

How We Mean What We Say

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We've all heard the saying, "Say what you mean and mean what you say," and we've just tried to do that in saying together our Identity and Purpose Statement. We've tried to put into words what we believe our identity and purpose are – "mission," if you prefer that language – as a new church.

But how are we going to do that? How are we going to live out what we believe God is calling us to be and to do?

For the next few weeks, Francis and I and a few of you are going to take a deeper dive into our Purpose and Identity Statement in an attempt to give some answers to those questions.

So let's start at the very beginning, as the song says in *The Sound of Music*; please repeat after me: "Lyndhurst Community of Faith Church."

What's in a name, Shakespeare famously asked, and in our case, I'd say quite a lot. We – all of us – went through a process of proposing, voting, and eliminating to come up a name that we hoped would capture who we'd been, who we are, and who we want to be. Our name is specific, it's descriptive, and it doesn't cause you to scratch your head wondering what it means.

It's also theologically meaty: we are a community of faith, as all churches are. Does that make our name redundant? At first I thought so, but then I realized that the folks who gather in mosques, synagogues, temples, and on hilltops are also communities of faith, and we are not those folks. We are a church, and a church is a unique kind of community of faith. Our name and our Purpose and Identity Statement identify us as a Christian bunch of people. And who are they?

Now the waters begin to churn, because "Christian" means a lot of different things to different people. Most of us, I think, would understand Christian to mean followers of Jesus the Christ, as Peter, James, and John were in the reading from Matthew that Nancy read for us a few minutes ago.

Except that they weren't Christians. They were Jews, and there were no Christians by that name until some folks in the city of Antioch started using that term, apparently as a slur, a few decades after Jesus' death.

Those *chistianoi*, as they would have been called, held only one belief in common: that Jesus of Nazareth was God's *christos*, anointed, messiah. That's it. That's what made a Christian a Christian from the get-go.

But believing always reveals itself in doing, and the "doing" for a Christian is following Jesus, which is a whole lot easier said than done. It's one thing to declare Jesus the Christ, but

after you've said the words, then what do you do? It's a bit like saying, "I do" on your wedding day. You've said the words, now how do you live them out?

Please repeat after me. "Lyndhurst Community of Faith Church // boldly embraces a collaborative call."

When was the last time you were bold? Was it when you marched into your boss' office demanding a raise or a new coffee maker for the staff lounge? How many years ago was that?

Was it when you spoke up for someone being bullied at work or by someone who did it just because they could? Was it when you got up and walked away from a toxic conversation or a toxic relationship? Or was it when you decided to ditch your car for the sake of God's creation?

The Bible tells us about 360 times not to be afraid, and we'd do well to heed that reassurance as we start a new life together. There are lots of mistakes we can afford to make; few will be costly, and even fewer will be fatal. Our competitive culture, however, rewards success, not creativity, not experimentation, and certainly not failure. It's one of the many ways in which our culture is lacking.

Last week, Francis sent me a profile of the Rev. Karen McEwan Farthing, one of his co-alums from The College of Wooster and a colleague of mine in the UCC ministry. Before she became a minister, however, Karen studied physics and she mastered the scientific method. Experimentation is key to that method, and lots of experiments fail. So "failure," Karen says in her profile, "is a legitimate result, and just because the experiment fails doesn't mean you're a failure."

Being bold, for us, means experimenting with how to be church, not recklessly or mindlessly, but with courage and conviction and the vast wealth of experience assembled in this very gathering right now. If you put all of our ages together, you've probably got at least a couple of centuries of experience at being church, and we have the opportunity to bring all of that experience to bear on this new experiment called Lyndhurst Community of Faith Church.

So let's try new things – new songs to sing, new liturgies to offer, new ways of coming in and going out, new causes to march for, new emails to write, new phone calls to make, new things to plant and harvest, new partners to team up with, new people to irritate – maybe even a new way of thinking about what it means to be a member of a church.

That came up this past week in a Zoom meeting with the Structure and Governance Team. Let me remind you who they are: Chuck Kennedy, Laurie Moormann, and Jim Christensen. Francis and I were discussing with them Article III of our draft constitution, and it became clear that being a member of a church is more complicated than many of us think. Do you have to believe something in order to be a member? If so, what? Do you have to believe several things to be a member? If so, what are they? And how do the rest of us know that? Do we need to know that? Why?

Francis and I both came away from that very stimulating conversation with the hope that we, as a church, will have a serious and sustained conversation about what it means to be a member of a church, any church, at some point in our not-too-distant future, not so that we can tell "who's been naughty and who's been nice" and kick out the people we don't think are up to scratch, but rather so that all of us can come to a richer understanding of and greater appreciation for what following Jesus might look like, for us as individuals and as a community of faith.

So being bold is the first step in embracing our collaborative call. Now let's look at that lovely word "collaborative," a lovely word and a lovely idea. As soon as I read the first draft of our Identity and Purpose Statement months ago, I saw that word and detected Francis' fingerprints all over it, because Francis loves to collaborate and he's very good at it.

