



DEXTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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GIVING GOD ROOM TO WORK

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Rev. Matthew J. Hook

In some ways, we are embarking on a capital campaign to pay down our debt, in order to free up funds for ministry, additional staff leadership, and a potential connecting building including major youth space in its basement. Our goal is to raise \$1.5 million over 3 years. But it's more than just about a campaign; it's about shifting from maintenance to a movement, all based on our mission. The journey through Giving God Room to Work over the next few weeks bears directly on the future ministry potential of our church. Our response will literally determine the shape of our ministry for a number of years to come. In some ways we're voting on our mission: to go and make disciples—turning the unconnected 1000s in our area who have no church and no hope in Christ into fully devoted followers of Christ.

People's lives will be changed within our region, not to mention our church family because of partnering with God during this spiritual journey of the campaign. And picture the destination—not only is it the journey of a lifetime, but it will look like this: *A regional equipping center for Christ-focused life transformation for the unconnected 1000s.* I'm convinced Dexter and the surrounding areas, from Ann Arbor to Pinckney to Chelsea to Scio Township need Christ and the ministry of this church. God is working here in people's lives. It's not about numbers. It's about lives transformed, marriages saved, broken people healed, and getting people into ministry and missions.

We are here to affirm the faithfulness of the folks who have led us here, through the giving of their time, talents, and treasure. Now it's our turn—to give God even more room to work.

Depending on where you are right now, your response to the challenge God is giving us will be different. We have various levels of comfort with this process. We have people at a variety of places on their journeys. You may be a part of the company of

1. The Captured. There are those of you who are sold out. You're held captive by Christ and his mission and our church. You demonstrate that in your commitment to this local church. You're serving and giving and it is clear to the Lord and everyone else that your central purpose is to love the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. You give at least 10% of your income to the church and you invest your time and talents and treasure in the work of the Kingdom. You look for ways to *increase* the level of ministry in our church. You're chomping at the bit to take the next step in faith to build the Kingdom and reach lost people with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. You're the first to volunteer for missions and ministries. For you the challenge will be how much you can give to this next chapter in the life of this church. And I thank God for your kingdom hearts.
2. The Committed. You are solidly growing in the Kingdom, enjoying your involvement in Dexter UMC, but the fact that the church really is the hope of the world has not yet grabbed you. It has not yet captured your imagination. Your challenge may be to do what it takes to make that next step to reach the unconnected 1000s in our area.
3. The Conflicted. You know the truth of the Gospel, but you've allowed stuff to get in the way of jumping in with both feet. You're sort of half-in, half-out. Your challenge may be to decide. My prayer is that you become a committed, captured team player, and embrace what God is doing through this church.
4. The Curious. You are checking out Dexter UMC to see if it's the church for you. You may be in a church shopping mode, or you may come regularly. Maybe you're here because your spouse is bringing you. You may need more time than a few weeks to decide, but for some of you, the challenge may be to leave the status of spectator and step up and

take ownership of this church and its vision, by investing your time, talents, and treasures here. For us reach our goal of reaching the unconnected 1000s in our area, it's going to take the investment of every Christian who calls this church their home.

5. The Crowd. You represent what we call "spiritual seekers." You haven't crossed the line of faith. You may be here investigating the claims of Jesus Christ. You are who this church is seeking to reach with ministries and our weekend worship services, in order to introduce you to God made known in Jesus Christ. The church is the only organization that exists for those who are not yet members. Your challenge will be to hang in there with us
6. If you are in the company of the curious or the crowd, we're not asking you to give to this campaign. We just ask you to bear with us as the church family rolls its sleeves up and gets down to business. We simply want to be more intentional about doing God's work in a new way.

We don't want our talking about issues of money and stewardship to cause you to leave. If you're just checking things out, we're not going to be asking you to give anything. But you need to be here to understand more of what Jesus said about money. Jesus talked more about money than virtually anything else. Why? Because money, Jesus taught, was a direct challenge to the loyalty of your heart. God is going to ask you for your heart. If you're going to come to Jesus Christ, you're going to have to deal with money issues, because money is seeking to be the god of your life. In Matthew 6:24 "*You cannot serve both God and money.*" Either you serve God WITH your money, or you serve your money as god, but you cannot do both, and you and I need to be challenged about that.

