

## **The State of the Church**

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### **Introduction**

The mission/vision statement of Los Altos United Methodist Church (LAUMC) expresses our hopes and dreams for ourselves individually, as a community and for the world:

Who Are We?: A church doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with God.

Why Are We Here?: To become deeply committed Christians knowing, loving and serving God

Where Are We Going?: Touching heaven, changing earth with head, heart and hands.

Who Do We Welcome?: All, regardless of age, cultural background, disabilities, ethnicity, financial circumstances, gender identity, marital status or sexual orientation.

Our United Methodist Denomination puts our mission more simply:

Making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

Different wording for the same sentiment taught to us by Jesus so long ago. We exist as an institution "to love God and neighbor". (Matthew 22:36-40)

As we enter our 61<sup>st</sup> year as a church, how are we doing? Are we living out that mission? Is our church involvement making a difference in our spiritual development? Are we making a difference in our community and the world?

### **Our Denomination**

Last November 2010, the Call to Action Steering Team of the United Methodist Council of Bishops issued their long awaited report "Call to Action". Their mandate was "to seek an objective operational assessment of the Connection [i.e. our denominational structure and institutional life] that will result in findings and recommendations leading to the reordering of the life of the Church for greater effectiveness in making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world."

In the face of dramatic institutional decline in membership, worship attendance and financial giving the Team found that the future viability of our denomination requires:

-a change in mindset so that our primary focus is fostering and sustaining congregational vitality

-the clarification and commitment to dramatically higher performance expectation for all levels of the church

-new leadership, starting with the Council of Bishops, that is accountable for upsetting current paradigms that inhibit the mission of the church and adopting new understandings that result in more effective practices

-institute and report measurable performance results in all sectors of the Connection enabling us to learn and adjust the ways we invest our time, talent and money.

Based on these findings, the Team recommends for the next ten years that the United Methodist Church.....:

1) Use of the "Drivers of Vital Congregations" as the benchmarks for effectiveness in the local church. They are:

-Effective pastoral leadership for management, vision and inspiration

-Multiple small groups and programs for children and youth

-Mix of traditional and contemporary worship

-High percentage of spiritually engaged laity who assume leadership roles

2) Reform the development, deployment, evaluation and accountability systems for all clergy.

3) Establish new systems and significance for the statistical performance of local churches and annual Conferences, with particular attention to worship attendance, membership growth and mission engagement.

4) Reform the Council of Bishops so that our episcopal leaders assume their responsibility for performance accountability.

5) Consolidate denominational program and administrative agencies so to align their work with the priority of congregational re-vitalization.

## **Our Church**

Although LAUMC won't have much to do with reforming the Council of Bishops or the consolidation of denominational programs and agencies, we are one of the leading vital congregations in our Conference and denomination. When it comes to statistical accountability, how are we doing?

In the last decade LAUMC welcomed 1,051 people into membership, half of them by Profession of Faith (502) which means they were not members of any church at the time and for many made their first commitment to Christianity. Forty-one percent (41%) of our current membership

of 2,592 have joined the church in the last ten years. Subtracting deaths, those who have moved away and those removed from our Active membership lists due to inactivity, our total membership has increased by 100 or +2.6% over that ten year period while regional and national United Methodist church membership has decreased dramatically. Our total Conference membership in California-Nevada region of the UMC has declined by -13%.

During that decade our average Sunday worship attendance at LAUMC has declined -7% from 874 to 816 [These figures reflect a changing definition of Sunday morning average worship attendance by our Conference statistician]. In the 357 churches in our Conference there has been an average worship attendance decrease of -18.5% during that same period.

Without the cooperation of the Conference Statistician we have not be able to include the over 100 households who worship with us on-line each Sunday. If permissible, we would have actually increased our average worship attendance.

In our Conference Statistician's report to the Annual Conference Session last June, LAUMC was listed 6 times in "The Top Twenty's Top Awards", more than any other congregation;

Most People Baptized	#1
Largest Total Number involved in Christian Formation Groups	#1
Most Children in Christian Formation Groups	#1
Largest Number of Short Term Volunteer in Mission participants	#1
New members	#3
Confirmation class members	#5

We are the second largest church in our Conference to Glide Memorial, San Francisco in Total Worship Attendance and Total Church Membership.

Financially in our Conference we are the largest contributor to our Denominational Shared Missional Giving system (Apportionments), UMCOR Disaster Relief and United Methodist Women missional giving. Financial giving to the Operating Budget has been flat over the last five years. At this writing our congregation's financial giving to the 2011 Operating Budget is up over +8% from last year.

