

**WHO ARE WE?**  
**Walnut Hills United Methodist Church**  
**Doug Peters, Senior Minister**

To know who we are as a congregation you need to know what we value. You need to know what values bring about within us a compelling passion in our interaction with God, with each other and with our world. We may not all understand our values in exactly the same way and we certainly have times of disagreement, as any healthy community does. But our congregational leaders feel it is important to be clear ourselves about our values and to be willing to state publicly what we believe to be our priorities as a community of faith.

**A United Methodist Congregation**

First of all we are a United Methodist congregation. As United Methodists we have historically shaped our beliefs around four points:

- The Bible – how do we experience God in this complex series of writings produced by several cultures over so many centuries?
- Tradition – what has the Christian faith learned and taught throughout the years since Jesus lived on earth?
- Personal experience – how has God nudged our individual spiritual journeys?
- Reason – how do we think, using all the resources available to human beings?

These four points are like four legs of a table – they must each contribute to one’s spiritual balance. Focusing only on one’s individual experience without considering the ancient traditions can lead to imbalance. Reading the Bible without utilizing our God-given intellect can lead to imbalance. Spiritual imbalance does not decrease God’s love for us but it certainly contributes to unrest and chaos in the community of faith and beyond.

**The United Methodist Congregation Known as Walnut Hills**

Secondly, we are the United Methodist congregation known as Walnut Hills. Since our founding in 1989 we have embraced and have been embraced by this mission statement:

“Walnut Hills – A Place to Call Home Where We Are Welcomed and Sent Forth to Serve.”

This mission statement is seen everywhere - in our building, on our publications, in our communications. Our children, youth and adults are taught it. We feel it expresses why God has called us to be a church.

In addition, we have been guided since our founding by these visionary core values:

A Community:

- Of today moving beyond the traditional by being in tune with the lifestyle, needs and resources of people today.
- Not bound by a single neighborhood, but encompassing all of the western suburbs and beyond.
- Willing to give itself away in whatever form that takes, knowing that in giving itself it becomes whole.
- Reaching out to individuals and families and other communities offering acceptance of the individuality of each, and affirmation of our need to be needed.
- Inviting individuals to learn of and give themselves to a God wrapped in mystery and coming to us in love.
- Encouraging individuals to offer themselves in witness and service right where they are in their everyday lives.

### **My Vision for Walnut Hills**

Thirdly, as senior minister I am expected to bring my own vision for how I believe God is calling me to lead this unique community. Therefore when I preach, teach, plan and organize:

- I consider both testaments of the Bible.
- I reflect on the traditions that came before me.
- I listen to the experience of my own heart.
- I reason as deeply as I know how by reading and consulting with others more learned than I.
- I look for consistency with our mission statement.
- I re-visit our core values.

Some directions become very clear to me while others remain uncomfortably vague. There are times when this congregation embraces my leadership and times when either an idea of mine needs more seasoning or is just plain wrong. I try to be as honest as I can with the people I am privileged to serve in my role as the pastoral leader.

To know who we are as a congregation you also need to know what I value. You need to know that I believe strongly that I am called by God to this ministry and you have to know that the values that follow have been developing within me since I entered pastoral ministry in 1975.

1. I believe that the Christian journey teaches that our primary allegiance is to God and that our primary responsibility is being the community of God. This means that sometimes we will be at odds with the culture, society or nations in which we live. The Hebrew prophets in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) and Jesus in the New Testament repeatedly called their societies to

accountability. This call to accountability was generally not received favorably. For us to do the same follows that tradition. Our bishop, Gregory V. Palmer, declared in an interfaith worship service in 2003, “My citizenship is in a higher commonwealth.” This means that while we value where we live we don’t forget that a greater power has a claim on us.

Sometimes I am criticized for taking stands on certain issues and policies. I believe that God’s vision for humanity does not allow for unjust wars, hideous greed, racial or societal superiority or any of the other ills that plague us. Therefore, as Bishop Palmer proclaimed in June of 2005, “We get involved in public policy and social issues because we believe there is a mark on God’s created wholeness.”

2. I am passionate about the study of both testaments of the Bible. The Christian community is not equally versed about the content of these ancient writings. While some in our faith read frequently and understand much, others are strangers to this crucial “table leg” of United Methodism. I believe that Biblical study must include rigorous discussion about how to interpret words and phrases from cultures, languages and centuries far removed from our own. Some people find it easy to fixate on just a few verses and then make unyielding decisions as a result. There are major divisions in the Christian faith over Biblical interpretations. I am not a literalist, meaning that I don’t believe God intends for us to interpret every verse in the Bible literally. I believe we are given a glimpse into the spiritual development of ancient Israel and the early Christian community in the Biblical pages. These writings help transform us as God comes to us in our own spiritual journeys. For this reason our program for the confirmation of our youth includes a yearlong overview of the Bible. For this reason I have introduced several long-term and short-term study opportunities for adults.
3. Because I embrace Walnut Hills’ mission statement I believe that God welcomes everyone without exception. As Bishop Palmer preached in a sermon in June of 2005, “All have the imprint of God on them.” It is extremely simple to welcome people who are like us and with whom we agree. True and honest welcoming is much more difficult where cultures, values, experiences and decisions remind us of our differences. Jesus goes so far as to say that even our enemies are to be loved and welcomed by us.