Also, the reason a place like Dexter UMC exists today is because those who really care about you and your eternity have made great investments of their time and talents and treasure. To get where we are, we've had to talk about the stewardship of our financial resources. So if we're going to create a place for the future where more people like you can investigate the claims of Christ, we have to talk about money. New programs and buildings don't just appear on their own. Someone invests in a vision of what could be.

So hang in there with us. This is NOT going to be about twisting anyone's arm to get money out of you. But each of us is going to be challenged, in order to "Give God Room to Work."

As the title of this adventure suggests, we're talking about *giving God room to work*: in our church, in our lives, in our community, and in the time we've been given. Today, I want to talk about the *work* we're talking about that God does.

In Luke 15:11-32, Jesus tells one of his most powerful parables. Scholars call it the "Gospel in the Gospel". If you had to sum up all of what God is about, you might share the story Jesus did, found in Luke 15:11-32: *To illustrate the point further, Jesus told them this story: "A man had two sons. The younger son told his father, 'I want my share of your estate now, instead of waiting until you die.' So his father agreed to divide his wealth between his sons. A few days later this younger son packed all his belongings and took a trip to a distant land, and there he wasted all his money on wild living. About the time his money ran out, a great famine swept over the land, and he began to starve. He persuaded a local farmer to hire him to feed his pigs. The boy became so hungry that even the pods he was feeding the pigs looked good to him. But no one gave him anything. When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, 'At home even the hired men have food enough to spare, and here I am, dying of hunger! I will go home to my father and say, "Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired man." So he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long distance away, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him. His son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son.'" But his father said to the servants, 'Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger, and sandals for his feet. And kill the calf we have been fattening in the pen. We must celebrate with a feast, for this son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found.' So the party began. Meanwhile, the older son was in the fields working. When he returned home, he heard music and dancing in the house, and he asked one of the servants what was going on. 'Your brother is back,' he was told, 'and your father has killed the calf we were fattening and has prepared a great feast. We are celebrating because of his safe return.' The older brother was angry and wouldn't go in. His father came out and begged him, but he replied, 'All these years I've worked hard for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to. And in all that time you never gave me even one young goat for a feast with my friends. Yet when this son of yours comes back after squandering your money on prostitutes, you celebrate by killing the finest calf we have.' His father said to him,*

'Look, dear son, you and I are very close, and everything I have is yours. We had to celebrate this happy day. For your brother was dead and has come back to life! He was lost, but now he is found!'

This is why our #1 core value that shapes us at Dexter UMC is “God is crazy about lost people, and so we should be too.” God is calling all prodigals home. 700 years before Christ, Isaiah prophesied they will come from the north, south, east, and west. The new thing God intends to do will transform not only Israel, but the entire earth. God himself calls and welcomes them home. Now we don’t *have* to be the ones to do this, because God’s going to reach prodigals, with or without us. He will reach His unconnected 1000s, with or without us. But what is so cool is: we have the opportunity to work with Him in doing it!

We have momentum to finance the mission of Christ’s church to “go and make disciples”. And when we get it right, we believe we will look like a regional equipping center for Christ-focused life transformation for the unconnected 1000s.

In some ways, we are re-launching what was begun 174 years ago. We are re-launching like the people did 80 years ago when the church was rebuilt. We are re-launching like the people did 12 years ago when the church walked from Central and 4th street Newkirk Camp on Huron River Dr to claim the beauty of this land for God’s glory.

Today, the majority of our people care deeply for lost people. That’s what brought the prodigal son home. You may have heard the story 100 times before, so today I want to highlight some new thoughts on an old subject.

The son’s daydreaming turned into action. *"He arose, and came to his father."* A 100 resolutions, mission statements, vision statements, and purpose statements are nothing compared to a single grain of putting it into practice. Just do it. The determination to return home is good; but it’s when the wandering young man actually begins moving that he draws near the blessing. If you have been saying "I’ll get my act together, I’ll turn to God", quit making resolutions and come to practicing. Today may be your day! Let Christ change your thinking and believe in him. Join the adventure!

Because the Prodigal stood ready to confess, God was able to love him all the more. (We cannot be loved more by God than we are in this moment, but our posture and how we come to God can enable us to experience God’s love more or less. It depends on our stance).

