Pastor’s Report  
Charge Conference 2016  
Matthews United Methodist Church  
Dr. Charles (Chuck) W. Wilson II

It is my great privilege to experience my first Charge Conference with this remarkable mission post called Matthews United Methodist Church. In many ways, I feel as if I have been here serving for years. Yet, my time only began a little over 4 months ago. To be sure, these 4 months have been some of the best I’ve ever known in ministry.

What am I trying to do during this first year? Let me mention a few things …

I’m working to endeavor to maintain my own relationship with God. I know that it is only as the intimacy is authentic and strong that I am of any good to the people of Matthews UMC. I’ve committed myself to the kind of study and reflection that will enable me to have something life-giving to offer to God’s people week in and week out.

I’m working to be the best husband and father that I can be, out of a sense that if I fail the “church that meets in my home, I’m failing God and God’s people too. At the end of my ministry here at Matthews UMC, I want Karen to be there smiling in the rocking chair by my side, and my kids to feel like the church was where they found life abundant and not lost their dad.

I’m working to listen, listen, and listen some more – to the voice of the Spirit, to the remarkable staff community and lay leaders of this church, to the people of the Matthews UMC. I don’t want to take down any fences before I truly understand why they were put up. Nor do I want to fail to encourage us towards the changes necessary to remain faithful to the calling of God in this new season of the church’s life.

I’m working to make the rounds of the many different ministries of our church, and do my best to get to know the mission, vision and values of Matthews UMC. I want to see firsthand where we’re at our strongest, and to discover where we may need shoring up, digging down, or reaching out.

I’m working to cheerlead for, learn from, and challenge the tremendous staff community of Matthews UMC. It is not at all difficult to see why you are so very proud of them. I couldn’t imagine having a more wonderfully diverse and dynamic set of community members. As long as none of them paints their hair green and wears a wedding dress to staff community meetings, I’m sure we’ll continue to get along famously.

I’m working to ensure that Matthews UMC continues to be a multi-generational church, amidst a culture where churches are increasingly either for the young or for the old. To be such a church, we must each be willing to stretch, perhaps in directions not entirely familiar to us. We must be a congregation that has both a high sense of the wonder and majesty of God and a high commitment to joyous celebration that God is among us. We must be a people with both a deep respect for tradition and a genuine openness to fresh expressions and experiences of the timeless truths of God. We must be a church of children and youth who know their elders have much to teach them, and a church of elders who understand that oftentimes God uses children and youth to lead them into new ways.
I’m working to pray faithfully for the people of Matthews UMC, as I know you will for me. We do that because we know that it is God who brings forth the fruit, who builds the house, who gives the increase, who supplies the resources to accomplish God’s purposes. In the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Church at Ephesus he says, “God is able to do exceedingly, abundantly, more than all we could ask or imagine by the power at work in us.” I’ve found that to be true time and time again. You and I can’t pretend to know what the future holds, but because we know WHO holds the future, we can live with great confidence that – as long as we seek and serve him – great things are in store.

Let me mention something about our transition. God’s people called Matthews UMC made the transition for the Wilson family to be so easy and smooth. A thousand thanks to Rev. Paul Craig and his investment of leadership into this congregation. I’m thankful for his ever steady hand of leadership during transitional times. This place was also prepared for my coming by Hampton Hopkins, Chair of Staff Parish Relations. His insightful guidance helped so many lay persons to know we would not only survive change, but flourish. Let me also offer a very special “thank you” to Dr. Ken Lyon. He left behind such a healthy church. Bless you for your faithful, fruitful service of 21 remarkable years.

One point of transition was to get me with as many different groups of people as possible. Thus far (as of November 3), I’ve done “Meet and Greets” with 22 groups totaling nearly 800 people.

Let me make an additional note about our Church Staff Community. These are simply some of the finest, most gifted people with which I’ve ever been associated. My friends that is saying a lot. They serve, give and offer themselves so freely. Already, we have enjoyed some wonderful times together in worship and planning. Into this mix of staff community, we are adding new persons as well. They are superb additions to our already gifted, resourceful community.

