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Interview with John Fullerton

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John Fullerton

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Accession number: ELFS-CWM-A013101.A
Event: Interview with John Fullerton
Place: First Presbyterian Church, Mt. Vernon

CM: This is Chris Meyers interviewing Pastor John Fullerton, Accession number ELFS-CWM-A013101A, The date is the 31st January, year 2001, the time is approximately 10pm and we're here at Pastor Fullerton's office at the First Presbyterian Church in Mt. Vernon. Maybe you could start by just letting me know a little bit about the congregation, and...the demographic information regarding the congregation.

JF: Sure...I wanna say for purposes of clarity on the tape, it's 10am. As a college student, 10pm, you're just getting started, man. It's 10am. Ah, yeah – the congregation. We are a downtown congregation, we are one of the original churches in Mt. Vernon, this church was founded only a few years after Ohio became a state. Some of the early settlers in Ohio founded this church and so we've been sort of a central church to the Mt. Vernon area for some time now. And currently we have about 400 members of the church. There are about 275 of those worship regularly. We've got a strong average worship attendance. And we also have a number of visitors every week including the Kenyon College students are regular visitors and people from the town who hear some of the things about the church. So we've got a fair number of people visiting every week. The Presbyterian Church on the whole tends to be a higher educated body of believers and that's reflected in this congregation as well. There are a number of doctors and attorney's, and certainly a high number of people with college degrees, and a high number of people with post graduate degrees. So a good thinking congregation. There are a fair number of people who are native Mt. Vernonites, which having grown up in the military is still unusual for me to get used to people who were born here and raised here – a good number of people come back to Mt. Vernon and live here, and so ah, you get a number of people in the congregation like that. We also attract a good number of people from the Apple Valley community. It started out as a retirement area – man made lake – 25 years ago, and has just boomed with population. So now you've got not just the retirees who are worshipping with us, but you also have the people as they continue to expand, there are a lot of first time homeowners who are buying out there, and a lot of those young families are finding their way to Mt. Vernon and finding this to be a great place to worship with them as well. And apart from that they Kenyon College folks, Nazarene College folks – we have some of the professors and students from both of those schools here. And then people from all around, probably within – 95% of the people are within a 7-10 mile driving radius. We've got a few folks come in from Butler, a few from Centerburg, but most of em are right here in this area.

CM: Could you also talk to me a little bit about ah, the differences in the times of your services and who goes to each?

JF: Sure. We ah, a couple of years ago formed an early service that came...originated for a number of reasons, not the least of which was a congregational interest in having a second service. And the early service that we currently have is fairly unique to this area, you don't see a lot of this type of approach to do worship. It uses praise and worship

music but is not what I would consider contemporary. I would consider it more contemplative and that is there is a lot of space for quiet, communion is served every week. It is just a very intimate prayerful participatory, contemplative, quiet meditative kind of service – that’s our 8:30 service, it’s held in the church hall. And ah, you’d think that that would inherently attract the younger crowd, but it’s not necessarily so. I’m always pleased to see people who are retired worshipping at that early service. So it’s an interesting service. There are a good number of younger folks in there. But it’s not all exclusively so. And so that’s the early service. 10:30-11 is the fellowship time when people are kind of gathering and assembling, and then from 11-12ish, depending on how long those pastors go, ah, it is the second service. And the second service is more traditional. When people think about Presbyterian liturgy and worship, it’s the type of service they would think of. It’s fairly liturgical – not as much as other liturgical services. We bring in the cornerstones, and other musical presentations, ah, and we use the gray book, which is the praise and worship book, at least once a service. But for the most part it’s a traditional service. So those are our two services.

CM: Um...I guess it you know anything about the activities that people partake in after church- whether it’s something that’s church sponsored or it’s something that people just do on their own. Could you talk a little bit about that?

JF: Are you referring to Sunday only?

CM: Yeah...Sunday.

