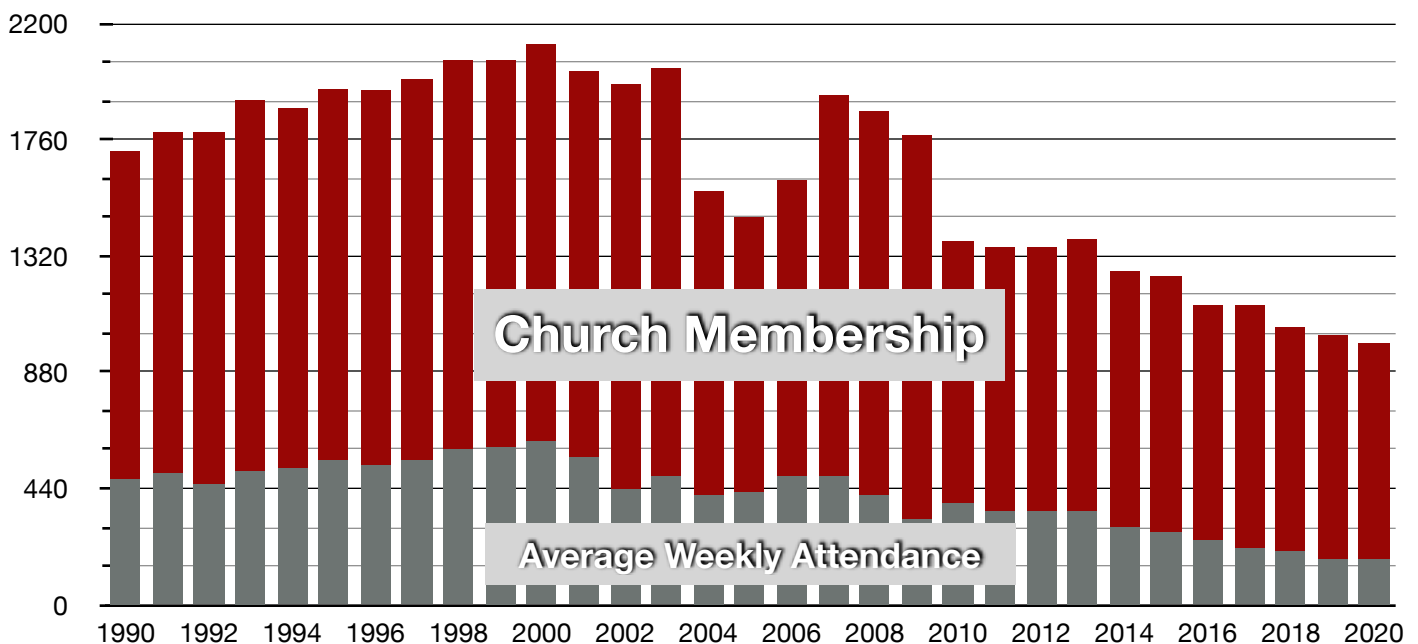
Thank you for granting me the space to share some of my experience with you. What I want to spend the rest of the time you have so generously shared with me and our church is to outline three observations that I have made in my first 6 months. To be honest, these observations cause me concern as I hypothesize they serve as barriers to the new ministries and new people God is calling us to engage that will bring renewed vitality to UMCG. To be clear, when I speak of church vitality **I think a vital church is one where God is transforming lives and our community is transformed by what God does through us.**

As I share these three observations, I will invite us test these observations to see what extent they may be valid through our Church-Wide Assessment process that is taking place the first week of February. I have no problem being wrong and this is why I want your help in testing my observations against our shared experience, if these observations are a non-issue then we can move on, but if there is something to concern these observations raise within me, then we will need to address the valid concerns. Now this morning, I just preached on David and Goliath and I whole-heartedly believe whatever barriers we face are barriers that only hinder us and do not hinder our God. I have seen God move too much already

in our church to think that God has abandoned us to whatever threatens our ability to experience God's transforming work of grace in the lives of people and our community.