Let me make an additional note about Church Leaders. Matthews UMC you have a superb group of church leaders. They have been at the heart of our transition. They have already taken an enormous amount of time to help me get settled and learn the ropes. I have already spent a lot of hours with Mr. Terry Efird, our 2016 Administrative Council Leader, Mr. Grant Overbey, Administrative Council Leader for 2017 and Mr. Scott Putnam, our Lay Leader. They have been my sounding board on many ideas and questions.

Worship in the year head is going to deepen us in the spiritual life. We will start the New Year by taking a look at Black Ice. Black Ice refers to that thin, unexpected and invisible coating of ice that can coat our roads in the wintertime. It is highly transparent and hard to see. In the spiritual world, black ice keeps us from seeing the truth. It distorts our perceptions. It tricks our reality. It feeds us misinformation. It steers us into danger if we’re not careful.

During Lent we will Ask Jesus some of those questions that haunt us this time of the year. Jesus … why are you so special? Jesus … why did you have to die? Jesus … why were so many afraid of you? We’ll look for fresh answers to these ancient questions.

During the summer we’ll enjoy special Sundays around Confirmation, Graduation, a brief study on grace titled Ambushed by Grace. In addition, we’ll enjoy a couple of amazing guest preachers.

During the fall we will embark on A Bible Blockbuster because the Old Testament story of David has all the elements of a blockbuster story. Suspense! Action! Deception! Conflict! Scandal! Sex! Power! But it has one thing “Indiana Jones” or “The Prince of Persia” never had. In and through
the twists and turns of David’s story is the story of the often hidden but always persistent purpose of God being fulfilled in his life. David is known as Israel’s finest leader. The Psalms, his spiritual memoirs, are among the world’s greatest literature. Far from perfect, his administration was rocked by scandal and marred by lapses in judgment. But David’s heart was filled with God. He loved God, obeyed God, celebrated God and placed his life at God’s feet.

We will conclude 2017 with an Advent series titled **Light of the Word, You Shine Upon Us.** We will put up our lights. We will present our dazzling nocturnal displays of light that add so much to the season … and as always, we will light our candles. During Advent 2017 at Matthews United Methodist Church we will learn that God is **with us** in the flesh … that God is **for us** as love … and that God is **in us** as light.

**Let me offer some vision Notes for the year ahead.** Do you know the name of Stephen Jobs? He is the founder of Apple Computer. One of my favorite stories is how in the early 1980’s, Steve Jobs became friends with John Sculley, who was at the time the youngest President ever of the Pepsi-Cola Corporation. Over time, Jobs became convinced that Sculley was the right person to become Apple’s next CEO. Jobs tried his best to convince Sculley to come to Apple, but Sculley wouldn’t budge. Finally one night in New York City they were talking about it again. Sculley once more refused, and after a long, awkward silence, Jobs turned to Sculley and said, “**Do you want to spend the rest of your life selling sugared water or do you want a chance to change the world?**” That is about the closest thing the secular world has to a calling. It is told that Sculley declined Jobs offer that night, but he walked away knowing that he would soon have to say yes. Sculley wasn’t doing anything wrong; it was just a matter of purpose and perspective.

The same is true of the Church of Jesus Christ. It’s not that the church is doing bad things, by no means; we are always doing good things. It’s just that it’s so easy to get focused on the urgent rather than the important.

So let’s ask ourselves a question: Who does Matthews United Methodist Church exist for? Does it exist for those of us here within these four walls? Or does it exist for the people who don’t have a church home and don’t have a relationship with God through Jesus Christ? I believe it was Archbishop William Temple who once said, “The Church is the only cooperative society in the world that exists for its non-members.” Now that is a very bold statement. According to the Archbishop of Canterbury, we don’t exist for the people in here; we exist for the people out there.

Look with me at three Bible characters and see how they responded to God’s call to adventure.

**First of all I want to point us to the Old Testament character of Abraham.** He is 75 years of age, living near his extended family, playing golf, living off of his 401K, and enjoying retirement. Then God initiates a plan to redeem the world, and it comes in the form of a call to Abraham. God said: “Abraham, I want you to leave your country, leave your people, and leave your extended family and go to a location to be announced.” Now, just a parenthetical note: retirement doesn’t appear to be in God’s vocabulary.