JF: Cause we could talk quite a bit about what they do together socially for the rest of the week. Sunday only, well the 8:30 crowd may very well go out after the service and get breakfast – usually go downtown to Jody’s or out to Bob Evans or somewhere. Or go home. You know, part of the motivation for coming to the early service for some people is the fact that they get the sentiment of the wonderful service, but also at 9:30, they’ve still got the rest of their morning to go and the rest of their day to go. There’s a sense of being able to do more on a Sunday. And so for some people after the 8:30 service they will go home and have breakfast or they’ll go to one of the restaurants in town and have breakfast. Not a lot of those people – it’s not a huge attendance at that service anyways. There’s probably an average of 65-70 people there. Some people that do go to adult ed. – we have food in the class. So that’s another thing they’d do afterwards relating to food. Between the 10:30-11 hour there is usually coffee time. But most folks when I think about where they go after the 11:00 service...you know that’s kind of prime time food time – prime eating time. And there are several clusters of people I have in mind when I think about that. There’s the cluster of folks that go to the Village Inn. I think a fair number of them are the Apple Valley gang. They’ll go out to the village in - they’ll call...I’ve seen them on the phone in the back of the church saying, “hey...hey preached too long, we’re on our way, we’re running a little late here.” Well I haven’t heard them say that, but you know. “We’re running a little late, is it too late to make a reservation?” And off they go. I’ve actually never joined them – I’ve threatened them a couple of times that I would. So there are those folks. And then there are little pockets of folks that’ll go out to.... Ryan’s is a popular place in town. Ah...mostly because of the variety that

people can get. It's kind...well if you like it it's great, if you don't...you know, it's kind of the fat of America there. You know, Ryan's – ugh. But you know, we've done it, our family goes there, and our kids love it. You know because they go and we're usually with someone else and they get to pick what they want on the buffet. So there's some Ryan's folks, some Jody's folks, um...you know there are not a lot of restaurants in Mt. Vernon to begin with, so the choices are fairly limited. But most people go home. And there's probably still a fair number of people for whom the Sunday dinner is a...there's something special about the Sunday dinner. There's no school, there's no things...well there are a lot more things these days going on. But there's not as much competing for their attention on Sundays. Still, thank goodness that there's not as much competing for their attention still. And it'd be nice if it continued to reverse or, so there was less and less. Hey, I'll watch the ball games there with the best of em, so you know...So a fair number of people. Most of the people I think still go home after church and 3 Sundays out of 4 we do the same thing. We'll go home and have lunch there before we do the rest of whatever the day is going to hold.

CM: Do you think that some of the groups that you're talking about who go to restaurants...are those groups who are made up of the same people who go to the same restaurants week after week? Or is it more of a sporadic, sometimes people will just go out and eat?

JF: Maybe a way to answer that is to say what I don't see happening. What I don't see a lot of is the retirement crowd saying to the young couples with kids, "hey why don't you come join us at the village in" or I don't see the couple in their forties saying, "hey – can you guys who are in your eighties...can we join you, or why don't you join us". I don't see a lot of that. I do see a fairly homogenous group going out to these places. And that's understandable...you know...being of the same generation, you laugh about the same shows, or the same events...it's understandable.

CM: Um...now, I don't know if you'll be able to answer this question, but I was wondering if you know anything about the history behind the after church crowd. I mean not just from your congregation alone, but ah, from around Mt. Vernon. It seems like it's a very popular thing to go out to eat after church...

JF: I think it goes back to um, the days when Sabbath keeping meant a lot more than it does now. And the days...the early days of this country and on through early 1900's, and mid 1900's when families would set apart Sunday. It was a day where you didn't do anything. You went to church, and ah, depending on what tradition you came out of...there were some traditions where they were more strict in what you could and couldn't do afterwards, but for the most part, regardless of the tradition that you came out of, Sunday was a day where you didn't do a lot. So one of the things that they...and I'm thinking especially in the 1800's and before the shift to market economy and the urbanization of America when you had an agrarian society. And, if you're going to be harvesting, you're going to work your butt off for six days. But you are going to honor that day of rest. Unless it is harvesting, and a lot of times it, you know, the wheat needs to be taken in, your livelihood for the next year depends on it and you have three weeks to