The word literally means to work together – co-labor-ate – and that's how we get things done.

But collaborate with whom? What is a collaborative call? Is it a call to work together with God? A call to work together with one another? A call to work with God's creation instead of plundering it for our comfort, security, or enrichment?

If things go more or less according to plan, a few years from now we should have a young microforest on the northwest corner of our front lawn. John McCumber is the driving force behind this up-greening of our space, and it's both a reminder of our need to rebuild the native arboreal canopy and also an opportunity for us to ask ourselves, "What else?" What other steps can we take to work collaboratively with God's other servants in the biosphere?

"For I will consider my Cat Jeoffry," Christopher Smart says in his wonderfully wacky poem, "Rejoice in the Lamb,"

For he is the servant of the Living God duly and daily serving him.

For at the first glance of the glory of God in the East he worships in his way.

A few years ago at Faith, we were faced with a parking lot that had become a safety hazard near our tree island. The roots of the trees had lifted up the asphalt in irregular ways and places, making it dangerous to use the parking spaces in that general area. We got quotes to dig up the asphalt and put down new asphalt and the numbers were not pretty. So we decided instead to expand the island – dig up the dodgy asphalt, lose a dozen or so parking spaces, and then fill in the space with mulch and seed it with native plants. And now, years later, there's a beautiful native prairie where asphalt used to be. Are there areas here, in addition to the microforest, where we could do a better job of collaborating with God's creation?

Let me say one thing more about the microforest. I see it as a form of evangelism. It's proclaiming the good news of God's love for the world, articulated in the opening verses of John's gospel, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God." We believe that Jesus of Nazareth is the Word of God – God's declaration of love for the world – and John says that nothing in all creation came into being without that Word. When we proclaim our love for God's creation, we are declaring our love for Jesus, the Word through whom creation came into being. Ecotheology may not be a familiar term to many of us now, but perhaps it may be one of those new ways of living out our faith if we boldly embrace a cosmic collaborative call.

Finally, would you repeat again after me: "To live intentionally as followers of Jesus Christ."

To live intentionally is to stop sleepwalking through history. It is to heed Paul's advice to the Ephesians to wake up, to become aware, and not to continue to let the world lead us along the broad path that leads to destruction.

Too many of us, I fear, have equated being nice, middle-class people with following Jesus Christ. That doesn't cut it, actually, at least not as far as I can see in the New Testament. Most of us spend our lives building comfortable, pleasant, nice middle-class lives, and we don't want to leave those lives for Jesus or anybody else.

But Jesus doesn't call any of us to lives as respectable burghers. He calls us, instead, to lives that are deliberately out of step with the world. He calls us to lives that will result in someone in a position of power and authority placing a cross on our shoulders and pointing us toward Calvary. To live intentionally as followers of Jesus Christ is to live a life of sacrifice that is more than cosmetic. To live intentionally as followers of Jesus Christ is to live as agents of change – light, salt, and leaven were the images he used – and not as maintainers of the status quo.

That's going to be the big challenge for this new church. Francis and I haven't yet crunched the numbers, but you can look around and see that we are overwhelmingly not young, and to be not-young is, among other things, to have learned the ways of the world. It means that we have had our way of understanding reality shaped by the world and its values. We accept things like violence and injustice as realities about which we can do little, but in fact, to follow Jesus intentionally is to live in such a way that we confront those realities with our lives, being prepared to surrender those lives for another, greater reality that Jesus called the realm of God. That's the reality that we should allow ourselves to be shaped by, nurtured by, and yes, even saved by.

I want to close by telling you of something I learned in an email Friday evening. Some months ago, a friend of mine said that he and his wife were stepping away from social media for a while to try to reorient themselves to God's reality and not virtual reality. They wanted to rediscover the things that actually matter to them as followers of Jesus Christ and as kind, loving people, and they felt they couldn't do that while they were relentlessly bombarded by messages from our monetized, industrialized, and militarized culture. I wished them well and waited to hear. Months went by. Last night, I got an email from my friend who is now, with his wife, two children, and mother-in-law, living in Ghana, and they are, together, setting up an orphanage. His email wasn't long, but all I could say in response was, "Wow, just plain wow." That's what can happen when you stop listening to the world and start listening – really listening – to Jesus.

The realm of God is within us, Jesus said, and my friend's decision made that abundantly clear to me. Our Purpose and Identity Statement is a carefully, thoughtfully, and prayerfully crafted echo of God's Word for us in our time and in our place. It was written by Kimberly Whitney, Colleen Bloom, Robin Weaver, Barb Holtz, and Francis Miller. It was written as an expression of their faith and as an expression of ours. It is a kind of roadmap for our future – the how we mean what we say. Nobody could write that statement but us, and nobody can live it but us. So let's get on with it. Let's live it up.