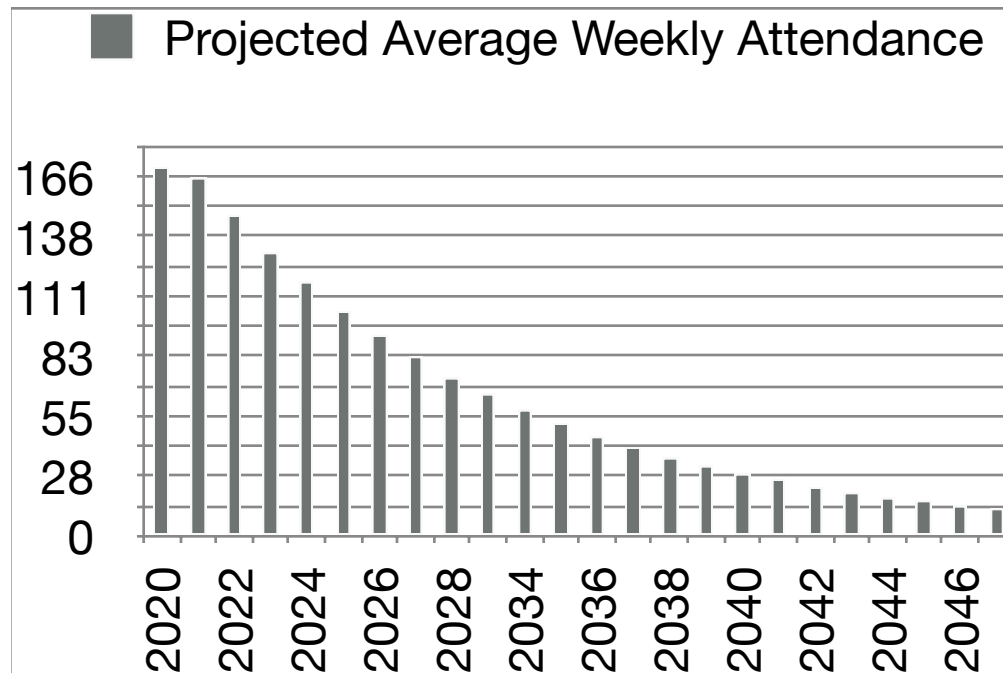
My first observation is that we are no longer Larry's big church. Let me unpack that by first saying I do not mean to convey any disrespect to Pastor Larry in this observation. Pastor Larry was a beloved child of God and wonderful pastor. What I have learned from the memories you have shared with me is that during Pastor Larry's ministry from early the 1980s until 2000, this church experienced an explosion of vitality. It seemed like energy, people, ministries and resources would only increase and many who remember those days, they credit much of that vitality to Pastor Larry's leadership.

Looking at data going back to 1990, I have charted a common metric for church vitality: church membership and average weekly worship attendance. The red/larger numbers reflect the professing membership and the gray/smaller numbers reflect average weekly worship attendance. As you can see for over 20 years now we have been in decline, with a couple of blips up.



For those who have long been connected to UMCG, I hope this data isn't a complete surprise to you. I also want to note that even in decline just as many people came to new or renewed life in Christ during the Pastor Larry years. There are also a good number present who came to new or renewed life in the past 20 years with Pastors Bill and Rich. Hopefully, God will use my ministry to bring new and renewed life too. Even in decline, God is still at work in our church.

But that decline is concerning to say the least. Curious about the rate of decline, I have charted this trend into the future using the rate of decline from 2016-2019 and just honing on average worship attendance because that number shows people who actually are engaged at UMCG and simply holding membership. Here is what the decline looks like if nothing changes: If nothing changes, we will be under 100 persons in 3 years (2025). If I retire when our accountant says we can in 2047, UMCG would be at 12 persons assuming this church could be sustainable that long.



Another piece of data that is concerning, in 1990, the average worshipper at UMCG had to contribute \$1397 (that figure has been adjusted for inflation and reflects 2020 dollars) to support the church. In 2020, the average worshipping person had to contribute \$4252 (that figure is 2020 dollars) to support the church. While a national trend for churches is that fewer people will be more generous in supporting the church than any other time in modern history, at a certain point any organization is simply not sustainable. I have not yet done the work to use data to predict when that might be for us, but my gut says in less than 20 years with no changes to any parts of our ministry the doors of UMCG will close.

Now I want offer some good news here. First, we have never been Larry's church or Bill's or Rich's or Rob's church. **We are the church of Jesus Christ!** When Jesus is at the center of the church -when the prevailing personality of the church is Jesus and not a pastor- then Jesus guides our actions, our mission and changes lives and the world. While one can spend a lot of time looking at the data and the charts and quickly conclude that we are headed to death which brings

despair, I want to remind us that **God can only bring new life after a death.** After all we are a people who believe that the tomb is empty because God raised Jesus from the dead. I know God can and is willing to bring resurrection to the United Methodist Church of Geneva without us having literally die as a church, but we may have to die to ways and methods of being church that we are accustomed to.

Yet to receive the new life God offers us we have to die to self and the methods of ministry that have sustained UMCg in recent history. We may have a mighty legacy of 40 years of really amazing ministry. Everything this church has done for 40 years has been used for God's purposes. Very little was ever inherently bad. But even the best parts of the life-giving ministry God has done through this church and blessed people and the world has also led to our decline. So everything needs examination, all our ministries and resources need to be assessed (and like the Wesleyan Covenant Prayer) then our ministries and resources can to be offered to God to be used for the new life God is calling us to or we need to be prepared for God to lay aside the ministries and resources God no longer needs in order to make room for the new life God seeks to bring to UMCg.

