

“It’s Raining”

October 21st, 2007. Where has the month gone? It is hard to believe that that next Sunday is our New Location Celebration.

And can you believe that today marks the point that I have been here for a year and a half?

Do you know what other anniversary we are celebrating today? It was six months ago today that we started a prayer campaign. All of us here at that time committed to pray for our church every day for a six month period. And here we are – six months later.

We all had decided that our church was growing pretty well and that God had been pretty good to us, but we felt God had something more in store for us. So we decided to refocus our attention and start praying for our church.

There were four areas in particular we have been focusing for the past six months – Faith, Growth, Guidance and Discipleship.

So let’s take a few minutes to look at each of these areas and see how God has been blessing us.

The first was Faith. We have been praying for our own faith to grow and to have strength in our faith, not just during the good times, but through the bad times as well; and we have also been praying for those around us, that their faith may grow as well.

The second area we have been praying for is Growth. We have been praying for growth of our church so we can reach out to more people.

The third was Guidance. We have been praying for God to guide us as we choose what paths to take, the right programs to offer, and discernment for which direction he wants our church to go.

Finally we have been praying for Discipleship. We have been asking God to help us become better followers of His, to help us to live our lives closer to how He wants us to live, to seek Him out more in our daily lives, and finally, to reach out to others to help them become Disciples.

So these are wonderful things to pray for, right? Faith, Growth, Guidance and Discipleship.

And I think it is a wonderful thing to pray. I feel we should all pray on a regular basis. But when we pray we need to realize that we should stop and listen for God to respond.

Now I am not saying to listen for this booming voice to ring out of the heavens – and I am not saying to look for an angel to appear right in front of you and strike up a conversation.

But what I am saying is that when we pray, we should stop and listen to our hearts. Is there a thought that comes to the forefront of our minds - is there an emotion that gets stirred up – is there a tugging at our heart strings of something we know we just need to do? These are the things we should be listening for. Prayer is two way communication and it is important that we remember to listen to God in our lives.

I truly feel that when we start to listen to God, if we really try to listen to Him and to pray about what He wants for us, and then – if we put His Will before ours, then I believe that is when we start seeing our life blessed in new and exciting ways.

This isn't just true in our personal lives, but it is true for our church as well. We have been praying for God's guidance, and then we have been trying to keep our hearts and minds open to where God is leading us.

God let's you know if you are on the right track. For example, 6 months ago, I really felt that God was wanting us to do a prayer campaign. I truly felt that we were receiving His blessings as a church, but that He had so much more in store for us. So we started the six month campaign on Sunday, April 22nd.

And God let us know that very day that we were doing the right thing. Before the 22nd of April our worship attendance was averaging in the mid-fifties, but on the 22nd – the day we started the campaign - we had 79 people in worship.

And, just because God likes to take things to the extreme, we had this record number of people the Sunday after Easter, which traditionally is one of the poorest attended Sundays for any church – but for us this year, it was a record number.

Then, on the day after the we started the prayer campaign, the principal of Rattlesnake Ridge called me and asked if I was ready to sign the contract for us to move over here.

Now at first, this doesn't sound like much – but for 2 months before this day, I had been leaving messages for him about every week – and none of them were getting returned. Now, all of a sudden, when we started the prayer campaign, the principal calls me.

Then, just to put icing on the cake, he tells me that not only can we use the cafeteria, but he will give us storage, access to the kitchen and two classrooms to use for the nursery and for Sunday School.

It was more than I could have even asked for. But that isn't even the greatest part. Later we found out that he wasn't even going to charge us for the extra classrooms. I was completely floored.

At no time did I ever imagine free rooms, nor would I have even have dared to pray for free rooms.

But I believe these gifts of grace come straight from God. I believe it was God's way of saying, yes, I hear your prayers – it's about time you started praying for the church.

And don't you find it kind of amazing that our six month long prayer campaign ended the Sunday before our New Location Celebration? It is like we have been preparing ourselves these past 6 months – getting ready.

We already had the Celebration planned, postcards ordered, and then Shirley looked at the calendar and realized that the 6-month prayer campaign ended 1 week before the celebration! I just love the way God works. We might have forgotten when this campaign ended, but God didn't!

How about our growth? 6 months ago our worship attendance was averaging in the mid-fifties. Today we have 79 in attendance - and our average is about 73.

Growth isn't just about the numbers – it is about bringing people into a Christian Community where they can find God for themselves. So when we are marketing, when we are speaking to others, it isn't about how many people our church has in worship attendance, but it is about how many people we are helping get closer to Christ and grow in their faith.

