

## 2020 Pastor's Report to Charge Conference

In the late summer of 2019, our Leadership Council began focused work around three questions from Gil Rendle's book *Quietly Courageous*. The questions were: "Who are we?" "What has God called us to do?" and "Who is our neighbor?"<sup>1</sup> These questions guided our work throughout this past Charge Conference year. This work has challenged us at times; however, it has also led to new adventures and many opportunities to bear fruit for the Kingdom of God.

The first question which asked who are we, lead us to review and revise our vision, mission, and identity statements. The revisions strengthened our commitment to welcoming and accepting all people and encouraging all to worship and participate fully in the life of Westlake UMC. The mission statement was expanded so that, as individuals and as a faith community, we will live and love in a manner such that others will want to become followers of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

The second and third questions challenged us to discern and act with intention on what God has called, and continues to call, Westlake UMC to do in partnership with our neighbors in our mission fields in the western suburbs and in the city of Cleveland. Of course, our actions are always tested to ensure that they align with our identity as a faith community.

In the western suburbs we invited the community, and especially those at the new school across the street from the church, to our first ever Live Nativity last December. The camels and other animals were a huge hit. Participants heard the story of Jesus' birth from a new perspective. We reached new people and a younger population with this special service. We also changed the worship times for our Christmas Eve services to increase availability to families with small children.

In our mission field in the city of Cleveland we made the decision to sell the property at W. 86 and Clark Avenue and move ministries to where we can better reach new people. In early 2020 the building and adjacent lots were listed by a commercial real estate agent. We moved the existing small group Bible study to a near-by coffee shop on Lorain Avenue. In the first few sessions, new people began joining in on the study and sharing how it was helping them with their faith. A very active member of our church felt lead by God to begin a new expression of faith in cooperation with the LGBTQ Community Center in Gordon Square. She and her partner entered into meaningful conversations with that organization about their hopes and dreams. Then the pandemic hit.

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<sup>1</sup> Gil Rendle, *Quietly Courageous* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 26-27.

Plans for a community focused children's Easter event in Westlake were canceled. The coffee shop we held our small group study in on Lorain Avenue and the LGBTQ Community Center were closed. Our plans changed; but we held tight to our vision, mission, and identity as a faith community.

In his book *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory*, Tod Bolsinger writes about "adaptive leadership." He states, "Adaptive leadership is about 'letting go, learning as we go, and keeping going.'"<sup>2</sup> The staff and leadership of Westlake UMC have done exactly that during this pandemic. There were plans and programs that we needed to let go, and that freed us to try new things.

The frequency of our food pantry serving the Gordon Square to W. 86 area was increased to twice a month. The building at W. 86 & Clark Ave. was sold to a person who plans to use it as a site for a day care center, which we pray will be a blessing to that neighborhood. With the sale of the church building in the city, we moved our food storage and packing to Pearl Road UMC with plans to have it housed in our building in Westlake by late fall 2020. The food pantry moved to delivery only and we now consistently reach over 300 serving units each month. Our food pantry clients live in the zip code areas of 44102, 44107, and 44111 which includes Gordon Square. Our monthly community meal held in Westlake was stopped from March through August because of the pandemic. In September it restarted in a new format as a take-out only meal, with meal delivery to church shut-ins.

We used our adaptive leadership skills to add new mid-week gatherings via live streaming or Zoom each Wednesday evening beginning in June. These virtual gatherings have included a prayer service, blessing of the pets worship service, back to school blessing, compassion camp for adults, and vesper worship services. We purchased a radio transmitter and have held many Drive-In worship services including drive-in Confirmation and 4<sup>th</sup> Grade Bible Sunday. Each Drive-In worship service includes the celebration of the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

Life groups, youth group, Sunday School, VBS, and committees of the church switched to Zoom during the early days of the pandemic and continue to use this platform. Early in the pandemic we began having a weekly virtual coffee for any parishioners who wanted to join me for conversation and community building. For our parishioners in our mission field in the city of Cleveland, and for some of our less technology savvy members in the western suburbs, we have gatherings weekly on toll-free conference calls. A monthly written communication is mailed to approximately 50 shut-ins that helps keep them connected with the church.

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<sup>2</sup>Tod Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 88.

Westlake UMC began live streaming our 10:00 traditional worship service in June 2016. In March of this year we added streaming our worship service on the church Facebook page and offering an audio-only Zoom option for joining worship. We have reached new individuals in many different locations in the U.S. and in Africa through our streamed worship services.

A new ministries team has been formed focusing specifically on our neighbors in the greater Gordon Square area. Conversations are being restarted with the LGBTQ community center by those who felt led to engage in some type of a new, fresh expression of faith there. We are also investigating the feasibility for a group with shared interests in mentoring youth to work with students in the Gordon Square area.

Westlake UMC has a long history of working for justice as well as performing acts of compassion. I have preached on the sin of racism many, many times throughout my years as the pastor of this church. In January 2020 I preached about the many examples of racial injustice that are chronicled in the book and movie *Just Mercy*. After that sermon, individuals and some small groups viewed and discussed that movie. This fall, another life group is studying racism as presented in *The Faith of a Mockingbird* and will be studying *Just Mercy*. One of the first messages to the community on our new electronic sign was "United Methodists Stand Against Racism." At least fifteen laity and clergy from this church signed the East Ohio Conference Covenant Against Racism. As I participate in the Conference Anti-racism training for clergy, I am confident that new resources and opportunities will become available for this church to live into its identity, mission, and vision as we stand against racism.

I continue to be honored to serve as your pastor and I look forward to traveling with you on the journey of this new charge conference year. It is an exciting season in the life of WUMC. I ask that as we move into this new charge conference year, we move together in prayer and service committed to being a welcoming and inclusive congregation that seeks to live and love so that others will want to become disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.