

First Baptist Church of Augusta
February 14, 2010
Mark 12:29-31
“State of the Church”

29 Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; 30 you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' 31 The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."
(Mark 12:29-31)

Due to events far beyond my control or desire, I was unable to give a full state of the church address several weeks ago for a Sunday evening service. Many of you have attended this faithfully each year, where I share with you through power point slides and conversation about where our church has been in the past year and where I see us heading in the year ahead.

I admit this is about vision not science. I did not know last year at this time, the economy would worsen instead of get better. I also did not think we would, in spite of the economy, begin construction on our Fellowship Hall and Chapel as early as we did, yet doing so will perhaps save us substantially down the road. Looking back there were some hopes for our immediate future that were unreasonable. I still, for example, want to see us as a teaching church provide a formal course of study for laypeople wanting a more rigorous knowledge of theology, Bible, and church history, perhaps partnering with a theological institution. 2009, however, was to have other priorities.

Before we get too far into 2010 I still want to reflect about this past year and share some thoughts as your pastor of how I see God leading us. This morning here is an abridged version of the State of the Church.

In keeping with tradition of previous State of the Church addresses, this morning's message can be divided into two sections, the first I like to call the “Nickels and Noses” section. In other words, how did we do financially, and how is our membership?

I cannot imagine anyone in this room that was unaffected financially in 2009. It was a difficult year for many, more difficult than most expected. Yet, in spite of a volatile economy, including unemployment and underemployment affecting many members, and others uncertain about their long-term prospects of earning a living, you demonstrated faithful generosity. Lavinia Polatty, our Financial Director for over 33 years, has shared with me that as a church we received a total of \$3,028,223 in tithes and offerings – this is nearly \$10,000 more than last year, and I thank you for your generosity.

In addition to that total, you gave nearly \$230,000 in mission gifts – almost \$40,000 more than last year. These mission dollars are above and beyond what we already contribute for missions in our budget. Because you gave, we were able to start the Nehemiah Challenge, where our first project began as just painting a home and we wound up re-roofing a house. Other projects are now coming our way and we can change Augusta one home at a time. Because you gave, we met nearly half of our \$30,000 pledge for the Masters Table, that serves 400 meals every day to the poor and hungry. Because you gave, we were able to support missionaries in over 150 countries.

Because you gave, we were able to stock the food pantry and help with utility bills, legal advice, and rent assistance for those in need. Last year we assisted over 1700 families, including nearly 2500 children. We distributed nearly \$70,000 in funds, which does not include the value of all the food you donate to our food pantry every month.

Finally, I am pleased to report that you gave in addition to the budget and to missions over 1.6 million dollars to our capital campaign.

One more word about giving: each year it is distressing to count the number of families who are active in this church yet do not give anything to help this church with her mission and ministry. This year it is just over 39% of our family units who for one reason or another make this decision to not support our missions and ministries. I hasten to add however that 13 more families are now giving than the year before.

How about our membership? Where are all those noses that accompany the nickels? We received 33 by way of baptism and forty more by way of letter or transfer for a total of 73 new members. This is down by about twenty from the year before, although I will quickly add I do not keep a graph in my office keeping track, as if membership is a stock report. Fifty-two members of this church transferred their membership from here, because they either moved out of town or joined another local church, which is about average. Forty-three of our members passed away, which is much higher than the previous year, but overall about average. Part of being a church that has been around for nearly 200 years with multiple generations of families is that death is something we regularly face. I would like to also add that because we are readily a part of the many seasons in a person's life including birth, baptism, and death and all the other events that can happen in life it makes us more authentic in dealing with the whole of a life.

It is important to look at our past, in order to celebrate it, as well as better understand how we could have done things differently or better. I would be disingenuous if I did not say I am disappointed that we did not have numerical growth this year with our membership. In the past few years, we have had net growth helping us make up from the losses we experienced back in 2003-5. While the number of members who have either moved out of town or transferred their membership is about average, I must be honest and say, I would rather have a positive rate of growth, instead of numerical plateau.

While Columbia County has shown significant percentage growth, Richmond County has remained stagnant, making the overall population of the CSRA about the same for over a decade. Furthermore, the population and economic centers seem to be continuing to move further west of us. This makes it more challenging than ever to reach families coming to our area.

I remain steadfast, however, that we are indeed a City on *This Hill*, and, as a City on *This Hill* we are A Teaching and Learning Congregation. Jesus calls on us to be salt of the earth where we preserve the faith by enriching lives.

A Sharing and Engaging congregation, where compassion and love for our neighbors is incarnated through practical engagement.

Being and Living as the presence of Christ in Augusta and around the world through letting our light shine.

These are three guiding visions for me as pastor for this great church.

