

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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1 Pet 2:4-10 *"The State of the Church"*

Like other pastors, I am occasionally moved to speak about "the state of the church," although it's been some years since I last did that. But the Sunday of our Church Annual Meeting seems an appropriate day to say something about this church, although I also want to set it briefly in the context of the wider Church.

1) The Global Church

Since the day Jesus told 12 men that on their faith in him, and especially on their leader Peter, he would "build his church," the Christian faith has spread around the world and is now professed by 2.1 billion people – a third of the world's population. From its Middle Eastern origins to its 1500 yrs or more of shaping European and American culture, the second half of the 20th century saw a dramatic shift in the "center of gravity" of world Christianity to the south; the majority of Christians in the world now live in Africa and Latin America, with Asia as a rapidly growing area. Indeed the largest churches in the world are now in South Korea.

Europe and North America's dominance of Christianity has ended; one estimate puts the net loss of Christians in these areas as 7,500 a day, while people in Africa are converting to Christianity at the rate of 25,000 a day. While the USA still has the most Christians (about 225 million), Brazil has 165 million, Mexico

95 million, the Philippines 75 million, Nigeria 50 million. The old centers of Christendom – Britain, France, Germany, Spain, Italy, are now far down the list. Nobody is sure how many Christians are in Russia – some estimate 90 million; while Chinese Christians are even harder to count – estimates vary from 50-100 million.

The new churches of the "global south" are enthused by theologies of deliverance, liberation, and reward. Probably half are Pentecostal – especially in Latin America. The cultural role of the Roman Catholic Church in the old Spanish and Portuguese colonies has shrunk as Pentecostalism has grown rapidly. The Christian world will look very different to our children and grandchildren than it did to us. What if China turns out over the next 40 years to have hundreds of millions of Christians? Would that not prove to be the most significant cultural and political fact of the 21st Century?

2) The American Church

But what about the "good-ole USA?" Nearly 80% of Americans still identify themselves as Christians; between a quarter and a half of them attend church weekly. Roman Catholics number about 70 million; the next largest "group," still growing, is Evangelical of various flavors, another 60 million; the largest single Protestant denomination Southern Baptists at 16 million. The old "mainline" churches – Episcopal, Lutheran,

Methodist, Presbyterian, Congregational – together amount to maybe 30 million and are all shrinking yearly.

The American Catholic Church is now in a crisis of lost confidence in its leaders, and lost respect for authority in general. The Southern Baptists have peaked and are in slow decline. Independents, including “mega-churches,” are springing up everywhere, but the major long-term growth is among Pentecostals, here as in the rest of the world. The mainline decline has recently slowed, but overall represents 40-50% loss over the past 50 years.

The United Church of Christ, to which this church belongs “at arm’s length,” is the descendant of the old National Council of Congregational Churches, and since its formation in 1957 has been at the leading edge of social movements including civil rights, what in the 70s was called “the women’s movement,” and in the past 30 years “the gay rights movement.” Among its 5500 churches, about half class themselves as “moderate,” about a quarter “progressive” (which used to be called “liberal”) and a quarter “conservative.”

In this area it is represented by the 12 Congregational churches of the Suffolk Association. This church is among a small group of relatively “conservative” Congregational churches in an area where the great majority are determinedly “progressive.” In this context, there are things about our church that you deserve to know- things you might never hear unless you came to a New Members’ Reception – for example, that we are the about the tenth largest Congregational church in NY State; the second largest of the 12 Suffolk Congregational churches, and we are known in this county - with varying degrees of curiosity - as “the healthiest.”

That means we are a church with flourishing programs, solid finances, a steady flow of newcomers and new members, and we occupy a respected place in our community. We take for granted things that other churches struggle to even imagine: many children in Sunday School, multiple Sunday worship services and weekday Bible Studies, a strong reservoir of volunteers, two flourishing youth groups, coffee and more every Sunday! One Moderator of the Suffolk Association apparently berated other church leaders that they should go over and take a look at what the Wading River church is doing!

