

Our Utmost for His Highest

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Here it is. (*holding phone with text*): Large iced coffee—cold brew black with 3 Sweet and Low, Large iced Mocha Light with 2 Splenda, One blue Powerade. On my way to help set up for the church picnic, I called John Brantley to ask if the men wanted coffee or something else from Dunkin Donuts. John checked with Anthony, Ramon and Lucas, and they did. Large iced coffee—cold brew black with 3 Sweet and Low, Large iced...That is as far as John got with their order before I interrupted him. I must have been on speaker, because I heard Lucas laugh and say, “She said, ‘Whaaat?’” I sure did say, “Whaaat!” I’m 70 years old, I was still a couple of miles from Dunkin Donuts with my mind on what I needed to do to get things set up, and I’m 70 years old. John must have known the chances of my remembering a large iced coffee—cold brew black with 3 Sweet and Low, Large iced Mocha Light with 2 Splenda, one blue Powerade, and my small decaf with just milk were not good because he very wisely said, “I’ll send a text.” All of this to say, please forgive me for just reading this sermon, but it is a fact that my memory is not what it used to be. I will try to look up occasionally, but I don’t want to risk losing my place on the page.

When Pastor Brian asked me to do the sermon this Sunday, it was with the idea that it would be based on our revitalization-focused weekend with Rev. Gilmore. Although the seminar had to be postponed, because we did have the privilege of hearing Rev Gilmore preach last Sunday, we decided that I would continue with the theme of revitalization.

Our Lynn Brantley is now the Literacy Supervisor for New Haven Public Schools, but she was once a classroom teacher, and teaching children is still what she is all about. She just can’t help herself, so if you listen for it, you will see that each of her Children’s Sermons contains some kind of mini (or not so mini)-literacy lesson. I tease her about it, but as I struggled with how to organize my thoughts for this sermon, my mind went to the old 5 W’s of writing: Who, What, Why, Where and When. Although the “w” is

at the end of the word, I have added a sixth W: How. I guess I shouldn't have been teasing you about your literacy moments, Lynn.

In order to answer the first W, "**What** does revitalization mean for Hamden Plains UMC?", I Googled "revitalize" and found MacMillan's online definition: to make something that is failing or weak become strong and successful again. Today's reading from Acts 4 gives us an insight into the strength and success of the early church: unity, sharing, fellowship, evangelizing, great power, and great grace. When we read or think about our church's history, we are encouraged as we realize that although we have been struggling in recent years, in the past we have shared the traits and strength and success of the early church and can, therefore, be made strong again as we find new vision, passion for the gospel, hunger for the word, love for community and excitement for seeing people come to faith in Jesus.

Who will do the work of revitalization here at Hamden Plains? As Lay Leader, I would like to think that it is Pastor Brian's responsibility and, as members of the congregation, you might like to think that it is Pastor Brian and the church leaders' responsibility. Of course, it is neither. "I am the church, you are the church, and we are the church together." It is the responsibility of each one of us to work together with our pastor so that the revitalization we all long for will become a reality.

As Lay Leader, I regularly speak with Pastor Brian. One of his recent comments was that for many people, nothing has really changed for them personally. Worship happens each week, pastoral care is offered, prayers are prayed, the church doors are open. He shared with me "Revitalization will happen when each person, guided by the Holy Spirit, asks themselves 'What can I do for God and my Church that I am not already doing?'" There are already examples of this: the young adult event next week, the Welcome Baby event, a revitalized Pumpkin Patch. What other ministry is waiting for you?

The answer to "**When** will we begin the work of revitalization?" is that we have already begun and have accomplished much: fruitful discussions and meetings, mission and vision statements, revitalized ministries and newly-

appointed members of established committees. Greater than all of these is the feeling of hope for the future of our church that we are now beginning to experience.

Because so much has already been accomplished here, “the church” seems to be the obvious answer to “**Where** is the work of revitalization to be done?” It is not, however, the only answer, or even the best answer. **Revitalization begins in our hearts and minds.** In Sunday’s sermon, Rev. Gilmore spoke powerfully about hope, telling us to “Hold onto the hope that God will fix what is broken,” and to “tap into the endless hope that is Jesus”, so that in Him we will be able to say, “We can.” At the Charge Conference, Pastor Brian talked about overcoming passivity, and Rev. Sylvester confirmed it when he told us we cannot be static; we must be bold and dynamic. The Bible tells us if [we] have faith like a grain of mustard seed...nothing will be impossible for [us]” (Matthew 17:20).