So how are we doing by the Call to Action benchmarks of vitality? Statistically pretty good. We are certainly a vital congregation and one of the key leaders in our region.

The numbers also describe a congregation that has hit a plateau. In fact we have been  $\pm$  5% of 2,500 members since 1987. In the last ten years our membership growth has been nominal and our worship attendance has declined. We cannot allow this to be acceptable, the normal course of doing business in an increasingly secular community. Our forefathers and mothers built a church 61 years ago with the commitment to reach out. Have we grown so comfortable

in our success and status quo as a church that we no longer care as much for the people who are not here as we do for those who are?

### **The Challenge: New Mindsets and Paradigms**

For LAUMC, how is it that a church can grow in membership and decrease in Sunday attendance at the same time?

Rev. Adam Hamilton of the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Kansas City wrestled with these same phenomena in a speech to the Leadership Institute last October. His 18,000 member, not yet twenty year old congregation, used to track 2.4 monthly visits by active members ten years ago. Now it has dropped to 1.8 monthly visits. More members, less worship attendance. What's that all about?

The reality of decline in religious affiliation in North America is a complicated issue and reflects a number of changes in the religious life of our culture. The book **Unchristian** (Kinnaman and Lyons, Bakers Books, 2008) outlines the research of the Barna organization on this subject and suggests a variety of reasons why a nation expressing a 94% belief in God is now experiencing such a radical decline in religious institutional affiliation. I would direct you to the Pew Religion Survey ([pewforum.org](http://pewforum.org)) as well.

To put it bluntly more and more North Americans don't find religious institutional life relevant to their spirituality. And that's across the board: liberal, conservative, progressive, evangelical, orthodox. The only religious institutions growing numerically in the USA for the last decade are Muslims and Mormons (Latter Day Saints) and then only nominally. Seminaries of all persuasions have recorded successive years of decline in their enrollments for the first time since World War II. One could conclude that it's not that North Americans aren't spiritual it's that they don't find church life necessary for their spirituality.

For those that do, today self-identified "active church members" are engaged with a host of other Sunday activities besides church, more so than ever before which may be the single leading factor in the "increased membership decreased worship attendance" challenge. Yet over all, the Protestant institutional life is clearly in decline.

Again, there are a lot of reasons for that not the least of which is the reluctance of Main Line Protestant churches to adapt to the changing expectations of our culture and time. Most local churches are driven by the personal preferences of those already attending rather than a sense of inclusion for and tolerance of those outside of their established circles. This is especially evident in worship styles of music, liturgy and congregational esthetics. As United Methodist Bishop Robert Schnase said not too long ago, "Maybe those under 50 years old do not share our passion for the hymns of 18<sup>th</sup> century European males as we established church folk do!"

Those churches that will survive and thrive in this new day will be those who are willing to invest in new methods of worship, education and community life. The statistics are telling us that Sunday morning worship as we have experienced it for the last fifty years better not be the one

and only form of spirituality that a church has to offer if it seeks to last as an institution. Alternative times, formats, music and methods of worship need to be explored and presented. Worship environments in thriving churches will be flexible and technologically up to date, reflecting a worship culture that isn't afraid of trying new things. The sanctuary pew on Sunday morning will not be seen as the only or even primary place where one gets closer to God and shares in the fellowship of kindred spirits.

## **Disciples and Transformation**

I endorse the intent of the "Call to Action". The local church is the most significant place where disciple making occurs and from which come efforts to transform the world. Accountability for the health of local congregations and the redirection of our denomination's resources towards that end is a good thing.

Beginning January 1, each church in our Conference will report to Headquarters weekly statistics for worship attendance, professions of faith, small group attendance, mission involvement and financial giving. By March 15th every congregation will be expected to set goals for the next four years for each of those areas listed and report them to Headquarters as well.

Considering the changing spiritual landscape of North America I would suggest that the numbers in worship on Sundays or the total of those willing to join our institutions will no longer be the ultimate measures of our success. Rather it will be the spiritual growth and commitment of those participating that will tell us if we are succeeding.

As a result of their involvement in our churches how many folk pray each day? Read and study the Bible? Belong to a fellowship group committed to spiritual development? Contribute to a mission project locally or globally with time, talent, prayer and/or resources? Practice a spiritual commitment to giving to making their church and community a better place, financially or with other gifts?

I would much rather count such trends over how many bodies show up in the pews or "sign on the dotted line". Worship attendance and membership do not always correspond to discipleship or transformation. Last year LAUMC had the largest total number of people involved in Christian formation groups of all churches in our Conference in all categories children, youth and adult (1077). That number may say more about the state of our church than any other!