Then God goes on to say to this senior citizen: “I going to make your people into a great nation and I will bless you … and all the peoples of the earth will be blessed through you.” Now if you were Abraham, how would you handle both the fear factor of leaving all that was dear to you for a foreign land, as well as the pride factor of being the channel through God would bless the world?” Do you think Abraham had a business card that said: Abraham: God’s gift to the world?”
And yet Abraham leaves it all to follow God’s call to the unknown land of Canaan. Abraham leaves the ease of retirement to become the father of the people of God.

**Think with me about a young Palestinian girl by the name of Mary.** She is living out her hope of marrying a nice Jewish man by the name of Joseph and settling down together. Then comes God’s call to raise the Son of God. Now that will get your attention.

So Mary has a decision to make: She could settle down with Joseph, have kids with him the normal way, drive a minivan, be a soccer Mom and so on, OR she can give birth to the Savior of the world. It couldn’t have been easy on their family life. We know that Mary went on to have at least 6 other biological children after Jesus. After Mary and Joseph had other children, how could they resist the temptation to say to their other children, “Why can’t you just be more like Jesus?” Mary chooses the rollercoaster ride of being the mother of Jesus.

**There is another Bible character I want you to think about. How about an impulsive fisherman named Simon Peter?** Peter was a fisherman, in a time when most people did not choose their profession; it was most likely handed on to Peter and his brother Andrew from their father. In those days, classes and professions were fairly rigid. Peter’s father didn’t sit him down and say, “Peter, if you set your mind to it, you can be anything you want. You could be the Emperor of Rome.” It just didn’t work that way.

And it is in the midst of being steeped in the fishing profession that Jesus intersects with Peter’s life. In our text Jesus says in v. 10, “*Do not be afraid, from now on you will catch people.*” In the Book of Matthew the words of Jesus are recorded as: “*Come, follow me, and I will make you fish for people.*” Jesus gave Peter a calling and a vision for his life. Jesus was saying to Peter, “You’ve been catching fish all your life. But now you’re going to be fishing for the most precious catch of all – wayward children of mine. I’m counting on you, Peter. You’re my Plan A. And someday you’ll return to this Lake – not to fish, but to lead many people through the waters of baptism in my name.” And oh how God used Peter: Peter left the security of the family business to become the worldwide church’s first leader.

I think it bears noting from what we’ve learned from these characters that … the life of faith appears to be in opposition to a life that is safe, stable, and secure.

God’s call comes into each of our lives in different ways. God’s call has come in my life and my story, and I by no means put myself in a list with Abraham, Mary and Peter. But I do know that God’s call comes to ordinary people doing ordinary things.

Thirty-five years ago, I had no idea what I was going to do. I thought maybe I would go to work in the publishing industry. There was a company that had gotten my interest. It would pay a great salary … that stocked the refrigerator full of free drinks all day long … that provided a great workout place … that threw wonderful company parties, and of course offered stock options. Then came God’s call to me to spend all of my time sharing with people the Good News of Jesus Christ.

How would God use me? I felt in my heart of hearts that God wanted me to reach out to the lonely, the last, the lost and the least. Was it a sacrifice? By no means. As the great Scottish missionary, David Livingstone, said, “It is emphatically no sacrifice. Say rather it is a privilege … I never made a sacrifice. Of this we ought not to talk when we remember the great sacrifice which He made who left His Father’s throne on high to give Himself for us.” Friends, that Father loved us so
much that he left the glory of heaven to walk the dusty streets of Palestine, then to suffer, be crucified, and die on a Cross so that we might be reconciled to God.

When I think about what Jesus did for me, when I think about the privilege it has been to have a front-row seat to see lives transformed by the power of the love of God, I say that it is no sacrifice, but rather a privilege. I think I’d be a fool not to follow Jesus.