I'll admit such a process of assessment could be painful. This could stir up conflict. It could cause us to experience more grief. But I believe that if we are faithfully willing to do this kind of hard work as a church, then **God will supply us with exactly is needed for God's call on our church for this time and place.**

To this end, I believe God has called the leaders and provided the space to create an Executive Team of the Church Council consisting of the chair, vice chair, secretary and senior pastor to help lead our entire elected leadership in an assessment and make an offering to God as I described above. We launched a new day in leadership at our Leadership Summit on January 15th and your leaders are energized for the work ahead. However, I think everyone who is connected to this church has a role and voice in this process of assessment and offering. The best way to do this is through the Church-Wide Assessment sessions that Ministry Architects will be leading us in during February 1-6. These are hour long sessions with the consultants with both in-person and virtual options during that week and you only need to attend once. Please see our communications to register or just show up as scheduled. We will receive the assessment report on February 10 at 7pm via zoom and all are invited to share in the report of the church-wide assessment.

The second observation I have made that concerns me for the health and vitality of our church is that I see the wounds of the past conflicts, haunting the present. In my time with you, many of you have trusted me to name wounds that have some connection to conflicts of the past that have not had a chance to properly heal.

Specifically, I have heard of wounds stemming from the Welcome Statement vote of 2014; or how Third Tuesday Suppers began or concluded; or the way the transition happened between Pastor Larry and Pastor Bill; or the decision to stay downtown and expand on Hamilton Street versus moving to the western side of town transpired; the tragic loss of Jodi Borger on staff; the broken trust that happened in the Youth Ministry over 30 years ago or something I haven't named - many of these wounds still with many of us.

As your pastor, I worry that too many persons and relationships are still hurt and broken for us to be as healthy and vital as God calls us to be. When such brokenness goes undressed, it inhibits our ability to trust each other. Unhealed wound can keep us stuck in the past and create a culture of superficiality in relationships that resists transformation. If transformation is key to vitality, resisting transformation means resisting vitality. Practically speaking, if we are walking wounded we become easily reactive to normal tensions in the life of the church, we are not fully present with each other in ministry, we avoid change because it risks bring up pain of the past. These old wounds can also impact new persons, they can often sense a 'tension in the air' which feels unwelcoming, despite our best efforts to be warm, inviting and welcoming.

I realize I might have just broken a major social norm by airing the 'dirty laundry' of past conflicts and by naming an elephant in the room for many - all at the risk of unsettling those who know not these hurts. I apologize if I have caused harm. That is not my intent. My intent is based on my love for the people of this church and for God's future for this church. I love you too much to pretend everything is ok, when for a significant portion of the church it seems to me that it is not.

Now, if there is anything the church of Jesus Christ embodies it is God's reconciling love shown to us in Jesus that we call grace. **God's grace can bring forgiveness, healing and peace to all who need it so that we are in a healthier place relationally, in order to faithfully be used by God to reach the people God is calling us to reach.** I personally have had God push me to address issues in my own life that I had long-preferred to keep in the past and try to forget or ignore. I thought I was fine, until God brought healing in addressing those past wounds. While incredibly uncomfortable when I discovered the gift of new life God had waiting for me, I wondered why I held on to those past wounds for so long.

I know God can do that healing work in congregations too. I have had experience with organizations who specialize in congregational reconciliation and peace work. Based on how we assess the need for such healing work, we may need to employ their services to let God's reconciling and healing love wash over us and bring us to new life and peace. Our Church-wide Assessment and Church Council Executive Team are tuned into this concern I have just raised if we

discover that my observation is valid and there are unhealed wounds in our church, we will do what it takes to have God lovingly bring us healing and peace.

The third observation I have made is there are internal and external cultural barriers to vital ministry that have no easy, clear or known solutions or work arounds.

A few examples of internal cultural barriers we face are: we are a church that feels successful when large numbers of people show up to programs. The church of Jesus Christ experiences success when lives are transformed, not by how many people are in a room. So we need to change how we measure success and fulfillment of our mission. Another internal cultural barrier is that we also only offer single modes of ministry (we have only one kind of worship style; we offer the mode of a program that fits the leaders of the program not the needs to those we want to attract with a program) we need to offer more modes to reach more people. Another is that many of us don't regularly interact with people who don't attend church and so we are disconnected from the needs and language of the people God is calling us to invite to make and nurture as disciples. Even my time is spent managing the existing church and relationships and not forming new ones. There are other internal cultural barriers and the Church-Wide Assessment will help flush out many of these barriers and present a 24-month plan to start addressing such barriers.

