

## What's on our List?

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Uncle Walter was the eccentric uncle in our family. Maybe you've had an eccentric uncle. It's possible a few of us may BE an eccentric uncle. Anyway, Uncle Walter was ours. Now don't get me wrong—he was a good man. He lived in a narrow row house in Lebanon, Pennsylvania in the heart of Pennsylvania Dutch country, with his wife, my mom's sister, Amanda. He never owned a car and for much of his life he walked or biked where he needed to go, even to work at the Bethlehem Steel plant. He was the church organist for many years and a man of great faith. Nevertheless, he was eccentric.

Uncle Walter was a list-maker. He would make a list for just about anything. Many of his lists were tacked up on his little bulletin board behind his little desk. My favorite, though, was his PIE list. That's P-I-E PIE list. You see, on Sundays, Aunt Amanda would prepare a big Sunday dinner right after church, and then later on Sunday evenings, every week, their supper would be pie and ice cream, and pretzels. It's a Pennsylvania Dutch thing. So every Saturday, Uncle Walter's job was to walk the couple of blocks to the corner bakery and buy the pie for Sunday. But it was important for him to know WHICH pie he was to buy on a given week, so in the beginning of the year, he would make a list of all the Sundays in the new year, and he would plot out his pie strategy. The objective was to ensure an even distribution of apple, cherry, and so forth while taking into consideration seasonal specialties: strawberry in the spring, peach in the summer, and pumpkin in the fall. Apple, or any other flavor, was not to be repeated until all the other flavors had made the rounds.

We may not make lists like Uncle Walter did, but we take list making for granted, don't we? If we stop and think about it, lists are wonderful creations of a God-inspired human race. I'd like to take you through three ways lists can help us as individuals, as Christians and as a church.

First, making a list- of tasks or objectives- brings order out of chaos, change, or uncertainty. A written list is like a roadmap to keep us from getting lost. It reduces stress, and increases our odds of successfully navigating whatever rough waters we're in. Psychologist and author David Cohen says this about written lists (and they must be written, he says): "...they dampen anxiety about the chaos of life; they give us a structure, a plan that we can stick to; and they are proof of what we have achieved that day, week or month." A list can be "what I am going to buy at the supermarket" or "what am I going to do today", which by the way, on this Father's Day takes me back to Saturday mornings as a child. My father would sit at the kitchen table with his coffee and make a list of things he wanted to get done on that Saturday. In my teen years, I took special note of what was on these lists since often I would become a reluctant participant in their completion. But a list can also be more strategic- more long-term. Frequently our anxiety comes not from what has to happen today, but what we know needs to change over the long haul. A list has tremendous value in this regard. As Christians, we're on a lifelong journey. God calls us to move forward, to make progress, knowing in our imperfect state we can't snap our fingers and achieve some end state of a Christ like existence. So if we are to progress in our Christianity, we have to do it intentionally, and with a series of incremental steps which we can put down on a list. In the Scripture we read this morning, Paul is counseling the people of Philippi about the journey. "I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us." Paul recognized that spiritual growth, even his own, happens intentionally with a series of tasks and objectives.

The same is true of the church. There is no question that Asbury is facing a time of significant change, even uncertainty and collective anxiety. Many other churches face the same situation. So simply put, Asbury needs a list, too. And in fact, your Church Council has proposed the development of a 5-year plan to provide us the clear direction we need.

In the business world, it's fairly typical for the organizational development people to recommend that individuals, departments, divisions and so forth establish a list of three or four things they want to achieve over a specified period of time. They tell us that having too many objectives or tasks is counterproductive, that we can't focus enough on any of them because there are just too many. I believe the same is true here at Asbury. I believe we should prayerfully decide what objectives we want to focus on, and then with God's guidance develop a list of initiatives that support one or more of those objectives.

This leads me to the second important function of a list. We've said a list helps us find order at a time of chaos or uncertainty. But a list helps us PRIORITIZE the things we want or need to do.

