

## **First Church Moderator Remarks 2019**

Leonard Ash

I'd like to start by thanking you all for your vote of confidence and your support for me and all the leaders of First Church. It has been a pleasure working with Council, with ministers and staff, Long Range Planning, Blue Fire, and especially so closely with Kara over the past year. She's been a great mentor and a good friend.

And thank you, Julie Greer, for being willing to step up as Moderator-Elect this year.

I can't wait to roll up my sleeves to get to work with the new Council: Julie, Janet, Moe, Bree Elle, Jesse, Becky, Drew, Jeanne, Amy, Sara, Alan, Phil, and others whose names are to be revealed!

As Moderator, I want to have an open door. However, on Sundays it's "catch me if you can." I am in the choir, and otherwise I am the parent on point for my 8-year-old daughter, Brienna. So good luck finding me! If I'm not in here, I'm probably in the children's play yard helping out with the kids.

And I'd also like to thank my partner, Carolyn, for her support and encouragement.

Thank you to our Mental Health Ministry team, Robin, Christina, Jane, Kerrie, and so many others, for your efforts thus far, and for your achievement today of making First Church a WISE Congregation for Mental Health.

Lastly, thank you to the youth for providing our lunch today and being such gracious servers.

So I must admit that a few weeks ago, as I started to get serious about the theme for my year as Moderator, I was hesitant to stick with the theme "Beyond Our Walls." The federal government was shut down – because of a wall. It just seemed *too* prescient, too cute for this particular time.

I hope you all had a chance to read my remarks in this week's Carillon, where I describe the genesis, many years ago, of the image of First Church moving Beyond Our Walls. Thank you, Derek!

I wrote about my yearning for our church to be the face of Christ to our neighbors. We have such a good thing going here, and it's not just our lamp to hide under a bushel. No! We need to let the light of Christ shine... Beyond Our Walls, in our cloister, in our parking lot, in the streets, down the block, onto campus, across town and throughout the region.

And I also wrote about how we have not let a fire stop us from doing that good work. In fact, we're showing our resilience, our flexibility, and our resolve to expand our ever-widening welcome.

There are so many good works we are taking Beyond Our Walls. Thank you, Kerrie, for your testimony last week about how, in one humble act, you can be the compassion of Christ to our neighbors, our sisters and brothers, literally just Beyond Our Walls.

As a civil engineer, when I think of walls, I think of the literal, structural meaning. Retaining walls to keep hillsides from slumping downward, walls as shelter, walls to create a separation of space, and a sense of security.

So many biblical references to walls pertain to the fortifications used in ancient cities. Walls kept citizens safe from marauders and from being overtaken by warring tribes.

That same confidence that a wall will keep others away is alive and well in our national debate.

But in the New Testament, in Ephesians 2, we read about how God, through Jesus, is doing a new thing – a different kind of construction project.

In *The Message* translation:

You're no longer wandering exiles... You're no longer strangers or outsiders. You *belong* here... God is building a home. [God]'s using us all—irrespective of how we got here—in what [God] is building. [God] used the apostles and prophets for the foundation. Now [God]'s using you, fitting you in brick by brick, stone by stone, with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone that holds all the parts together. We see it taking shape day after day—a holy temple built by God, all of us built into it, a temple in which God is quite at home.

I love that last part, “a temple in which God is quite at home.”

I know that we all want our campus to be the best it can be. We face tough decisions about what we can build with what we realistically can afford, and how the space can serve it highest and best use.

In that decision making, and in this time where we are being flexible and displaced, we must remember that we already are vigilant stewards of a temple... of which, I hope, God is quite at home.

That's why I'm more interested in how we, as a church, are treating one another and the neighbors Beyond Our Walls, than in debating the merits of metal or the sins of stucco.

Of course the detailed decision-making that goes into rebuilding is important, and I know that we are blessed with caring and judicious people who will ensure that whatever is constructed beyond this wall [behind me] will be a beautiful creation.

But how can we say what's best for the church in fifty years if we can't say it lovingly to the church that's here right now?

To paraphrase Jesus a bit, “for what does it gain First Church to rebuild Pilgrim Hall and yet lose its heart for being a loving and caring congregation?”

That is why, this past year, the Council focused on getting back to some basics. We learned about non-violent communication during a Council retreat. We then spent a significant portion of our time during several of our Council meetings discussing a book about family

systems and managing our anxiety. It was not always easy to discuss these sorts of things, and we had moments of genuine vulnerability where we let down our guard.

We faced some tough choices as a Council this past year, and because of our work together to better understand ourselves and the dynamics at play when groups are faced with adversity, I think we were able to find common ground. We could more easily hold each other to account when we drifted from speaking for just ourselves or when we started channeling others anxieties. We realize we have more work to do, as a church and as individuals, to prepare now for the work that is before us, but we're on our way.