do it, you are out there 24-7. But, for the most part they worked hard for six days a week and on the 7th day, they truly did in a way set it apart for the Lord. And one of the highlights of that socially was the coming together. Now theologically, the idea of breaking bread together, there is a profound significance to the idea, you know, I mean when the two were on the road the Ammeus, it was in the breaking of the bread where they actually saw and realized who they were walking with. And so there is something ceremonial about sitting down together. Even having lunch with you all on Tuesdays, you know, we are breaking bread together. There is a ritualistic dimension to that that unites people. It's hard to sit down at a table with someone that you can't stand and eat together, because there is a sense of rejuvenation of the body and along with that rejuvenation of the spirit. And it's hard to be in poor relations with somebody – I mean it happens, I know, but it's hard when you're sitting down and having an intimate thing like that. And that carries over to the social dimension...you know I grew up...the South is home for me. And I know that in the South there is very much a southern tradition...and I think it's not just Southern, but I've known this southern tradition, that you...there's always pot roast, on...or fried chicken, or something being readied for the meal after church. And there's something very ritualistic about the meal after church. And in many ways, we've lost a lot of that – you know, what that was all about. But in other ways, this clustering together and going to restaurants is the modern ideration of going to grandma's house and family members driving their wagons in from five different directions. Meeting at grandma's house and everybody bringing something for the pot luck after church. The principle is still there. The idea that if you're sitting down with loved ones...fellowship of family, of faith, and breaking bread together. Even though no one says it, there are bonds of unity made during that time, and when we think about it, those bonds of unity have a transcendent quality to them, and as Christians we think, once again, there is something sacramental about every time we get together as families in our own homes, so I think that has something to do with it...a cultural desire to come together at table after church on Sundays.

CM: And do you very much see the restaurant groups and the people who are going to their homes doing a very similar thing?

JF: Yes, yes...only the people going to restaurants spend more money to do it. And have less work too...they don't have clean the dishes and they don't have to make the food since somebody else does it.

CM: Do you think that that is at all related to...maybe this is taking it too far...but do think that's related to the fact that they want to eat at a restaurant...that's related to the fact that they don't want to be doing any work on the Sabbath...

JF: No...I would hardly call them purists on the subject. Because you know, one step beyond that is they're making somebody else work...in order to accomplish that, so I don't think that Sabbath keeping is at the heart of that.

CM: Well that's all I have...is there anything else that you wanted to add about restaurants in general or food?

JF: The comment that I made to you the other day, and I'm always amused by it, because when we introduced the early service I was describing a few years ago, one of the things we did is we moved our second service...the later service time from 10:45 to 11 o'clock. Well that 15 minute window had implications on the very crowds we've been talking about here...because there's a certain amount of, you know, 'we've got to beat the Methodists to the restaurant', so...it's really interesting to see that, and certainly not something that we would drive any worship structural decisions such as worship times, but it was something in our conversation that we were very much aware of...that there is a crowd out there, and we need to just be mindful of that...that have been getting to their restaurants or their homes at a certain time – well the restaurants in particular, as I'm thinking about this. They've been getting to the restaurants at a certain time, and ah, we're going to throw that schedule off by 15 minutes, and if we preach long, you know, whoa, we're really throwing it off there. And there is something magic about 12 o'clock. And we've talked about it in worship planning that, you know, we need to be aware of realities out there. And the reality is that the one-hour worship service is the expectation. Now we can change realities by educating the congregation and saying, "hey...we don't think one hour is going, we wanna have sacraments every Sunday, we wanna do other things in the service, and we know that that's going to mean that they'll be a consistent extension of the worship service by 15 minutes, by 30 minutes, so from now on, just be aware, plan your time accordingly, plan your lunch schedule, eat a little more for breakfast...whatever it is so that you know that we're going to be out at 12:30 and not 12 o'clock. And so that's always a possibility. So just to say that we are aware of...the implications in worship planning...we're aware of what those implications are for those people who have plans afterwards. So...beating the Methodists to the restaurants...

CM: Thank you very much...is there anything else that you wanted to add?

JF: Nope

CM: Great, well we'll close there.