So what about Matthews UMC? Anybody at Matthews UMC settling for sugared water? Everyone who is a part of our great church has a calling when it comes to God’s kingdom. Your calling may not be mine, but you have one. There’s a saying that God always gives us a choice between our way and the better way.

Every Jesus follower and every Church must ultimately decide what they will be about. Every church must decide whether it will be a luxury liner ... dedicated to servicing the needs of its paid passengers or a lifeboat dedicated to rescuing drowning people.

Do you know the story of Lifeboat #14? The Titanic was on her maiden voyage, when on the night of April 14, 1912, The Titanic struck an iceberg. Less than an hour later, the lifeboats began to be loaded. The ship began to break apart and slowly sink. At 2:20 am the stern section tilted into a position that was nearly perpendicular to the water’s surface and steadily began to sink. 1500 people plunged into the 30 degree water.

Most of the lifeboats had rowed away from the ship half-empty for fear of suction pulling them under when the Titanic sank. Most of those boats refused to return to the aid of those in the water for fear of being swamped. So there they sat, listening to the screams of the dying, hearing the final pleas for help. Of the more than 2200 people on board the Titanic, only 705 would ultimately survive. But one lifeboat did return; Lifeboat #14 and it rescued five swimmers.

When I dream of church life, I dream of people who want to be Lifeboat #14, to follow God’s call into the lifesaving business, to be a search and rescue team. As the great 19th Century Evangelist D.L. Moody expressed it when he said: “I look upon this world as a wrecked vessel. God has given me a lifeboat and said to me, ‘Moody, save all you can.’”

God is at work in every person’s life in this place. God is drawing us to himself, and he is inviting every one of us to participate in this amazing process.

My vision for the church is to be a rescue ship that provides a safe place for people to explore a relationship with God through Jesus Christ, without fear or judgment. So many people have a belief in God but are scared by the church and by Christians – I have met them in our community.

We want to be a church that launches small group “lifeboats.” We want to be a church that gathers ten to twelve people at a time into small group lifeboats that grow by personal invitation until they are overflowing and need to launch yet another lifeboat. These groups are a place where people engage in one-another ministry, the study of God’s Word, and prayer over who God would bring next to the empty chair.

We want to be a church that embraces the diversity of our community. We are a community of people of all colors, styles and backgrounds and economic standing. Our church needs to reflect this diversity and lift it up as a part of calling in this community. God has led the leaders of Matthews UMC to bond together in partnership in this community and world.
We want to be a church that nurtures spiritual growth and discipleship for all ages.

We want to be a church that keeps service to our community and world at the forefront of our calling. We must continue to serve and give in order to answer our call of making and sustaining fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ. God has also called us to deep, deep service around the globe.

We are not without our challenges though. We still have stress upon our finances. How could you not these days. We are not funding our ministries to the level they need. We have staff community members working way beyond the call of duty to accomplish the ministry. We simply need more resources to draw upon: human and financial.

Well, a church that is healthy and resourceful will only happen if there are Jesus followers who sense God’s call on their lives to give themselves away for His sake, who don’t need the church to be a warm, cozy, safe luxury liner, but who have God’s heart that, as the Apostle Peter would later write, “none should perish but everyone to come to repentance.”

Matthews UMC, eternity will be the time to enjoy the luxury liner. Now, is the time to row and rescue. One pastor friend of mine says, “Luxury liners are for people on vacation. Lifeboats are for people on a mission.” I’m sure it was neither easy nor comfortable nor safe for Lifeboat #14 to row back towards drowning people. It wasn’t easy or comfortable or safe for Abraham to leave the ease of retirement, or for Mary to leave the comfort of a normal family life, or even for Peter to leave the security of the family business. But when we submit our whole lives – our futures, our bodies, our treasures, our comfort zones, we become instruments of the Holy Spirit to save a few.

What will you leave to find God’s call today? Do you remember the title of John Ortberg’s book? If You Want to Walk on Water, You’ve Got to Get Out of the Boat. Is your boat in dry dock or is it in the rescue business? Will you hear Jesus when he calls your name today? Will you say “yes” to him? Will you become a “witness” for him, telling others what God has done in Jesus Christ?