Did you know that the Moderator-Elect at First Church is also the head of the delegates?

As a delegate, you are encouraged to attend Ordinations, Installations, Ord-stallations, Ecclesiastical Councils, Bay Association meetings, and NCNCUCC's Annual Gathering. It's a great way to meet others in UCC congregations all over Northern California and Nevada. And no matter who I met I found points of connection with the other.

Declining membership pledges? Same. Fire? Same. 21<sup>st</sup> century church with 20<sup>th</sup> century bylaws? Same. But I loved seeing how God is doing a new thing in all of these other churches, too. So many good things are happening – so many new ideas. We have such a strong network of support around us, to which we contribute and receive support from in return.

Last weekend I went to the Justice and Witness Revival in Sacramento that was organized by our Conference. One of the speakers, in talking about doing the hard work for social justice, said the most important work is the internal work – of what it means to be peace, to be love.

This year I want to challenge us to pause (in our "Active Pause") to consider that internal work. Take stock of those barriers WITHIN US that keep us from loving each other as ourselves, from extending a hand to a neighbor in need, from saying a kind word, from trusting each other.

When we start our church services, our ministers say, "because you are here today, this body is whole and perfect." Do you believe that?

Turn to your neighbor and say, "because you are here today, this body is whole and perfect."

We need each other to make our Church body whole and perfect. And to fully embrace each other, we need move Beyond Our Walls that seem to divide us. When we each have our moments of anxiety or fear that our needs are not being met, let us, through our words and deeds, remind each other that each of us is an important part of our body, that we need each other, and that we will not leave each other behind.

Let us help one another open doorways, install windows, build some ladders to overcome our walls.

I have to say, once in recent months I have had more than a few people say to me that, as Moderator, I'll have my work cut out for me. It's going to be a lot of hard work, some have

implied, maybe with a little bit of “glad it’s not me!” Of course I am just poking fun, and I have taken your comments with the love and well wishes you intended.

It just got me thinking. It’s true that our church faces a lot of challenges, a lot of hurdles to surmount... and of course I want to see us move Beyond Our Walls. But this is not just MY challenge. We are a body, and we ALL have work to do. WE have work to do. We have work to do.

When we face a national trend of declining church attendance, we have work to do.

When we have leaders that try to divide us by stoking fears of the other, we have work to do.

When we still see overt and institutionalized racism, we have work to do.

When we have a system of mass incarceration that has lost sight the human capacity for rehabilitation and God’s gift of grace, we have work to do.

When we have a culture that values temporal profit over environmental justice and the long-term care for our earth, we have work to do.

When we have a steady stream of college students longing for sense of stability and community right here, we have work to do.

When we have such a disparity of resources that people are spending the night in tent cities or just outside our walls, we have work to do.

When we have neighbors with babies who only have a t-shirt to wrap around their bottoms or people who need clean water, we have work to do.

When we speak unkindly to each other, or when we lack the words to be loving upstanders when others are speaking unkindly, we have work to do.

When our local food bank needs boxes of cereal and jars of peanut butter, we have work to do.

When we seek to discern our collective vision for First Church over the next three to five year, we have work to do.

We ALL have work to do.

Let us renew our sense of accountability to one another, to move Beyond Our Walls that hold us back from being the body of Christ in our world.

Let us tear down the barriers that keep us feeling separated from each other.

Let us move Beyond Our Walls that isolate us from our shared responsibility to be the Church that is as Christ to our neighbors.

Let us do the hard work of rebuilding the temple of our hearts – to be a temple in which God is quite at home.

We have to be the Church of Christ today, *here and now*, to make sure we still are the Church of Christ in five years, fifty years, five hundred years.

I hope that this Lent you can pledge your time to attend our Visioning sessions, to listen intently to one another, and to listen to what is stirring within you.

And I hope that this year you will commit to doing the internal work to discern those walls within you and within our collective body that hold us back.

Each of us has work to do, my friends, each of us as parts of one Body.

I'll close with a 16<sup>th</sup> century poem by Teresa of Avila that I heard at the Justice and Witness Revival:

Christ has no body but yours,  
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,  
Yours are the eyes with which he looks  
Compassion on this world,  
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,  
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.  
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,  
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.  
Christ has no body now but yours,  
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,  
Yours are the eyes with which he looks  
compassion on this world.  
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

Thank you, again, for the honor of being your Moderator this year. I am hopeful because God continues to do a new thing a First Church. The Spirit of Christ alive in this Congregation.

We have work to do, and we will do it.

Go forth and be as Christ to your neighbors... here and Beyond Our Walls.

Thank you.