



## DEXTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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### **Harvest It Home – Harvesting Hope**

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This summer I went to a gathering of clergy in Lansing for renewal, encouragement, and maybe to learn a few things from the 2 featured speakers. I showed up at the hotel banquet room ready to go. I huddled in the corner so I didn't have to really engage, and so I could observe, and so I could plug in my laptop. But I wasn't prepared for what happened next, and how it affected me.

The pre-conference event was a panel discussion. The panel was an appropriately mixed up group representing many leaders in various positions: a college president, an inner city pastor, the editor of a religious newspaper, the Director of the Michigan Department of Civil Rights, and an older couple, both doctors: one a neuropathologist and the other gerontologist. The conference leaders asked the panel the top three issues most deeply affecting people's lives. There were some interesting insights:

The college president named the magnitude of change, terrorism redefining life, the isms of the world, and how we understand (or DON'T understand each other). The inner city pastor named loss of faith, spirituality, and life itself, material gain being people's number one care in the world, lack of compassion, and religion that is more subservient to humanity than to God. The religious newspaper editor (who spoke more than the rest) named global issues first: violence, terrorism, AIDS in Africa. Then she went on to name the issue of the US dominated view of everything, and people can't tell what is news, opinion, and spin. Greed, with disparate wages between executives and laying off workers, and that too many people value "the exorbitant." The Civil Rights leader named lack of finances to support a family, the meaning of life issue and our place in the world, people with no voice and no power to affect decisions. The doctors named suffering, pain, and death and the why question that always goes along with it. They also named the problem of access to that.

The panel's greatest fears were along those same lines: destruction and self-destruction, not addressing these issues, and not changing how we value people.

Then, the panel was asked their greatest hope for humanity, and this is when my heartbeat started to race. The college president's greatest hope was in issues of the heart. The inner city pastor's greatest hope was God's grace. The religious newspaper editor's was that the church would become outspoken and countercultural. The doctors' greatest hope was that as humans, we could achieve our potential. The civil rights leader's greatest hope was that young people would start to blur the lines of differences in the races through interracial marriages. And my greatest hope was that no one would ask me what I thought of the panel.

I was so sad. Actually, it was a great reminder of what most people are feeling, even leaders with influence in our society: overwhelmed, and at a loss of where to turn. What do you do in a time when many signs of hopelessness are on the rise?

Entire groups of people having no where to go.  
Yet Another suicide bomber.

Wars  
Gang membership,  
Violence  
Drugs  
Broken families  
Suicides.  
Abuse.  
Loneliness.  
Fear & Uncertainty  
Isolation.  
Personal failings, again.  
Feeling Incomplete.  
Numbness to it all.  
Abandoned children.  
All the "isms."  
Stress.  
Depression  
Alienation.  
Droll Boredom.  
Apathy.  
Despair.  
Ignorance.  
Not enough money.  
No answers.

Shouldn't we be beyond all this? It's 2003 for crying out loud!

Listen to what a pastor from Hollywood writes "There is a very serious conversation going on in our culture, in Western culture at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century about God. And the church is not a part of it. We're not invited to the conversation most of the time...and we are not even aware of it."

Millions of people feel demoralized by the decay around us. So where do *you* look for hope? And if you find it, how do *you* harvest it?

Do we just get away from it all? Do we get a "fix" of personal peace and then head back to the grindstone? A lot of people do that. Look at the popularity of the movies, TV, and other spectator events, shopping, for that matter. Or the darker side of escapism: drugs, alcoholism, and things like pornography. People become spectating sponges. We're invited to find happiness second hand, by people who seem to have it all. Well, it depends how you feel about Escapism. But like my adopted grandma Thelma Wilmoth (89) says, "I don't like to watch too much TV. It takes you away from really living." And she would know. As Fred Allen said, "Television is called a medium because it is so seldom rare or well done." We even watch TV (and videos and the internet) about nothing more than other people's lives. And it is very rare that we take hope away from it. What we usually take are artificial views of life and the addiction and expectation to be entertained where ever we go. But ultimately no hope.

