

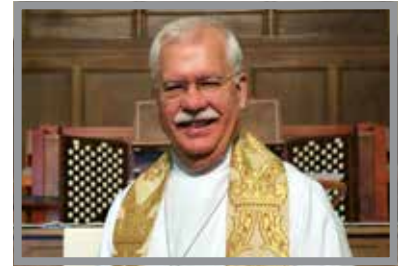
PAST ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND FUTURE CHALLENGES

A summary of Reverend John Wright's report to the Administrative Board session on April 17, 2016.

ACCOMPLISHED TOGETHER

Stewardship/Finances

When Barbara and I arrived as pastors in July of 2010, the church's checking account had less than \$2,500. At the end of that first year, we were looking at a budget shortfall in 2011 of over \$200,000. Barbara initiated painful cuts in staff, including a \$25,000 cut in her own salary. Each year we led the congregation in an intentional stewardship program. As a result pledged giving has grown each year, and we now have an operating surplus of over \$240,000 to cushion the church against unexpected disruptions.



Improvements in Facilities

When we arrived, Wesley Hall, a place where our pre-school children used the room as a playground in inclement weather, looked like a bomb had been dropped on it. When the Boy Scouts, which also used Wesley Hall, expressed the desire to raise \$40,000 to 50,000 as a gift to FUMC in honor of their 100th anniversary, Barbara set out to raise the necessary funds for renovation from the congregation, supplemented with a generous anonymous donation. During the renovation project, we discovered the support columns of the original 1923 ground-floor sanctuary.



Other improvements, initiated by Barbara, over this past six years have included a (1) state-of-the-art sound and visual projection system, (2) repainting and installation of new steps in the northwest stairwell and installation of ceramic tile in the library and mezzanine landing, (3) installation of ceramic tile in the narthex and connecting hallways, (4) \$400,000 renovation of the sanctuary organ, (5) new furniture for the church parlor (with gift from the Wedding Ring Class), and (6) replacement of the worn-out lighting control panel. Presently underway is an expansion of the narthex bathroom, as well as additional lighting over the choir and in the sanctuary, both made possible by a generous anonymous gift!

Worship Innovations

Undoubtedly, the most controversial change in the beginning was the addition of projection screens in the sanctuary. However, the congregation soon discovered that the screens greatly facilitated congregational singing. Great classical paintings, as well as contemporary images and clips from films greatly enhanced the worship experience, much like stained glass windows did in the Middle Ages.



When I came, I believed that FUMC needed to expand its worship repertoire to include a vital contemporary worship service that would attract new people to FUMC, for whom classical worship had little appeal. The result was the Life in the City worship service on Sunday evenings, led by Reverend Jen Stuart and Sarajane Dailey. Ultimately the service did not succeed, but I am so glad that we launched Life in the City, which is now succeeding in a new venue.

Transformation of Church Culture

I have worked hard to help the church move from a "club membership" mentality, in which participation is regarded as optional and worship is seen as a "spectator" activity to a "discipleship" culture with higher expectations of those who choose to be members. "Joining the church" now means a person's willingness to serve on God's "team" to transform the world. Worship is understood to be the team's "practice session" for "making disciples who make a difference."



Essential to this change in church culture was requiring them first to attend a two-hour "First Steps" session in which the basic concepts of the Christian faith were explained. At first, this procedure was met with skepticism, but I believe it has now proven itself and resulted in more committed members and disciples.

In each service, I issue a strong call to action in the form of the "Invitation to Take Steps in the Faith Journey," in which I challenge congregants to try specific service ministries, with the goal of getting at least 50% of the congregation involved in hands-on service in such ministries as Feed My People Breakfast, the FreeStore, Mobile Loaves & Fishes, etc.

Increased Social Witness



Early on, I sensed a readiness in the congregation to move toward greater inclusion of LGBT persons. Over time, we built a consensus that led to the following: (1) the congregational vote by an overwhelming majority in 2013 for FUMC to join the Reconciling Ministries Network, a national caucus group working to change the prohibitions in the Book of Discipline against full inclusion, (2) the invitation to the Reverend Frank Schaefer to preach at our annual Reconciling Ministry Service in 2014, and (3) my allowing two beloved gay members to propose during worship service in August of 2015.

In response to recent expressions of racism, I have supported (1) the dialogue sermon which Dr. Adama Brown and I presented last September in response to the AME bishops' call to confront racism in light of the Charleston shootings and (2) the interfaith service which featured two rabbis, an imam, and myself talking about what it means for us to be children of Abraham.

CHALLENGES IN THE FUTURE

Increasing Worship Attendance and Membership

What do we do in light of declining membership? First, we must realize that we are in the midst of an epochal cultural change from "Christendom," in which it was the socially expected thing to join a church, to "post-Christian secularity," in which the general culture no longer encourages people to attend church.

Second, when I came here, I simply assumed the "attractational" model of church growth, that is, if I preached sermons that were eloquent enough, offered worship services that were inspiring and the church offered programs that were engaging enough, "they would come." The "attractational" model has failed. We need to develop a "ministry/mission model" of church growth that involves newcomers in hands-on service in which they feel like they are making a difference in Austin and in the world.

To this end, now that we have a first-rate website, we need to develop an effective media and ad campaign, involving both social media and direct mail, that will showcase our ministries and encourage outsiders to become involved in them.

Our members need to move from a "welcoming church mentality" to an "inviting church mentality." In a "welcoming church," the members wait passively for newcomers to enter the church; then they welcome them. But in an "inviting church," members proactively tell friends, neighbors, and co-workers about their ministries and invite them to church.

Third, once newcomers do join the church, they need a clear "discipleship path." Twenty years ago, Mind and Spirit was the crown jewel in our adult education program. Today, it is a struggle for adults to attend a class outside of worship. One factor is the impact of our downtown location in the midst of terrible traffic. It is imperative that we develop home groups and satellite locations to gather for effective adult discipleship formation!

Renewed Mission and Vision

With a new senior pastor coming, it is time to engage in a vigorous mission/visioning process. Two possible starting points would be the *Healthy Church Initiative*, offered by the Rio Texas Conference and Gil Rendle's Holy Conversation process in which the congregation systematically asks: "Who are we now? Who are our neighbors now? What is our primary mission field now?"

Staffing

Having cut staff in 2011, we now need to look at adding: an Office Manager to assist pastors; more staff attention to "connections," to identify newcomers, track them, recruit them for membership, and follow-up to ensure they get "plugged in" to the church; and more staff attention to Adult Education.



CONCLUSION

Barbara and I will always be grateful for this grand church, the role it played in our calls to the ministry, the friendships here that have nurtured us over the years, the way it inspired us, even from afar, to champion social justice, and finally the opportunity to serve it as pastors. We look forward with great anticipation to the next chapter in its history that will unfold under the leadership of Reverend Taylor Fuerst.

Gratefully,

Reverend John Wright
Pastor, 2010-2016