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BETHANY LUTHERAN CHURCH  
ELKHORN, NEBRASKA  
JANUARY 9, 2005  
PASTOR MARK FRY

1 PASTOR MARK FRY: Happy new year to you as we begin  
2 a new year.

3 My state of the church address, I'm no politician  
4 and I certainly am not a speech-giver.

5 I have been blessed to be here, a pastor of this  
6 church for 17 years.

7 When we came here my daughter was in kindergarten  
8 and my son was a baby.

9 So Pastor Wenda and I have been here and I really  
10 can kind of see in the years we probably have been pastors  
11 of three separate churches.

12 There are really three different eras as I see  
13 them, and I can't pinpoint when those were, but we used to  
14 be middle size, and then we were large, and now we are  
15 really large.

16 That brings its own set of challenges and one of  
17 the challenges is, I want to confess to you I'm not a  
18 numbers guy, but numbers are important.

19 And I want to preface what I have to say by saying  
20 that in God's eyes you're number one.

21 You are the reason for the season of Christmas and  
22 God loves you and he has given his Son to die for you.

23 And so I want to talk a little bit about numbers  
24 and my two bookends of that are from John 6 and John 21.

25 If you have your Bible there you can look at it

1 with me.

2 But I'm highlighting this fabulous story. In John  
3 6 there are five thousand people being fed by five loaves of  
4 bread and two fish, and they're very small loaves. This is  
5 probably a kid's lunch.

6 But with the miracle of God's abundance and the  
7 power of Christ that small meal is blessed and multiplied  
8 and it feeds five thousand people and they are satisfied.

9 And after the feeding of that the disciples are  
10 invited to gather up the leftovers.

11 And so they do that and there are twelve baskets  
12 full of leftovers.

13 The other scriptural reference is from John 21, and  
14 it's interesting to me because there's precision in the word  
15 of God as he talks about different things.

16 And so Peter, he's the impetuous one, he jumps into  
17 the ocean, he comes in, they pull this net in, and it's just  
18 full of fish, exactly 153 of them, and the net was not torn.

19 So I want to talk a little bit about numbers. I  
20 think it's interesting that the kid had five loaves and two  
21 fish and there were twelve baskets left over.

22 I think it's interesting that there were 153 fish.  
23 I think it's really significant that numbers are important,  
24 so that is kind of where I'm coming from.

25 There is an entire book of the Bible called

1 Numbers.

2           So it teaches us that God does care about numbers,  
3 but again you're number one in that whole pyramid scheme  
4 that God has.

5           But we need to pay attention to numbers and we need  
6 to extrapolate some meanings from them and then move  
7 forward.

8           Because, as we all remember, Jesus leaves the 99 to  
9 seek the one who is lost, and that's you, and that's your  
10 neighbor who is out there who is lost.

11           So I'm throwing out some of these numbers and I  
12 want to build on that and this net in John 21, verse 11, 153  
13 fish.

14           It's an interesting number and theologians have  
15 been bothered by that number for two thousand years.

16           Why 153? What is John getting at when he describes  
17 the catch?

18           If you're a numbers person, you can take my word  
19 for it, or you can do it yourself, I did it because I didn't  
20 believe the person who told me.

21           If you add up one, plus two, plus three, plus four,  
22 all the way up to seventeen you come up with the magic  
23 number of 153.

24           The early church fathers, Jerome included, made a  
25 conclusion then.

1           We aren't there yet. There's more fish to be  
2 caught.

3           As we notice in the story that the net was not  
4 torn, there is room for more. The net can handle more and  
5 not break.

6           We as a church are the net. We aren't there yet.  
7 We did not build on for ourselves.

8           We built on for the sake of the Great Commandment  
9 and the Great Commission, so we are going to get there.

10          We aren't there yet. The net can handle more and  
11 not break.

12          I brought along my favorite prop today. A few  
13 years ago I was taught to invest my own image statement.

14          And that's a picture of me before the church was  
15 added on and I have only recently started to fly fish.

16          And I was raised in eastern Iowa on the Cedar  
17 River.

18          I was born in Cedar Falls. I was raised in a  
19 little town of Vinton, Iowa, right on the Cedar River.

20          I got married in Waverly, Iowa, the Cedar River  
21 runs through there, Pastor Wenda and I at the church.

22          St. Paul Lutheran's church is probably five blocks  
23 from the river. Her parents lived one block from the Cedar  
24 River.