At this time in the Christian journey perhaps the greatest divisions exist over the inclusion of our gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender sisters and brothers. People at Walnut Hills have asked me to give my response to this issue, an issue about which we must continue to have heartfelt dialogue. The United Methodist Church in our *Social Principles* declares, “Homosexual persons no less than heterosexual persons are individuals of sacred worth. We implore families and churches not to reject or condemn lesbian and gay members and friends.” However, the *Social Principles* also declare, “The United Methodist

Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching.” This last statement represents one of the few areas where I believe differently than my denomination. I think we send a significantly mixed message to those persons we are called to love and include.

The Bible says very little about homosexuality. Jesus says nothing about it. The Hebrew Bible prohibits homosexual rape in the story of Lot in Genesis 18 and 19. The Holiness Code in Leviticus 18 and 20 prohibits homosexuality along with many other practices, but says nothing about committed, loving homosexual relationships. In the New Testament Paul condemns homosexuality in his letter to the Romans (1:26-27) but since it is a letter in response to the Roman Church we do not know the full situation to which Paul was responding. In short, I do not think we can be a fully welcoming congregation until and unless we welcome people completely as they are. Because I am not a Biblical literalist I do not think the scant few passages condemn loving, committed relationships. I will pray and work toward the day when we fully include gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons.

4. The final part of Walnut Hills’ mission statement relates to service. Jesus makes it clear that the greatest honor has to do with serving others. In fact, one cannot completely love the other unless one is willing to serve the other. When we serve others we abandon any sense of superiority over others. It is a way to express love, it is a way to express humility, it is a way to express compassion. The dominant cultures of Jesus’ day and of ours are all too eager to encourage wealth, consumption, prestige and power. Service demands that we put the needs and dreams of the suffering ahead of our own, at least some of the time. True service involves two components – mercy and social justice. With mercy we help meet the needs of those who are suffering. With social justice we challenge the conditions, policies and practices that cause that suffering in the first place. Jesus commanded us to serve others both through mercy and social justice.
5. I am a Christian, yet I believe there is nothing in the teachings of Jesus that urges us to consider our spiritual journey superior to those of others. Jesus, who never stopped being Jewish, urged his followers to enter the Kingdom of God. That doesn’t mean converting everyone to Christianity. That means that we are to encourage all to live by the example of Jesus – fully loving, fully serving, fully committed to God’s vision of universal compassion. Evangelism is one of those noble words that I believe has been misinterpreted. It means the sharing of good news and even more specifically the sharing of the good news about Jesus. The good news about Jesus is that he lived his life giving hope to all. That is his example. The truth is that he gave the good news of hope by the way he lived his life, not by compelling those he met to follow only one world religion. We give the good news of Jesus’ hope by living our lives the way he lived his. We do that while at the same time

respecting and honoring the religious and spiritual pathways of the millions and billions of other persons on this earth.

6. I believe in the concept of stewardship as one of the defining components of the community of God. Although churches often think of financial giving when the word stewardship is used, such an understanding is woefully inadequate. Stewardship means that God entrusts everything into our care. In true community people are entrusted into the loving care of each other. The relationships of which we all are a part are intended to be nurtured in love, trust and encouragement. This wonderful planet with all its resources necessary for sustaining the lives of all God's creatures has been placed primarily into human care.

Everything belongs to God. Humans don't own people, relationships or the earth. When stewardship is honored then it becomes more difficult for nations, corporations, leaders, spouses, parents or anyone else to act as though they are anything other than the nurturing caretakers of that which rightfully belongs to God. If we are caretakers and not owners then it is imperative that we honor the wishes of God that everyone should be free of hunger, that everyone should be spared physical, emotional or sexual abuse, that everyone should live in adequate homes and not on the street, that everyone should have appropriate health care and that everyone should counter the greed that can lead to the systematic destruction of our fragile planet. I believe the church has a responsibility to speak out strongly for human rights, for safe and healthy relationships and for the environmental needs of our world.

7. I believe that every church, including Walnut Hills, has the responsibility of assisting persons in their spiritual journey with God. We ultimately desire to help those touched by the life of Jesus to become disciples of Jesus. To be a disciple means to live one's life following the example of Jesus' life:

- Fully loving
- Passionate about the worth of each person
- Primary allegiance to God above all else
- Understanding that we demonstrate our allegiance to God by making compassion for the poor, the sick, the oppressed and the outcast our highest priority in life.

To that end, at Walnut Hills Church I have helped create the Walnut Way. This is a method through which individuals can be more intentional about 6 compass points on their journey with God. Persons on the Walnut Way claim no spiritual superiority. Rather they identify their intention to grow in:

- W – Worshiping Community
- A – Acts of Service
- L – Learning

- N – Non-Judgmental Way of Life
- U – Unfolding Spirit
- T – Tithing

Those on the Walnut Way join together in Walnut Way Journey Groups of 6 or 8 persons, meeting monthly to encourage each other in their journeys toward greater spiritual wholeness.

While these paragraphs are not the sum total of the values of the United Methodist Church, of Walnut Hills or of my pastoral leadership I trust they give a glimpse into the kind of church we are collectively attempting to be. I believe strongly that there is a significant desire in the hearts and lives of many people to explore what it means to follow Jesus in this way. We feel that we are uniquely positioned to be this kind of church in the greater Des Moines area.