For a long time people in the church hoped that we could simply educate ourselves out of this crash course with despair. We looked to technology to solve our inherent problems and woes. Advances in medicine, communication, transportation, and education could provide the leg up that we needed to experience hope in the world today. And while the advances in these areas need to be celebrated, they don't provide what we need to bring us out of the trap in which we find ourselves. Despite having more medical professionals than ever before, disease and despair are at an all time high. In many cases we've used our technology to build bigger bombs. We can't out-educate ourselves from this basic flaw. Like the Titanic, this myth of human progress is going down, because that's what it is: a myth. Empty hope.

Today, more than ever, people are turning to spiritual means for hope. Transcendence. Look at Star Wars. The small, weak people find their salvation in some transcendent force in the universe. (A New Hope, “Help me Obi Wan, you’re my only hope.” (11 times in the first movie –or is it the fourth?). People are searching in every spiritual corner for this hope: in crystals, under rocks, (we visited Stonehenge and they were there in their lotus positions – of course it was near the summer solstice), in mazes. Anywhere they can find their personal peace. And it’s a start in the right direction, for hope. But it’s still a mystery, a nebulous idea of a better way. And what about helping your neighbor in his or her flesh and blood struggle? Isn’t spirituality another form of escapism?

Had I felt the need to hear myself talk as much as the newspaper editor did, I would have asked: How do people address peace and justice issues unless you win people over one at a time to God’s grace through Jesus Christ? Don’t you see the cumulative effect of sin and fallen-ness as a major issue? Don’t you know we have an answer? Don’t you know the question is not WHAT is the hope of the world, but rather WHO is the hope of the world?

The hope that each of us has is not in government, though God can use government for his good.

Our hope is not in laws that are passed, though God can use those.

Our hope is not in what great things we do as a nation.

The hope is God working through the hearts of people to change the world.

Your hope and my hope is “*Christ in you, the hope of glory.*”

Do you see? Do you understand?

*Jesus Christ* is the hope of the world! *Jesus Christ* is the hope of the world!

“Christ in you, the hope of glory.”

I’m not sure if you’ve noticed. Is it just me, or is it true that no one else is saying this. The local church is the hope of the world.

Because the local church has been entrusted with the Gospel message.

Paul wrote this to the church in Colossae. *“I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness – the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.*

*We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me.”*

Listen to the Message translation: *“This mystery has been kept in the dark for a long time, but now it’s out in the open. God wanted everyone, not just Jews, to know this rich and glorious secret inside and out, regardless of their background, regardless of their religious standing. The mystery in a nutshell is just this: Christ is in you, therefore you can look forward to sharing in God’s glory. It’s that simple. That is the substance of our Message. We preach Christ, warning people not to add to the Message. We teach in a spirit of profound common sense so that we can bring each person to maturity. To be mature is to be basic. Christ! No more, no less. That’s what I’m working so hard at day after day, year after year, doing my best with the energy God so generously gives me.”*

Much like our times, the word “mystery” was used much in the culture of the Colossians. But Paul uses it to describe the Gospel. The mystery is this: the personal experience and presence of Christ in the life of all believers. Christ dwelling, or setting up shop, in your heart. Why would God do this? Because if you can reach someone’s heart, you can transform them. Haven’t you ever wished you could get into the heart of your child and get them to see something the way you see it? When my kids get into it with each other, I just wish I could make them see all the years they will have together, and all the neat things about each other. I want that future vantage point to impact how they treat each other. Can you see how God, who only wants the best for us, wants to do that in our hearts? Well, this open mystery is God’s plan of salvation for every human heart that lets him in. And that is the hope we have.

When you worry, you pay interest on debts you don’t owe. Hope is not just wishful thinking. Hope is much more solid than that. Hope is confident expectation in God’s purpose and plan, even though from our vantage point we may not see it yet. As Christians we hope in the coming Kingdom of God. Jesus’ teaching, healings, and miracles were signs of this new kingdom. Jesus was not teaching “predictions,” but he was teaching what he was already familiar with; which, coming from him, is more real than what we perceive as “reality.” God’s promises *ARE* true, they’re not waited on to be true. The resurrection *IS* true. It’s not nebulous and ethereal. It is mystical and mysterious, but it is also ultimate reality.

