

Fixer Upper Church

Revelation 3:1–6 (NIV)

“To the angel of the church in Sardis write: These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. **2** Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God. **3** Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; hold it fast, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you. **4** Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. **5** The one who is victorious will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life, but will acknowledge that name before my Father and his angels. **6** Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

The World has changed. A little over a month ago, I sat around the lunch table with 3 other pastors who have been effective in ministry in the UMC and together we serve the 4 largest UMC churches in Hamilton County. The four of us have accumulated over 150 years of pastoral experience. I made a comment that **one would expect by this point in our ministries, we would know how to do ministry well yet we find we are constantly learning how do so now.** All of us agreed that things are more difficult now and success is not assured.

Over the past decade I often wake up in the middle of the night thinking about the effectiveness of my leadership as a pastor. I do not see the same level of effectiveness and growth I witnessed in the first 3 decades of my ministry. I see more stagnation, more people are likely now to leave the church either altogether or go look for another and attendance is less frequent by many who are involved in the church. What I am witnessing, my colleagues see in the places where they serve.

During those long nights I tend to blame myself for these trends. But as I evaluate those practices that in the past laid the foundation for effective ministry and growth – meaningful worship, good preaching, caring for people, welcoming guests, starting new groups, building good program departments – I see this church is typically much better than those churches which I served that were growing most. I realize I cannot work any harder than I do. I am more committed to praying and seeking Jesus than ever. I see that in our staff and many of our leaders.

It seems obvious to me that the church needs a good dose of “fixer upper.” But what does that mean for us? Can we do those practices better than in the past were the foundation of effectiveness and growth? Sure. But will it lead to the church that will reach the world for Christ around us?

I am coming to admit something I have known for some time. **The culture in the US, particularly as it impacts the church has changed. We are not living in the same environment we were living in 10 years ago, 20 years ago, 30 years ago.**

Recently Patty and I listened to an audiobook, *A Man Called Peter*, on our journey to pick up and take home our Arkansas granddaughter. The book was written in the 1950's by Katherine Marshall about her husband, Peter who was an extremely effective pastor and became the chaplain of the Senate. He was an extremely charismatic speaker and people would wait in line on Sundays to be allowed in the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C. While Marshall faced many of the same issues face by pastors today, it was a different world and time. Often the Washington Post would quote him and publish his prayers. Could you imagine that happening today? The Post might publish a politically incorrect statement by a DC pastor to arouse people's emotions.

Today the Church in America has lost much of its former “favored status.” While a few things remain such as non-profit status and clergy being able to deduct certain housing expenses, other things have eroded. Most businesses are open on Sunday and Christian holidays, little thought is given to planning activities on a Sunday morning or a Wednesday night whether it is a family outing, a sporting tournament or recital. In the minds of many, if not most, 11:00 am on Sunday is no longer a sacred hour.

Part of this is due to the fact that Christianity is no longer the dominant influencer in our culture. We are living in a pluralistic society where Christianity is one among many influencers – our culture is influenced by secularism, consumerism, other religions, hedonism, etc. As a result of this, church has become less the center of a majority of people's lives. Over the past 2 decades there has been a significant increase in the number of “nones,” those who are unaffiliated with any religious tradition. These often are “spiritual” but have little to do with organized religion.

There have been huge changes in attitudes that deeply impact life in church. Once most families regarded church as providing vital training for the children. Today many think it may be useful but sports, arts and where one goes to school is regarded as being just as or more important.

We could easily fill up this whole time for this message with talking about how our world has changed. We are living in a new world that present some real challenges for the church in America to flourish.

Recently I was given the book, *Canoeing the Mountains; Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory*. Tod Bolsinger contends that the church exists in a totally different world than a few decades ago. He compares it to Lewis and Clark's expedition of exploring the Louisiana Purchase to find a water route from St. Louis to the Pacific. It was assumed that the land they were to explore would be like what was known east of it. When they finally arrived at the head of the Missouri River, they expected to top the next ridge, cross the continental divide and find the waterway to the Pacific. Instead they found the snow cover peaks of the Rockies. They had to completely rethink how they would go forward in this uncharted land. Tod proposes that this is where the church is today. **We are living in uncharted times.**

The Church at Sardis.

The book of Revelation is one of mystery and intrigue. It is often difficult for most of us to wrap our minds around. Chapters 2 and 3, however, seem to have straight forward messages. The main human character, John, is instructed to write letters to seven churches which were located in Asia minor (SW Turkey). While each letter was intended for a particular context, what was written transcends the original audience and has spoken to churches and believers for 2,000 years.

