

Good morning and blessings to each of you worshiping with us today. It is my honor and privilege to serve Kona United Methodist Church as the Chair of the Church Council- our elected leadership team. Today, I want to share with you some of the highlight comments of our 2023 visioning retreats. If you would like a copy of the minutes of the two sessions, they are available in the church office, online, or on the greeting table.

The text for today's message provided guidance for our retreats. Peter's message to the early Christians speaks to us today. He writes, "Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling..." (that was after his first cup of coffee and donut) and saying further, "Each of you should use whatever gifts you have received to serve others..., as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms."

As we plan for 2023, we must reflect on the challenges of the past two years. The isolation caused by Covid limited our connection with each other in worship, fellowship, and service. However, in our hearts and minds we remained steadfast in our belief in God and our commitment to our mission. We knew that the Holy Spirit would guide us to build a shared VISION of hope and faith.

The theme of the 2023 retreat was, "Building on a Shared VISION." Our retreat focused on you, us, as individuals- the fundamental building blocks of our faith. Without U, us, there is no Church, there is no Kona U United Methodist Church, our actions as a community of faith are dependent on us U.

Retreat participants engaged in sharing and identifying our personal and church values. We defined values as **actions we really believe in and care about. The things we value- are necessary to build the shared VISION-** to achieve the mission of our faith and Church and to guide us as individuals, motivating us to be the personification of those values.

As part of our annual retreats over the past five years we conducted broad based congregational surveys. The surveys consistently identified five characteristics that describe Kona United Methodist Church 1) We are an open and friendly church, 2) We have a strong outreach and community presence, 3) We need to involve more young people in our activities, 4) We as a congregation do not communicate well

among our cultural ministries, and 5) We need more active participation by the congregation to fulfill our mission and vision.

These surveys captured the core message of what our church represents. However, the prior retreats did not fully challenge us as individuals. Peter's message verse 10 says each of you should use whatever gifts you have received to serve others as faithful stewards of God's grace. Our retreat focused on us as individuals and what gifts we can offer as faithful stewards.

We each addressed two basic questions:

First, what do you think are the things we as a congregation really value or care about and second, are these the things you personally value in your Christian faith? Discussing these questions culminated in a call to action, personally challenging each of us to do the things we really care about to achieve our VISION.

We agreed that we value being open and welcoming to all who worship here. We care about our fellowship and multiculturalism in our worship.

The difficult question- what prevents us from expressing our faith- doing the things we value? Participants said we have a cultural communication void. But, more importantly, the participants identified a lack of individual participation, if you will... in demonstrating our expression of faith.

Participants from each retreat responded to the question: how can we as individuals connect to do the things we value, both personally- and as a congregation- to build our shared vision? The simple answer is found in scripture, "serve others as faithful stewards of God's grace." We need to involve more of YOU- US, we need to engage in cross-cultural activities- doing practical things to which we can all contribute. We need to engage the youth in meaningful activities- thereby helping to build the future of our church and faith. One rather significant comment urged the group to "feed the soul with the right bread."

The participants in both retreat sessions took a bold step and pledged to bring at least one guest to church at least once in 2023 and to support a churchwide rejuvenation effort. Each of us was asked to complete an action pledge to show our commitment to the VISION and mission of our church. You have a copy of the VISION pledge in your bulletin. I ask that you take time to reflect on what you value and how you will help us build our shared VISION. Please complete the pledge as you are so moved and return it to the Church office.

Our Christian values are so much stronger when we share them with others! We accomplish more, we share the burdens, we share the celebrations. We need each other for encouragement, help, and support in all ways: physical, emotional, and spiritual.

Today starts the beginning of the new Church year. It is appropriate that we begin the advent season by lighting the candle of hope. **The Good News:** There is always hope in the love of God, as evidenced through His son Jesus.

The hope candle reminds us that Hope is a worldly activity. It signals our intent to grow in Christ loving God and our neighbor. Hope is the VISION of a new life, a new beginning, a new future for each of us to be an active part of our Church community, building on a new shared VISION. As we begin this new year and remember the four candles of Advent, hope, peace, joy, and love, each of us can pledge to help our Church grow. Please consider volunteering, serving in leadership, nurturing, outreach, and reengaging in worship and fellowship. Christian service is so much better when we do it with others! We accomplish more, we share the burdens, we share the celebrations. Let us remember there is no Church without U.

Amen.