25          When we first got married my first job was in Cedar

1 Rapids, Iowa.

2 So I have been around the river my whole life,  
3 basically.

4 And I had two grandparents, maternal and paternal,  
5 that both loved to fish. That's why I love to fish.

6 My Grandfather Fry was a funeral director. His  
7 philosophy was you sit quietly and you wait for the fish in  
8 the Cedar River to bite and if they don't bite it's your  
9 fault because you're being too noisy.

10 We would literally sit there for hours on the  
11 hottest of days and if the fish didn't bite, we must have  
12 been scaring them away.

13 My other grandfather, Grandfather McCandless, was a  
14 farmer.

15 He loved to fish, but his philosophy was you sit on  
16 a five gallon pail and you throw your bait out and you sit  
17 and wait and if they aren't biting you go somewhere else.

18 You do not waste your time sitting in the hot sun.  
19 You go find where they are biting and then sit there.

20 But the point being, you sit and wait. I was  
21 trained in that kind of fishing, I was trained in that kind  
22 of pastoring; to sit and wait and if they don't bite, it's  
23 their fault.

24 My personal image statement now is a fly rod,  
25 because it's totally different.

1           It's not about location; it's about presentation,  
2           so it is totally different.

3           In the art of fly fishing what you try to do,  
4           instead of being located where the fish are, is you lay the  
5           bait out there in a very appealing and attractive manner and  
6           hope that the fish will take that.

7           I think the same is true as churches grow. Nothing  
8           makes me madder than saying Bethany has grown because of its  
9           location.

10          I don't believe that. I believe Bethany is growing  
11          because of the grace of God, and because we have been bold  
12          enough to take some risks of presentation.

13          And I'm here to tell you that those are very  
14          necessary, they are very important.

15          So I'm framing all of this around the numbers  
16          thing, the fishing thing, my own personal challenge, because  
17          I was trained, and a lot of us as Christians are trained, to  
18          sit and wait for the fish to bite, and if they don't bite  
19          it's their fault.

20          That's no longer acceptable. The stakes are too  
21          high for the sake of the Gospel.

22          So I throw that out. We aren't there yet. The net  
23          can handle more.

24          Notice in that story of the feeding of the five  
25          thousand, they gathered them up so that none might be lost,

1 the fragments of the five barley loaves filled twelve  
2 baskets.

3 I have made a list of twelve baskets of leftovers  
4 that I believe are my most prized blessings through Bethany  
5 in the year 2004 now going into 2005.

6 So what I am going to do is, and these are very  
7 important, but the importance being, mine is not an  
8 exhaustive list, I would invite you to look in the rearview  
9 mirror, twelve things you're thankful for from your church,  
10 if you're part of the Bethany community, and thank God for  
11 those.

12 Lift those up to God and then move into 2005 with  
13 those as leftovers.

14 Because I believe these twelve important leftovers  
15 can feed and lead our community and the world to and for  
16 Jesus Christ.

17 So I'm throwing them out, not in any particular  
18 order, but my first one, as I say, it's not an exhaustive  
19 list.

20 My first one is our tremendous staff of people here  
21 at Bethany.

22 I don't know how many people we have on staff.  
23 People ask me that and I really don't know.

24 There are twenty-something, but we have people that  
25 are specialists that do ten hours, fifteen hours, they work

1 Mondays, Thursdays.

2           There's Brad, our sound guy, who comes in weird  
3 times and does so many things.

4           But we have probably twenty-five or so different  
5 full and part-time people and we recently in the last  
6 sixteen months or so have implemented a whole different  
7 model of staffing.

8           It's a directors-based model, and I'm here to tell  
9 you that's been hard.

10           That has hurt. It has been a growing pain. It has  
11 alienated some people, but it's a very necessary shift and  
12 change.

13           We have these unbelievable directors now and so  
14 people on our staff know who to go to for particular things.

15           And that has not been harder on anybody than on  
16 Pastor Wenda.

17           Last year she was the interim director of youth  
18 discipleship.

19           This year she's going to be the interim director of  
20 adult discipleship, and that's not easy.

21           She's not trained to do that. She's going to have  
22 to learn and go to some opportunities and grow into that  
23 position, but that's not easy, to always be shifting.