I appreciate that our Conference leaders have broadened their statistical tracking expectations beyond attendance and membership.

## **Strategy:**

**Shining Light: Extending love beyond our walls (Isaiah 58:10)**

The future of the local main-line Protestant congregation resides in its members' committed response to the needs of the community in which they find themselves rather than in the preservation of their own preferences.

The churches that thrive in the future will offer programs and ministries to those who are not currently engaged with their church and may not come into their domain. It will mean going to and relating with "those not like us"; people who are not familiar or comfortable with church culture. This would include young adults, the poor, those who identify themselves as 'spiritual not religious', those not traditionally included in church life, the disabled, mentally ill, the isolated elderly.

The local main-line Protestant congregation in the future will celebrate the ethos of "getting out of the pews and into the community". They will worship in unexpected places, with unexpected people in new and unexpected forms. They will start new congregations and communities with less energy spent coaxing people into their current sanctuaries or onto their campuses. Being the church will be more important than attending one.

For the established congregation it will mean that they understand their church, its programs and property, as a launching pad out into their community rather than the destination for the lost. Their commitment will be to extend the love they have discovered in relationship to God beyond the walls of their comfort zones and expectations, like a shining light of grace.

### **Next Steps for LAUMC**

We began to develop this "Shining Light" strategy as a result of the 2009-2010 "2020 Vision Process".

In 2010 we completed a full scale study lead by Rev. Susan Beaumont of the Alban Institute to restructure our professional program and administrative staff for more effective ministry. We have implemented many of those findings. This coincided with the establishment of an entirely new governance structure focused in all aspects of congregational vitality in July of 2010.

With the appointment of Rev. Samuel Yun in January of this year, the Open Circle young adult ministry has begun to develop an entirely new contingent within our congregational life reaching out to those 18-35. Weekly meetings, small groups and service projects have been successful beyond expectation. Open Circle will begin a young adult worship service on the first Saturday night each month beginning in October.

Under the leadership of Lisa Conway, our Children's Ministries Director, a new ministry for children with special needs and their families has begun within our Christian Education program. Along with special assistance for such children during Sunday School programs, educational and support events are being held for their families. The response has been amazing and will lead into community outreach to families with special needs children.

The Bold Mission Practice Committee has just received City of Mtn. View approval for a direct service feeding program for the poor and homeless out of the kitchens of Trinity UMC Mtn. View. This joint project between LAUMC and Trinity is called "Hope's Corner"; the site is located on the corner of Hope and Mercy Streets in downtown Mtn. View! LAUMC will provide leadership and resources for the upgrading of Trinity's kitchen and hopes to be offering hot meals by early 2012, not only serving the poor of our community but giving the privileged of our community an opportunity to learn, serve and grow.

Following a strategic visioning retreat by the Church Council in May, the development and nurture of small groups in the life of LAUMC has been set as our top programmatic priority for 2011-12. A Small Group Task Force has been formed and will begin to train leaders for this emphasis in 2012.

## **Conclusion**

When compared to the state of our denomination and the majority of our regional churches, the state of LAUMC is quite extraordinary. We are blessed and a blessing to be sure.

The biggest challenge to us is the complacency that comes with such success. We are a warm and friendly group, with an outstanding staff, excellent lay leadership and a smorgasbord of exciting programs and ministries. That's a good thing! But it can dull us to the reality that we are a congregation with a membership that has plateaued and that has a declining worship attendance.

LAUMC meets all our needs. But does it appeal to the estimated 85% of our neighbors in the Bay Area without any religious affiliation?

Rev. Douglas Anderson, Executive Director of the Bishop Ruben Job Center for Leadership Development at the Dakota Wesleyan University once said, "When the mission of a church becomes the maintenance of its property....when the mission of a church becomes the preservation of its preferences....then the end of that church is in sight...."

The Bishop's Call to Action challenges us to adopt new paradigms and mindsets, focusing our resources on measurable vitality in the local church. The Church Council Vision Team has begun a conversation about the future of our sanctuary worship space, recommending to the Campus Master Planning Committee that the next step in our facility development should be to design and construct a 'cutting edge' worship and service center. Regardless of the outcome of such a conversation it will tell us much about our operating paradigms and mindsets and thus set the stage for our future.

Will we use our enormous gifts of talent and resources that we enjoy today to lay the foundation for a continuing vital LAUMC in the future as a shining light for our region? The key will be our passion to reach out to those who are not here, a passion which birthed our church 61 years ago.