About a year ago we started advertising in the Northwest Monument News – a free monthly newspaper. In May of this year (during our six month prayer campaign) they decided to become a free weekly newspaper and they changed their name to the Marana Weekly News.

The amazing part, they called me and asked me if I would write a column twice a month for the newspaper – and it wasn't contingent on any future advertising. What a great opportunity for us to get our message out to others.

Then, shortly after that, a reporter from the Northwest Explorer called me and asked if he could come and take pictures - because he was doing an article on churches that meet in schools – so we ended up on the front page of the NW Explorer - totally unexpected and free marketing.

Recently we had our first fundraising campaign. Our goal was to raise \$5,000 to do some pretty extensive marketing. We ended up raising \$5,200, which I think is just wonderful. We have placed ads in the newspaper, and in community newsletters. We mailed out 6,704 postcards, and this week 5,000 door hangers are going to be hung on doors.

That is a lot of marketing. I have no idea what will happen next week. I have no idea how many people will come. It is possible that we will not have one new visitor. Doubtful, but completely possible.

And if we don't have a large turnout, we can't get frustrated. For many people, this is the first time they have heard about our church. On average, it takes 4 times for people to hear about something before they respond. So if they don't come now, maybe we will see them at Christmas or Easter.

But we can't get discouraged, because 6,704 households have now heard about us.

But what if the opposite happens? What if we end up with 1,000 first time visitors? Then I guess we go out and buy more hamburgers.

I am not sure what is going to happen, but I trust God. We prayed about this campaign and we set up a budget based on what we felt led to do. Whatever happens, we all need to feel good that we are trying hard to follow God and His Will for us.

Besides physical growth, we have also been praying about growing our faith.

We have been adding programs, groups and classes to help us all grow in our faith and to become Disciples or followers of Christ.

For example, we have started our United Methodist Women's group – whose purpose is to have a creative supportive fellowship, and to expand concepts of mission work. We have started a prayer breakfast for men, a monthly coffee with the pastor fellowship group, and different Bible studies or book studies.

We plan to continue to add more groups and Bible studies so there will hopefully be something available to anyone who wants to grow more in their faith. Recently one person said to me that we were offering too many programs already because she couldn't attend them all.

It is okay if you can't attend all the groups and classes we are offering. Find one or two that you really feel drawn to – as we need to offer several different groups and classes at several different times so those who want to attend can find one that interests them at a time they are available.

But to me, out of all of our faith groups that we added in the past 6 months - the most exciting one we had this year was Vacation Bible School. This year we didn't invite the local community – so we had a very small group, but boy, was it fun.

We had 5 kids and 7 adults! But you don't want to hear it from me – let's take a look at what really happened: (VBS Video)

Would the volunteers please stand up?

Helping Children learn about the love and grace of God is part of helping them becoming disciples, or followers, of Christ. For us, as those leading classes or Vacation Bible School, we are following Jesus' footsteps in helping others grow to be followers of His.

But faith is something more than just learning about God, it is also trusting God. During the past 6 months God blessed us again by a donation that came from St. Mark's.

Stepping out in faith – we accepted that donation and used it to hire our Director of Family Ministries, Rachel Mosher. Eventually these funds will run out and we will need to pay her on our own.

But by stepping out in faith and accepting this gift that came out of nowhere, realizing that it was truly a gift from God, we have been blessed with having her on staff, and now she will be kicking off our Youth Group on November 11th with a free ice-cream social.

Also stepping out in faith, we have hired a nursery worker, Deanna Fitzpatrick, who started today – as well as our new music leader, Jessica Squire. I just think it is so amazing that the first day they both could start was today – the last official day of our prayer campaign. Tell me God's hand wasn't involved in that.

We have been praying and trying to do what we think God has called us to do. When we truly seek out God in our lives or in our church, and we earnestly try to discern what God's Will really is for us – we start to see certain doors open – certain things just fall into place that amaze us.

Sometimes I just look back at the past 6 months and say, “wow”. For those of you who aren't sure yet if you fully believe in God, I say look at what has happened these past 6 months. It would be hard not to see the blessings that have been coming down on our church. It is like it has been raining blessings.

So what now? The six months are over. Does that mean we should stop praying for our church? I don't know about you, but for me, I think this is only the beginning. But I think it is time to change what I've been praying for. I want to keep praying for growth, and faith, and discipleship and guidance, but I think it is time we all start thanking God as well.

So as we pray at different times in our lives, let's remember to pause for a moment and give God thanks for all the blessings he has given us.

Would you join me now in prayer?

Pastor: Mark Maddox

520- 207-6453

pastor@umcSanctuary.org

www.umcSanctuary.org