24           And the other directors we have, I mentioned Teri  
25 in our announcements, she's our director of administration.

1           We've got Gene, our director of music. A lot of  
2 you get to meet him on Sunday and some of the gifts he  
3 provides. He's fabulous.

4           Barb Baumert is a fabulous director of our youth  
5 discipleship.

6           Pam Hamburger is our fabulous director of  
7 children's ministry.

8           And then we've got Jill Bruckner, our fabulous  
9 director of communications.

10          And just one little picture of what these people  
11 teach me on a daily basis.

12          About five months ago we were planning our  
13 dedication service for the new building, and we were  
14 wondering, and Jill was looking at our budget.

15          And she said, "Pastor Mark, I have not been here  
16 very long, so teach me how your budget reflects outreach in  
17 the community."

18          I said, "What do you mean?"

19          She said, "Well, I come with a business  
20 perspective, but I also come with the knowledge that  
21 Christmas is arguably the biggest day of the year for  
22 Christians."

23          "Yes," I said.

24          She said, "What do we invest in Christmas  
25 financially?"

1           And I said, "I don't know. Let's look in the  
2 budget."

3           There was a thousand dollars in there that said  
4 Christmas.

5           What that was was the music that is purchased for  
6 our Christmas presentation that has every year since we have  
7 been here been presented the week before Christmas.

8           She said, "So what you're telling me is you don't  
9 spend any money whatsoever on Christmas Eve?"

10           "That's correct."

11           She challenged the directors and the church  
12 council, she said, "Do you realize this is arguably the  
13 biggest day of the year and you don't invest any money in  
14 it."

15           The lights kind of came on. This is the first year  
16 we have ever then reached out for Christmas.

17           What happened when we did that, we had a billboard  
18 down by the Dairy Chef, my former favorite restaurant.

19           We had a TV spot, we had a radio spot, and we just  
20 had some fliers, very minimal investment, it was not very  
21 much money at all, we got tremendous rates on it and  
22 everything else.

23           For the first service on Christmas Eve, we invited  
24 people specifically to the 4:00 o'clock and the 6:00 o'clock  
25 music with drama, nativity scene, message and presentation.



1           We have four guys going off council. Gary May,  
2 Bill Ahern, Bill Larsen and Mike Hilbers, their terms have  
3 expired, so they are going in different directions around  
4 Bethany.

5           And we have four people who are coming on in their  
6 places.

7           We have Jim Church. He's a numbers guy.

8           We have Mike Peterson, who is an HR guy.

9           We have Barb Frye, who is tremendously gifted. She  
10 has both human as well a great resume of church experience  
11 in the past.

12           And lastly we have Dennis Wellendorf, who is coming  
13 on as a new council member.

14           Another guy who understands, has his feet on the  
15 ground spiritually, as well as prayerfully listening for  
16 God's call.

17           These are people that are called to these  
18 positions.

19           They join the other people already in existence,  
20 Gretchen; and D.J. Thayer, the Info USA guy; Randy  
21 Rinderknecht, financial adviser guy.

22           Laura Mann is human resources/marketing person, and  
23 then Julie Mahloch is a tremendously gifted woman of  
24 spiritual, being able to kind of forecast and see into the  
25 future and see into the culture.

1           These are people who are your church council leader  
2 people. So that is my second leftover.

3           The third is, we have some things that I like to  
4 call our lay legion teams.

5           We have a lot of different teams of lay people, one  
6 of which I really am honored by is the WELCA.

7           These are the women of the church and they do  
8 everything they do behind the scenes.

9           They faithfully care for the tremendous number of  
10 funerals that we do. They provide a lunch for those people.

11           They faithfully make the quilts we display once or  
12 twice a year.

13           They faithfully are totally involved in mission.  
14 They do their monthly Bible study.

15           They do their different service hours. They did  
16 the emergency kits shortly before Christmas.

17           A group of women that have been the backbone of the  
18 church for years and years and years and will continue to be  
19 so.

20           Anybody who is a female out there who wants to be  
21 part of something like that, those are groups that meet on  
22 regular bases.