With Ramon’s permission, I am going to share with you his answer to the “**Why**” of revitalization. While I was doing the bulletin boards two Saturdays ago, I talked with the woman setting up the nursery for their AA meeting. On one of her trips to the narthex sink, she asked if we have someone different doing the cleaning. When I told her that we do, she said, “It shows.” I e-mailed Ramon to tell him how much his work is appreciated. This is his reply to me: *As a part of the revitalization for the church, I find it necessary to put your whole heart into these things. While some look at it as my job for the church, to me it goes so much further than that. We want our church to be welcoming, smell great, and be appealing to those who are visiting, not to mention our current guests and members. I take pride in the work I do for the church because this is not only a reflection of our building, but it is a reflection of how we represent God.* Thank you, Ramon, for this beautifully-written reminder that all we do for the revitalization of our church is done for the glory of God. By the way, I think I heard Rev. Sylvester said that he thought the church smelled good when he came in.

My answer to the key question “**How** are we going to do the work of revitalization?” is that first and foremost, we must remember that we are a church. We’re not just some organization that has hope for success because of its own efforts. Our hope is the confident belief and expectation

in the truths and promises of God. This is not to say that we sit back and watch God do all the work; we have to do our part.

For many years now, I have been reading, and trying to live by, the incredibly challenging “My Utmost for His Highest,” a daily devotional written by Oswald Chambers. It is, in essence, a step-by-step instruction manual on how to live a life that is “absolutely and entirely for Him and for Him alone” (January 1). God’s highest is not the revitalization of our church; it is relationship with Him through Jesus Christ. God is not looking at our work, He is looking at our hearts. Our most important part in this revitalization process is to grow in faith and love. If, before we take any action, we prayerfully ask, “How will this advance God’s purpose,” we can trust that He will do the rest.

Several months ago, and again at Tuesday evening’s Charge Conference, we were given possible options for the future of our church: revitalization, merging, yoking, and closing. From the beginning, our first, last, and in between choice has unanimously been revitalization. Pastor Brian left retirement in order to help us, but he can’t remain with us indefinitely, nor should he. Hamden Plains is our church, and we are the church. If it truly is our passionate desire that the church’s doors remain open, we must take advantage of Pastor Brian’s guidance and encouragement and work together to sustain the momentum that he has begun. As Rev. Gilmore said, “The light is shining now, what will you do with it?”

With the light shining brightly, we will be praying and working **together**, so that our efforts will become much more effective and powerful. Ephesians 4:12 says, “*Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.*” If a cord of three has strength, how much stronger is the cord that is created by our congregation of 40, 50, or more. With Ramon’s cleaning the church as an example of how much one member of the congregation can accomplish when his work is done for God, just imagine what can be done by the whole congregation working together for Him.

Pastor Brian has often reminded us that, “No one can do everything, but everyone can do something.” If we are to keep open the doors of Hamden Plains United Methodist Church, we must determine what that something is

for each of us. Fortunately, if we don't already know our "something," we have help in figuring it out. Pastor Brian and the Stewardship Committee created a new *Commitment Card* for November's campaign. It asks us to share God's love by giving our treasure, time, and talent. We can use the card to ask ourselves the same in regard to revitalization: What is my treasure, time and talent and how can they be used in our revitalization efforts? As you pray about it, do not dismiss anything for being too small or unimportant; God uses all things for His purposes. Discover your gifts and use them for the good of our church.

In closing, I would like to share with you how two of our church members have used their treasure, time and talent:

I go to Arden House to visit Pat Leno and Luella Williams so that I may be blessed. I think I'm supposed to be going for their sake, but as it usually goes, it ends up being quite the opposite. When I brought communion to Pat this month, as she always does, she searched her pocketbook for money for me to take back to the church for her. She was only able to find two one dollar bills, a quarter, two dimes and a nickel. She apologized for the small amount, saying she was sorry she had no more to give. She went back into her pocketbook and searched until she found two pennies. She gave **all** that she had, **all** of her treasure, and was sorry she didn't have more to give. I told Pat about our Noisy Offering and that I would add her donation to it.

Last November, the Women's Group brought a complete Thanksgiving lunch to the Arden House to share with Pat and Luella. We all prayed before we ate, but after eating for several minutes, I saw Luella with head bowed, hands folded, and eyes closed, thanking God again for her food and all of His blessings. I don't know if she forgot that we prayed or that her heart was so full of gratitude that she just had to stop and give thanks, because either way is evidence of a grateful heart.

You can't visit with Luella for very long before she says, with great expression and hand gestures, "I love Trudy. I love Jesse. I love my whole family. I love everyone.

God is well pleased with these two women of faith who give and love with their whole heart. Let them be our example.

There is but one answer to all six “W” questions, and it is God. Let us put our trust in Him and know that as we give Him our best, the revitalization of Hamden Plains is in His hands.