The average supermarket carries between 40 and 50 thousand items. Have you ever walked up and down the supermarket aisles one after another without a list in hand? If you're like me, you end up with many more things than you intended to buy, and when you check out you don't have at least a few of the important things you came for. Not very efficient, is it? As individuals, we can fall into the same trap in every area of our lives. We may go from task to task, project to project, in sort of random fashion. At the end of the day then, we have done things we didn't need to do, and we haven't done some things that were really important. A prioritized list—from most important task to least important—keeps us focused on the most important things. In our Christian lives, we also need to prioritize. Reverend Shine Thomas says this: "When we are growing in Christ likeness or reaching for the prize, every other area of our lives is growing as well. Spiritual growth is foremost and central to all personal growth and is of ultimate priority and yet it is without a doubt the most neglected priority." In the journey, or as Paul says as we "press on", we need to determine what we can do that has the most spiritual value for us, and put those things highest on our list of priorities. Not sure what those things are? We'll talk about that in a moment.

As a church, we also need to keep our priorities in order. As we mentioned earlier, we can do many things sort of well, or we can pick 3 or 4 things we want and need to do really well. I pray that as your church council and the committees and organizations of Asbury meet in the coming months, we can have fruitful dialogue about what our top priorities should be, and then collectively develop lists of tasks or initiatives that support those priorities. If we can't match a task to one of our priorities, then in the interest of using our human and financial resources wisely, we should think about whether or not we should do that thing.

We've said that lists bring order out of chaos, change and uncertainty. We've said they also help us prioritize those things that are most important. And they do these things for us as individuals, Christians, and as a church.

Third and finally, lists can help us to record and acknowledge our accomplishments. Craig Jarrow, author of *Time Management Ninja*, says this is one reason why paper to-do lists continue to be effective. They are both to-do lists and "done" lists at the same time. Crossing an item off our list is a great motivator and makes us feel good. But on paper, after we've crossed it off, it's still there as a reminder of what we've accomplished. It allows us to celebrate. This same principle applies to us as Christians. While we don't want to dwell on the past, it is perfectly fine to acknowledge the progress we've made on our spiritual journeys. I suspect many of us remember our first Bible study, or when we went on our first retreat. Perhaps we remember when we were able to comfort a friend at a difficult time by witnessing to the healing power of Jesus Christ. This recognition of where we've been on our journey only increases our resolve to continue to finish the race, in Paul's words.

Churches too often measure success by the numbers. The Reverend Doctor Jerry Schroyer writes that "many feel that the more people who attend a church and the larger the church budget, the greater the church. That is not how God evaluates churches though." 2 Peter 3:18 says "but grow in the grace and

knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” We are commanded as Christians and as a church to grow spiritually. When we do that, we are successful and God is pleased. Reverend Doctor Schmoyer suggests we should measure our growth by asking these questions: Are we becoming more loving in how we treat others? Are we more aware of God’s work in our lives? Does the Word of God have a greater place in our lives than it used to? Are we quicker to forgive others than we used to be? If we can answer yes to these, we have grown and our collective soul, our church, is healthy.

Friends, at times of change and uncertainty, when we even feel as though we are going backwards, we sometimes try to fix things ourselves. This is a natural inclination of a species that differentiates itself by its ability to problem-solve. While we can influence outcomes, to be certain, it is only with God and through God that we can succeed. And so, when we make our lists and we set our priorities as Christians and as a church, keeping our priorities centered on Christ is undeniably important.

When I was researching this week, I was struck by one thing: In every single writing I came across, one act was first in the lists of things we must do: Prayer. Doesn’t matter what form, doesn’t matter if it’s once a day for an hour or 100 times a day for 10 seconds each, we’ve got to keep the line to God open and active. If we don’t, well, we certainly can’t grow, and nothing else on our list is going to work.

You know, the pledge of our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service and our witness makes a wonderful starting list to build upon. Let’s list two or three specific things under each category we can do to make progress in each of these commitments, work toward those, cross them off when we’ve done them, and then list some more! This intentional spiritual growth, friends, is how we will reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us- as individuals and as a church. Amen.