I think his return begins in the pigsty, with the memory of his father. He had a revelation. He didn’t come home because of anything he did. He *"came to his senses."* For years I tried to figure out what that meant. It could be the key to unlocking the secret of evangelism! I could write a book on it and help churches across the world reach people! But that’s not what brought him home. He didn’t come home because of anything he did.

What brought him home was *the witness* of what his father did for the lowest of the hired servants. They were well cared for. (They have more than enough to eat). Remember his words? *"At home even the hired men have food enough to spare."* That’s what got him. He came back because of what his father had been doing all along. He came back because of what he had seen. That’s what’s going to bring the unconnected 1000s. Our witness. Jesus is telling you today *"You are the light of the world."* (Matthew 5:14). Church, Jesus wants our light to shine for all to see.

The prodigal decided. He would return as a servant. So many people think they’re not good enough to be loved. Our sin and our damaged emotions give us a warped outlook on life and God. Because we see God in *our own* image, we can’t imagine this kind of love.

Here is Jesus’ shocker: While he was a long way off, his father saw him, and came running, seeing full-well all the results of recklessly wasteful living on his son. The prodigal may not have seen the father, but the father saw him. The eyes of mercy are quicker than the eyes of repentance. God sees the sinner long before the sinner sees him. The Father sees with eyes of compassion, not with judgment or anger. Church, do we have eyes like the Father?

The KJV says *"He fell on his son’s neck,"* hugging him and kissing him over and over. Because the prodigal stood ready to confess, he was able to experience God’s love all the more. Our experience with God depends a lot on our stance. *"God on the neck of a sinner"* – what a great image of the Omnipotent God’s love for us! The prodigal son couldn’t even finish his rehearsed speech before the father speaks.

God doesn't need time to think about "how" he will love you. He already settled that, eons ago, by his eternal covenant. He doesn't have to take any time to prepare for our return. That was taken care of by the life and sacrifice of his Son, Jesus Christ. Titus 3:5 "*He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.*"

Quote by Oswald Chambers: "We trample the blood of the Son of God if we think we are forgiven because we are sorry for our sins. The only explanation for the forgiveness of God and for the unfathomable depth of His forgetting is the death of Jesus Christ. Our repentance is merely the outcome of our personal realization of the atonement which He has worked out for us.

Do people even know that returning home is an option? As Christians, we must express it personally and be the church God had in mind. We must show people that God is crazy about them, like the father did. We get the main thing the main thing: God is crazy about all people!

If we're going to be a real prodigal-hugging church, our future in witnessing to Christ and ministry is dependent upon everyone accepting ownership of the church's vision. If we are to be successful, we will need leaders leading. We cannot expect to go any farther than its leaders. (You can't take someone where you're not willing to go). It must take heart in every person in this room. We need an army of vision-carriers who will personally own the vision.

Everyone taking the journey—we must engage every person who considers DUMC their church home. Depth of Commitment—It's not praying "God, what can I *afford*?" It's more like "God, what are you leading *me* to do?" It's Todd Snyder's prayer and the hobbit Sam Gamage's decision: Lord, take me outside my comfort zone, even if it's further away from home than I've ever been.

God is already at work here. We simply want to do it more intentionally so we can give Him even *more* room to work, for example, in youth ministry. Key leaders have stepped forward and poured blood, sweat and tears into Giving God Room to Work: John Nixon, Carol Bradshaw, Eric Knisely, Terry Major, Ed & Betsy Cambridge, Dan Kapela, Jean Klark, Darcel Tolle Sarah Mellifont & Dawn Northrup.

You're invited behind the scenes to serve on one of the teams. There is a one-hour meeting of all the teams this Wednesday at 7pm...

- a. Count the cost, carry a shared vision (remember—this is bigger than any of us), be an agent of change, encourage others—if you are involved, take the initiative to get others in your gang involved. Get 'em to join a team with you!
- b. Pray—for God to move in a manner here that is unprecedented—all for His glory and furthering His Kingdom purposes. Pray that God's people would attach themselves to His dream and be ready, willing, and able to step out in faith as God leads them.
- c. Engage with God personally—As God to begin working in your heart and life right now, showing you how you (and your family) can move to the point of sacrificial commitment and prodigal-hugging. *Ask God to experience Him like never before!*
- d. During the prayer hymn we invite you to prayerfully fill out your two cards: your best guess of what life would be like without God or this church, and your campaign team card. During our final hymn, we'll invite everyone forward to bring their cards up.