23           The second group of that is the building team,  
24 another lay team.

25           We finished the process of building really on

1 December 19th.

2 We are still finishing a few things. We have  
3 stained glass coming in and more video equipment coming in.

4 We are not done quite yet, but this lay team of  
5 people, captained by Tod Ringenberg, Mike Eastman and Lee  
6 Hamann, have been unbelievable.

7 Jeff Gamm, Nancy Johnson, Ron Riggle, these people  
8 have made this process so stress-free for our staff, and  
9 they are just a small example.

10 I don't know what we are going to do with these  
11 guys next, but we will have to think outside the box again  
12 of continuing to reach out.

13 The next group is the MOMS group. It's a bunch of  
14 moms that meet on a regular basis.

15 They have a particular curriculum that meets for  
16 about ten weeks.

17 These are women who are very, very faithful, they  
18 are dedicated to taking care of their family and their  
19 husband who is the primary breadwinner in the family.

20 It's a wonderful ministry and they meet here on  
21 weekends and also weeknights.

22 If you are young mom who is maybe new in the area,  
23 this is a group to explore. They're fabulous woman.

24 They are chaired by Stephanie Peterson, Mary  
25 Wellendorf, and JoAnne Kamppinen.

1           Then my sixth leftover is mission in general. This  
2 is the first time ever we sent a group actually to Bolivia,  
3 and those fine folks are in the room today, unbelievable  
4 stories of mountain top experience.

5           They work with the Bolivian Street Children's  
6 Project.

7           These are kids that literally live beneath the  
8 streets in the sewer.

9           And we're building a house over there for them, a  
10 safe house, and also getting some of those kids off the  
11 streets and into a caring environment.

12           And likewise we have done all kinds of mission in  
13 the past year.

14           There was the Care Bears Project. We made all  
15 these bears for hospitals.

16           We had kids that went to Mexico, Colorado, all  
17 these third world environments within the continental United  
18 States, that came back with their lives changed, of having  
19 to build homes for people, cleaned up, and seeing what  
20 poverty really looks like.

21           We had a great mission sports banquet last year.  
22 We were so blessed that Ahman Green came and didn't charge  
23 us.

24           Speakers of his caliber get forty to fifty thousand  
25 dollars to come out and give a benefit.

1           Ahman was so kind as to come for just a very  
2 minimal honorarium.

3           We raised over eight thousand dollars for Nick  
4 Hummel, who is a young man from our church who is on his  
5 second bone marrow transplant.

6           He's a pharmacy student, he's back in school, his  
7 numbers are looking really good.

8           But that's mission and those are things that we are  
9 about and we are going to raise to another level in the  
10 future as well.

11           The seventh leftover is music. I can't tell you  
12 how many people share with me the reason they were attracted  
13 to Bethany was because of our music.

14           I had a baptism last night in the chapel and the  
15 grandfather of the baby that was baptized said, "Do we get  
16 to hear your band?"

17           And I said, "No. They play on Sundays primarily."

18           He was just crestfallen, but music is so blessed  
19 here, and I don't mean just the adult music.

20           I mean the kids' music with Mrs. M and Georgia.  
21 The angel alert thing that was so fabulous that we did right  
22 before Christmas and the musicians that help in the chapel  
23 services, the musicians who step forward and sing at  
24 weddings and funerals.

25           It's just unbelievable the talent God has blessed

1 us with.

2 The eighth leftover is the Vessels of Love  
3 Ministry. Mia Kohlmeier is the chair of that.

4 She's a staff person that if you have a need you  
5 call, we will get the prayer chain and the prayer ministers  
6 notified immediately and they will care for that, either in  
7 one-on-one or with teams or just on a generalized prayer  
8 chain.

9 They are unbelievable. They also are responsible  
10 to get communion to anybody who wants it in their home  
11 setting if they are unable to get out anymore.

12 That ministry is life-giving, it's wonderful, and  
13 Mia is a wonderful captain of that.

14 We've also got Alpha, which I'm going to show you  
15 about a forty second video.

16 Alpha is our adult education for either exploring  
17 or reinvestigating the Christian faith.

18 You are going to get to meet Nicky Gumbel. He's  
19 the video speaker of this on a weekly basis.

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23 "Of course it's not easy to be a Christian.