There are external cultural barriers too. We no longer have a culture that encourages or compels encourages participation in the church. This means we have to invite people to church and stop hoping to attract new people. Ties to that is that we belong to a growing secular world. This means we need to learn to communicate with people that do not know the language of church or religion. We need to assume no-knowledge in our communication to reach new people which risks alienating our existing people. Another external cultural barrier is there is greater competition for the charitable dollar while the costs of ministry are going up, even if we pair down, we have to work harder to get that dollar. These are just a few of the rising external cultural barriers to being a vital church. I read about these barriers frequently and even the most effective and vital churches struggle to account for rising external cultural barriers, many of which have been accelerated by the pandemic.

And additional challenge in engaging barriers -internal or external- is that not every barrier has a known solution. For these barriers we must trust God to lead us. There isn't always a strategic plan or blueprint for overcoming every barrier that stands in our way, but that has always been the case for the people of God who face barriers, right? After all, ours is the God of the Red Sea, dry bones, healed people and empty tomb. There is no barrier that God can't overcome. We

may need to consider that some barriers might even be deployed by God for our growth.

In these situations, we need to assume a posture of unknowing, attending and surrender in order for God to lead us past these barriers. To that end, our Church Council is going to read and discuss the book. How To Lead When You Don't Know Where You Are Going by Susan Beaumont. Each Church Council meeting will dedicate the opening part of the meeting to discussing this book, learning about the spiritual posture of leadership and putting it into practice. Anyone who is not on Council but who is interested in reading and discussing this material and learn this posture is invited to join in. There is a sign up to get a book and you can come to just the first part of the Council meetings throughout this calendar year to discuss. I believe that by embodying the posture presented in the book, we will be better poised to follow God's lead in the the new and renewed life God has for us as a church.

So these are my three observations: We are a church in decline but are still attached to the booming days when Larry was pastor and God is calling us to become new. We have some wounds that needs God's help in healing. We have internal and external cultural barriers that we need to lean a new leadership posture to follow God in overcoming them to new vitality.

I'll be honest that the observations fill me with hope and energy and weariness and fear -all at the same time- in nearly equal proportions. But I do not for one second think God is done with UMCG or the people called United Methodist. Again, God is doing amazing things. God is marshaling the right people, the money, the resources, the courage into our present moment to bring us to a point of accepting God's offer at new life or rejecting it. In the end, it will be our collective response to what God is doing in our midst right now that determines our future. I choose to accept what God is doing, even as it causes me great discomfort, because I am not called to accept the consequence of rejecting God's gift, that is likely the death of our church. I welcome all who willingly or reluctantly are ready to offer themselves and the life and legacy of this church to be used and renewed by God. Together we can walk through the dark valley and green pasture for God is with us.

I want to close with a scripture that keeps me grounded and hopeful for our church. It's from the Old Testament book of Ezra. Ezra tells the story of how the Israelites who had been held captive by the Babylonians in exile for somewhere between 40-70 years. But a new day had come. God had stirred in the heart of the Babylonian king Darius to not only release the Israelites, but to supply the Israelites with whatever was needed to rebuild the temple. Now because it has been somewhere between 40 and 70 years of exile, there were some who returned who remembered Jerusalem and the amazing temple in all its glory, but mostly in this

new days there were new people who never knew Jerusalem and the temple as they were born in exile, but together they were now tasked with rebuilding the temple.

Here is the passage from Ezra 3:10-13:

When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, the priests in their vestments were stationed to praise the Lord with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, according to the directions of King David of Israel; 11 and they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the Lord,

“For he is good,

for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel.”

And all the people responded with a great shout when they praised the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. 12 But many of the priests and Levites and heads of families, old people who had seen the first house on its foundations, wept with a loud voice when they saw this house, though many shouted aloud for joy, 13 so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people’s weeping, for the people shouted so loudly that the sound was heard far away.

I think UMCG had been in an exile of sorts too. I don’t know how long or where to or what all has held us captive beyond my three observations, but believe God is calling us back to a new day and it's going to require new people, ideas and leaders, who don’t know the traditions of the former glory of this church.

If the new people come and God does a new thing in us, it will be exciting to see new ministry built on the same values of the past but from some, including me, it may cause grief. But like in the Extra passage, whether old or young, new or nostalgic - all the people were there together, mingling the tears and joys and so great a sound of worship was made that was heard from far off. The people trusted each other to move forward, following God’s new gift life and worship together in the new day God had blessed the Israelites with.

I think like our ancient faith forbearers, God is giving us new life as a church. We are becoming a congregation of old and young, new and nostalgic and as we move into God’s new day together, there will be tears of grief mixed with shouts of joy as God’s new life breaks in through the people called United Methodist Church of Geneva.

It is in the name of the triune God that I close today. I thank you for sharing the gift of your time with me and I encourage your response and conversation through the upcoming Church-Wide Assessment. May you be blessed and may God bless the United Methodist Church of Geneva. Amen.