The local church at its best is a microcosm of God’s ultimate reality. The local church is the hope of the world, because the local church contains this gospel message. We’re not just dealing in people’s lives here; we’re dealing with people’s eternal destinies. Why would you want to invest anywhere else, where it won’t last? Only God’s Word, and the souls of men and women last for eternity. If we here at Dexter UMC weren’t about those things, I wouldn’t ask you to invest. If we were just having a nice, happy time, *I* wouldn’t invest. But we are setting out to be about the things of God: hope for a world that is desperately seeking or desperately running,

I like other causes. I give a little to other causes. But none of those other causes are the equal of the local church. There is nothing like the local church when the local church is working right. The lost get saved, the saved grow, and the poor get helped. After all, Jesus said “I came to save the lost.” Cranky people become a little less so, self-oriented people become others-centered, nominal Christians become full-blown Christ followers. For the local church to reach its full potential it must be well-fed and well-led. And *that* is our plan.

Sometimes I wish some really big donor would come along and pay off our debt on the new building. But I have to watch that I don’t make that my *hope*, because there’s only one hope for our future: Jesus Christ. It’s on him I rely. He is the one who will bring about his glory. (Now that doesn’t mean I wouldn’t gladly receive money from anyone who also wants to write that check, who also wants to bring Christ glory!)

Last week I was so proud of the hope available in our church. A woman *in our church* lost her job. But she didn’t despair. Because of the hope in her, *on the day she lost her job*, this fellow church member picked up a friend of hers in need, brought this friend to our church and helped her pick up some food from our food chest. It was beautiful to see this tangible expression of God’s love. But that wasn’t all. Because though the food helped, her friend was still distraught about her future. It was then that she told her friend, “It’ll be alright. God is going to see us through this.” I saw God ministering the message of hope to her friend. On the day she was let go, she still had something to say. She had God’s perspective because she knew that God has a plan for her life, and until God accomplishes his plan, every setback is temporary.

Proverbs 3:5-6 “*Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.*”

Isaiah 40:31 “*Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.*”

Jeremiah 29:11 “*I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.*”

Joshua 1:5 “*I will never leave you nor forsake you.*”

I saw the hope of the world when a young man in our church who had lost his mom found a new home and a new family to be a part of, all because of the love of God expressing itself through this local church.

When you see the news in our world, you have to ask: Is there any possibility of a turnaround? (School, government? A new invention? Or a church?!) People need someone to come along side them and say “There is a love in heaven with your name on it. If you let us, we’ll love you.” What else can change a heart? There is only one power in the universe: the power of Jesus Christ and the message is entrusted to the local church.

Now what does that mean for you and me? It means we can claim confidence. Go for it. Instead of going through life with your life being a carefully balanced compromise...Risk Something! Don’t get to the end of your life and think “I never even tried...” Let’s all let the Word of God transform our lives. Let’s take the masks off. Let’s pray for outlandish things. People’s lives are changing. There is a harvest happening here.

We understand a Christ-less world is a hopeless world. At the same time we seem to forget that a Christ-filled world is a hope-filled world. Somehow we’ve lost the mandate given to us by God to stand in a desperate world and offer hope. We are a place of inspiration about the future, because the future has a name. And his name is Jesus.

I’ll use my life for that! We’ll build the church – the hope of the world, to be a regional life equipping center for the unchurched thousands. You are at the front end of the only force in the world that can change the world.

When the church harvests hope, everybody wins: First, God wins. The non-churched people in our community win, because the church impacts the community, taking care of people in hard times and uplifting their friends and neighbors; people in the church win because they are doing something important. Children and youth win from growing up in the church because they can see that they can truly make a difference.

So let us be well-fed and well-led because the local church is the body of Christ, the hope of the world, entrusted with the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Put here to reach a desperate world in need of hope, let us be a people of hope, that we may harvest it home.