The letter to the ancient church at Sardis seems to speak to our present situation powerfully. It is a message we can read as explorers in an uncharted wilderness.

Jesus addressed the church at Sardis with a powerful message – “*you have a reputation of being alive but are dead.*” From outward appearance, it looked like all was well. But something was happening that would lead to the church's death.

Appearance or public image are especially important in our culture. Most of us know that public image is not the whole story. And so it is with the church today. If you drive around Chattanooga, you will see churches everywhere. On Sunday and Saturday mornings, you will find cars parked in those church lots. If you turn on your radio, you will find multiple Christian stations in this market. You can easily find Christian broadcasting on TV and movies in the theatre. It would appear all is well. According to the real patterns and health of churches over all, if the church continues along the same trends for a few more decades, it will be a shell of what it is today. There are signs of decay and dying. In a few more years, many churches will need hospice care.

It is interesting that in this letter that **there is no accusation of moral failure or even spiritual neglect on the part of the Sardis church.** The complaint is their “*works are unfinished*” and they need to “*strengthen what remains.*”

The church of today is not in a dangerous place because of moral failure. Sure there are some who have messed up big time. This does have a negative impact on many. Our challenges are another issue. We are in uncharted wilderness, how we have done things do not work as they once did and we must now find our way in this new world.

Moving forward to mission and life.

So how do we move forward to the life and mission God intends in this uncharted world?

Sometimes I have been tempted to just retire and give it over to younger pastors. But I know that is not what God is calling me to do. Some are tempted to pull in the sides of tents and huddle close to others who believe and live like they do. Maybe they can wait this thing out until Jesus returns. I do not think either approach is what God wants. God chose that we would live at this time and has a direct purpose for us now.

The message to Sardis is one that nudges us in the direction God wants for us. Jesus called the folks at Sardis to “remember what they had received” and “to strengthen what remained.”

What had they received? They had received a salvation through Jesus that gave them life and meaning. They were experiencing liberation from guilt and sin to live a new life of liberty. They had been given hope for the now and beyond. They were given a faith that sustained them through the good and bad of life. They were given a mission to share this good news through word and deed. They were to remember this and to strengthen it.

We are called to remember what we have received in Jesus. Because of his grace in our lives, we are not the same people we were. We too have hope. We are a forgiven people. God has and is healing our brokenness. He has called us to be on a journey to be more like him. We are called to pour ourselves into developing as his followers. This is calling to go deep in our faith and relationship with Christ.

I believe there has never been a time in church in America when it has been more important to grow as disciples and move to maturity. In the uncharted wilderness we need to be as spiritually healthy as possible as we face uncertain situations and times. To grow in this way, it is essential to pour ourselves into those exercises that become channels through which God’s grace flows into our lives to produce growth – participating in authentic worship, diving into the Word, growing in relationship with God through prayer, engaging with others in small group, using our gifts in service and reaching out into this world in love.

Jesus called the folks at Sardis to “repent.” That is a very biblical and religious word which in this context means much more than most think. It is not merely feeling sorry and praying. This is a call to a reorientation – change your mind, change your direction. With it are used the words, “wake up.”

This is clearly our call – wake up and realize what has happened and see the world in which the church exists today. If we don’t wake up, we will surely perish. When we understand the change, then comes the call to change our direction. (This does not mean we attempt to recreate the “good ole days.” They are gone and there were issues there too. This is a call to face clearly into the new wilderness in which we are living and move into it.

Jesus told the Sardis believers their “works were unfinished.” He was not finished with them and they had more to do.

So do we. Our work here at OUMC is not finished. Jesus has much for us to do in this new wilderness. There are new horizons to explore. There is new territory to claim for Christ’s kingdom.

These are frightening day in which to live yet they are also so exciting. There is so much uncertainty before us. I do not know what all of this means. (If I did I could write a book and it would be a best seller in weeks and you would have to stop paying me because I could live off the royalties.) It calls for a spirit of adventure and learning. If we move forward into it, we will try things and fail. But from them we will learn. This new wilderness will call you out into the world where you live with a mission for Jesus.

No one here chose this time in which to live. It was chosen for us by our Creator. Let’s now live into it – day by day, week by week, month by month, year by year. Let’s take hold of the hand of Master and follow him into this uncharted new world. David Graves is right, “The best is yet to come.”