24 Personally I think it's much harder to be a Christian, a

25 true Christian today, than not be a Christian. Life was not

1 easy for Jesus. It has never been easy for his followers.  
2 But it is the most exciting life. Christianity is not  
3 boring; it's exciting. It's not untrue; Jesus is the truth.  
4 It's not irrelevant; Jesus is the life. He comes to bring  
5 us fullness of life."

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9 I would have never thought you could get a group of  
10 people to sit around and watch a British guy talk and then  
11 have so much fun and so many lives be changed as you discuss  
12 the topic of the night.

13 It's not a Bible study; it's just a very wonderful  
14 warm environment surrounded by coffee and food and  
15 fellowship of just discussing these incredible topics that  
16 Nicky brings up on a weekly basis. There is a manual you  
17 follow along in.

18 I challenge you and invite you to consider it. We  
19 have a new class that just started this morning.

20 Another one starts on Tuesday night. It is a  
21 wonderful opportunity to refresh and reinvest in the basics  
22 of the Christian faith and it's a life-giver.

23 There will be two hundred people amongst this group  
24 right now who would share with you that this was the real  
25 deal.

1           It was one of the better things they've done in  
2 their life as a Christian. So consider that Alpha.

3           We also have a Grandparents Day Out program. It's  
4 my tenth leftover.

5           This is a blessed group of seniors that come  
6 together really kind of once a month and they do mostly  
7 social things.

8           I want to invest in these folks a lot more in 2005,  
9 because I'm well aware that we have a whole community of  
10 empty nest homes that will be coming in.

11           There's a lot of lonely people of that age bracket  
12 as well.

13           And it's not just get together to go do fun things.  
14 We are going to watch the Luther movie together and there  
15 will be a question and answer part of that.

16           We'll also challenge those folks to take the  
17 Bethany basics class so that they understand what newer  
18 members are being taught about Bethany, so that they too can  
19 stay relevant and understand how we really are trying to  
20 emulate and imitate the Bethany community of the Bible.

21           So we are really looking forward to growing this  
22 ministry in the future.

23           The eleventh leftover is our preschool and Kids Day  
24 Out programs.

25           I don't know numbers very well on that, their

1 particular head count, but I think there are at least two  
2 hundred different children that come on a daily basis in and  
3 out of the building, wonderful, Verna Headley is our  
4 director of that, and Mrs. M is involved with that, and Pam  
5 and all those guys.

6 It's just fabulous to have their joy come into this  
7 building on a daily basis to learn who Jesus is and to  
8 faithfully be growing and getting ready for school, those  
9 beautiful little people.

10 The twelfth, not my last or least, but in some ways  
11 maybe the most significant leftover is our whole  
12 stewardship.

13 I want to share some numbers with you. Before we  
14 do that I want to tell you where we've been.

15 We have never, in my five years as the lead pastor  
16 here, we have never written down on a pledge card how much  
17 money people are giving to the church for the general  
18 ministry.

19 I was taught back in the days not to ever do that  
20 with people, and that was wrong.

21 This past October we invited Bethany people to make  
22 a conscious step growth pledge and promise of commitment.

23 And Martin Russell was our speaker that day. He's  
24 with the Nebraska Synod, he was amazed at the response we  
25 had.

1           I don't know the numbers exactly, but I think 80  
2 percent of the people who chose to return their envelopes  
3 grew in their giving.

4           And that is very important, because we have twice  
5 the church we had last year at this time.

6           And the way we are going to grow is by our own  
7 selves growing and growing in our giving.

8           So I wanted to share just a little bit of the  
9 attendance numbers.

10           Somebody right before the 9:00 o'clock service  
11 asked me how many people were here for Christmas and some of  
12 that, and just yesterday a guy was asking me, "How many  
13 members do you have at that church you're at?"

14           I said, "We really don't track membership that  
15 closely, but I can tell you how many people come here."

16           And he said, "Okay. How many?"

17           I explained to him last year's average numbers, but  
18 I'll show you here.

19           This is Christmas Eve. In the year 2000 we had a  
20 Sunday which was Christmas Eve, so the numbers were really  
21 kind of hard to track.

22           They weren't distinguished as to what was the  
23 morning and what was the night, but it was a similar growth  
24 pattern.

25           2001, 1730; 2002, 1893; 2003; 2236; this past year

1 we had 3103.