In the year ahead, we need to focus on how we will embrace our mission and purpose. It is really easier than you think. Jesus tells us simply that there are two commandments of which no other commandment in the Bible is greater. "...love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' 31 The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"

Firmly rooted in the commandments to love God and love your neighbor as yourself, First Baptist Church of Augusta is called to embrace three beliefs that lead to a healthy church and growing church for 2010 and beyond.

1. Growing in love for our worship and mission.
2. Growing in love for one another.
3. Growing in love for our neighbor.

In fact, the Deacons will be asked to approve a new committee to help provide leadership in this area of church health and growth. As the lay spiritual leaders of the church, we will look to the Deacon body for example and leadership.

Here is how I see us growing in these three loves:

First, growing in love for our worship and mission begins with each of us affirming by our presence and participation, that the corporate worship of this church and the missional work of this church are vital to the health of this church. Simply put, we need each other to be here when we gather to worship and work.

Worship is not intended to be only a private enterprise, entered into upon personal whim or guilt or even need. It is a communal activity where we gather and we enter with our joys as well as limp in with our failures. We come, “just as I am” to engage the “great I AM.”

When I was a little boy, I fell in love with the local church. It was for me a small one room building – it did not even have an indoor bathroom. I needed the people around me; some are still living today and still praying for me. I still love the local church, even though the congregations have changed from one room buildings to a collection of buildings sprawling upon a campus. My desire and hope for each of us here this morning is that we recover that love, discover that love, or grow in that love.

We enter, as the old saying goes, to worship and we depart to serve. We are not a private affair, existing for our own therapeutic enrichment or spiritual consolation. No, we gather to learn and teach; we gather to share and engage; and we gather to be and live in God’s presence.

And I - and here let me be intensely personal - I need all of you committing to this love of our worship and mission. We are planning at least one and more than likely many trips to Haiti. There will be other Nehemiah Challenge projects. We still need to meet the rest of our pledge for the Master’s Table. And every week with four exceptions throughout the year, we meet three times every Sunday morning. Show up ... learn ... grow ... teach ... participate ...give.

Secondly, Growing in love for one another, needs to include attention to the “pastoral care” needs of the congregation, by taking care of one another. This is by any definition a big church. The median size of a church in the U.S. has 75 attending and the average size is not much bigger – about 186. We average most every Sunday between 1000 to 1200 in worship. You can get lost here easy, which means it is a challenge taking care of each other.

On any given week we have members who are in the hospital, who have loved ones in the hospital, who are dying or will die. We have about 40 on our homebound list, plus a growing nursing home population. On any given week, our ministers are visiting or counseling members of this church, as well as members, friends, and family members of this community. This place is busy seven days a week.

In spite of or because of this, on any given week, there are members, who for one reason or another just stop coming. They are not necessarily mad or upset. They just get out of the habit or get distracted or sometimes just too sick to be here. The next thing you know, they get forgotten about – that is a tough thing to say but it is the truth.

We can do better. In fact, we must do better, because an essential characteristic of a community of faith is that we love one another. That was how Jesus described throughout the Gospel of John: “*A new commandment I give to you: that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.*” (John 13:34)

We can never be so big that we lose touch with what is going on with the lives of our members. We cannot talk about adding to our number if we cannot care for those who are already here.

That is why I am challenging every Sunday School teacher and director, every small group leader and every deacon, to be in regular touch with those entrusted to their care. There can be no excuse to neglect members of our own community, when Christ has said, “we are known by our love.”

Finally, we are to be about growing in love for our neighbor. This is practicing hospitality, not only within the walls of the church, but also beyond the walls of the church. Outreach is where we develop a culture of inviting others to participate in life in community and the movement of God.

God is doing something marvelous in every life. It is not that everything is good or well or wonderful. Yet, every one of us is being sustained and loved and cherished by the very movement of God.

More and more we must prioritize giving ourselves away – this includes our buildings, our financial resources and our energies.

Evangelism may be our most challenging work yet. We fear the ridiculous caricatures lampooned around us, but I say, we can reach out without dumbing down.

In the end, as members of this community of faith, we have to decide between maintenance or ministry. Maintenance is simply maintaining structures as they are without any change or any substantive effort. It is holding the status quo. Ministry is recognizing that God has not called us together to tread water, but to seek and serve.

I personally challenge every leader of this church – from committee chairs to deacons to the called ministers – to consider what you are doing in your areas or responsibility. Is it maintenance or ministry?

For the rest, I challenge you to step to the high calling of Christ which is for every life – to love the Lord and to love your neighbor are God’s commandments, and we can do no less. Already 2010 is starting out to be God’s great opportunity for every life here today.