3) *Our Church*

So what makes our church distinctive? Theologically and spiritually speaking, of course, it is the sovereign grace of God that has caused us to flourish while others have not. But in terms of the day to day aspects of the community of faith that we are all called to work on – structure, organization, programs, emphases – there are, I believe, some clear signs of “who we are.”

One is our history and location. There has been worship on this corner since 1740, and for decades before that in the homes of the first settlers, Congregationalists who came from Connecticut. Many churches would give anything to be located “on the village green” in the center of the oldest part of the community – all thanks to the Miller family (an offshoot of the “Miller’s Place” family) who have lived on this corner for seven generations, and who gave this land to the church in 1837. There are rich blessings in being “an old church” – chiefly that it keeps our own work in perspective, and daily reminds us that God has been at work here, the gospel of Jesus Christ has been proclaimed here, for hundreds of years before us, and God willing that will continue long after we are gone.

Secondly I would cite our stability. You may not realize that September 2010 will bring us, God willing, to two pastors in 50 years. Rev. Louis Tuleja began his ministry here in 1960 and retired in 1996, when I began. I have asked Pastor Tuleja to preach this September in recognition of his 50-year association with this church and community. If you know that the average pastoral tenure across the US is less than 5 years, you know why we are in a favorable position. We have had a steady diet of Reformed and Evangelical theology for 50 years, and I believe that stability has greatly benefited the church.

Thirdly, we have a great diversity of church backgrounds, and so we have developed a church culture of warmth and welcome. Most newcomers say they “feel at home” very quickly. That is a great tradition that I pray we will always maintain. Our worship has always been warm and enthusiastic, especially our music. This is the best “singing” congregation of its size - of any denomination - that I have ever been in. That delight and freedom of expression in song is a Congregational distinctive that goes back to the late 1600s and the great (and the first) hymn-writer in English, Isaac Watts (*Joy to the World; Jesus Shall Reign; O God, Our Help In Ages Past; When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*) - a Congregational minister whose statue still stands in the center of my home town in England - the “original” Southampton!

Music has played a large part in our church - from Sunday Worship to the youth groups of the 70s to our “resident band” for the past decade: the original Gordon Hurley 4-piece Combo that became the Sound Swing Society, then the Gordon Hurley Big Band, now the Island Jazz Express; a 17-piece band with vocalists that rehearses here every 2 weeks. And the whole community has flocked to the outdoor concerts on our lawn

in the summer by the SWR Community Band.

This touches on another important feature of our church - community involvement. Once Congregational Churches were the center of community activity - The Meeting House as they were often called - and we have tried to preserve that tradition with open doors to community groups, meetings, senior groups, and so on. Four different piano teachers have held their student recitals here. Our Sunday School kids and many parents will march in the WR Duck Pond Day parade, and we will probably have the largest group marching. We continue to send out food to the needy, books to clinics, money for third world children, help to anyone who needs it.

All this outreach effort is nourished by the steady Bible teaching that we provide for our children, youth and adults. One church leader in Suffolk reportedly told a parishioner who wanted a Bible Study that “nobody does Bible studies any more.” With his pastor’s permission, the parishioner started one and soon had 25 people attending. Here we have often had 5 adult Bible Studies going each week, and a “curriculum team” of up to 10 women devising Bible dramas, readings, games, crafts for weekly Sunday School use. Our youth leaders have shown teenagers by example that Christian motivation enables them to make a difference in other people’s lives, and in their community, by working together.

Is all this “boasting about our church”? Not at all! It is my expression of appreciation for your faith, your work, your warmth, your generosity. This is a wonderful church to be part of, as people who move away from here quickly discover. I thought Annual Meeting Sunday was a good time for me to tell you how grateful I am to you, and to God for his grace, for making this such a fine community

of faith, a functioning part of the body of Christ, at a time when that is getting harder and harder to do.

So let us not forget how richly we have been blessed, and make every effort to use what we have well, and determine that we will pass on to the next generation a spiritual and physical heritage that will not only sustain them and their families, but also the wider community around us that we are called to serve in the name of Jesus Christ. Without his call, none of us would be here.

Let us pray...