2 That was with four services and we used to do five  
3 services.

4 But that's just the tip of the iceberg of actually  
5 reaching out with the Christmas message instead of being so  
6 afraid we don't have room, so we can't have more, we used to  
7 do services at 3:00, 4:00, 5:00, 7:00, 9:00, 11:00.

8 Now we can do three, maybe four services, but also  
9 reach out and comfortably bring those people into the great  
10 story of Christmas.

11 Here are our worship attendance numbers for the  
12 year end.

13 Some people are curious about these numbers and  
14 these go back a few years, basically back to 1999.

15 That was a larger church, but it wasn't a big  
16 church. 748. 846.

17 Each year we have been blessed by some great  
18 growth.

19 In 2002, 948. And then we broke the thousand  
20 barrier, 1010.

21 Just last week we ran the numbers ending for 2004.  
22 1091.

23 Well, what does it all mean? Well, what is 2005  
24 going to look like?

25 We don't know. What we do know is that we had a

1 council retreat and what we challenged everybody to do was  
2 to grow two priorities, those being worship, as well as  
3 adult discipleship.

4 So I want to challenge you to put your faith first  
5 in your life, relationship-to-relationship inward;  
6 relationship upward; and your relationships outward.

7 I have a just a brief concluding kind of a video  
8 that Martha in our office put together I want to share with  
9 you.

10 This is really pretty cool. It lists all of my  
11 leftovers and it puts a smiling face behind them.

12 So enjoy this and I will have a couple comments and  
13 a prayer.

14 (Video Played)

15 What a wonderful tribute to some of the leftovers.  
16 I encourage you to think up your own list of things you're  
17 grateful for.

18 Bottom line, in conclusion, the core will grow  
19 deeper as well as wider by reaching out to the community and  
20 the world by living our core values.

21 That's really what I want to continue to hold up.  
22 It begins with you and me, of more intentionally living the  
23 sacraments and more intentionally reaching out and living  
24 the core values of our church.

25 Rick Warren, the guy that wrote "The Purpose Driven

1 Life" book says, "A greater commitment to the Great  
2 Commission and the Great Commandment will make a greater  
3 Christian."

4 And I've changed that a little bit, it also makes a  
5 greater congregation.

6 This is Bethany's 80th anniversary year of  
7 faithful, forward thinking ministry in this western Douglas  
8 County area.

9 And I want to challenge you and I want to tell you  
10 that I will challenge myself to grow, not just wider but  
11 deeper, this room has gotten a tremendous amount wider, but  
12 we also are challenged to grow deeper.

13 I just finished a book, we taught a class on it  
14 last fall, "The Life You've Always Wanted" by John Ortberg.

15 In it he writes, "One of the hardest things in the  
16 world is to stop being the prodigal son without turning into  
17 the elder brother."

18 The elder brother in that story is all about  
19 entitlement. It's all about where is my party? I've been  
20 here working all these years and you never celebrated so  
21 much when I came home.

22 And I love that quote because we are reminded that  
23 we have been the prodigal, and we will continue to be the  
24 prodigal in different ways, but dare we not become the elder  
25 brother that thinks that's my parking spot, that's my pew,

1 I'm entitled to it, I paid for it, my years of service are  
2 more.

3 We need to always be about reaching out to the lost  
4 and reaching into the world with the good news of Christ  
5 Jesus.

6 So please join me as we learn different more  
7 creative ways of presentation and also remembering that  
8 numbers are important.

9 In fact, you're number one. If God had a  
10 refrigerator, your picture would be on it. If God had a  
11 wallet, your photo would be in it.

12 Would you join me as we pray? Gracious God, we  
13 thank you for a great year of 2004. I'm not so naive to  
14 think it was without pain and sorrow for a lot of these  
15 people in this room today. We have said good-bye to  
16 friends. We have had growing pains. We've cried. We have  
17 laughed. We have celebrated. We've struggled. And yet,  
18 Lord, you've been there. Thank you, Lord, for where we are  
19 now, for this is new day. Would you teach us, Lord, to grow  
20 and to continue to serve. Thank you for Bethany and our  
21 80th anniversary year. Continue to shower us with your  
22 grace and your mercy, tremendous amount of forgiveness for  
23 the mistakes we make. Bless us and keep us always and send  
24 us faithfully into your future to reach your lost people.  
25 In the name of Jesus the Christ, amen.