

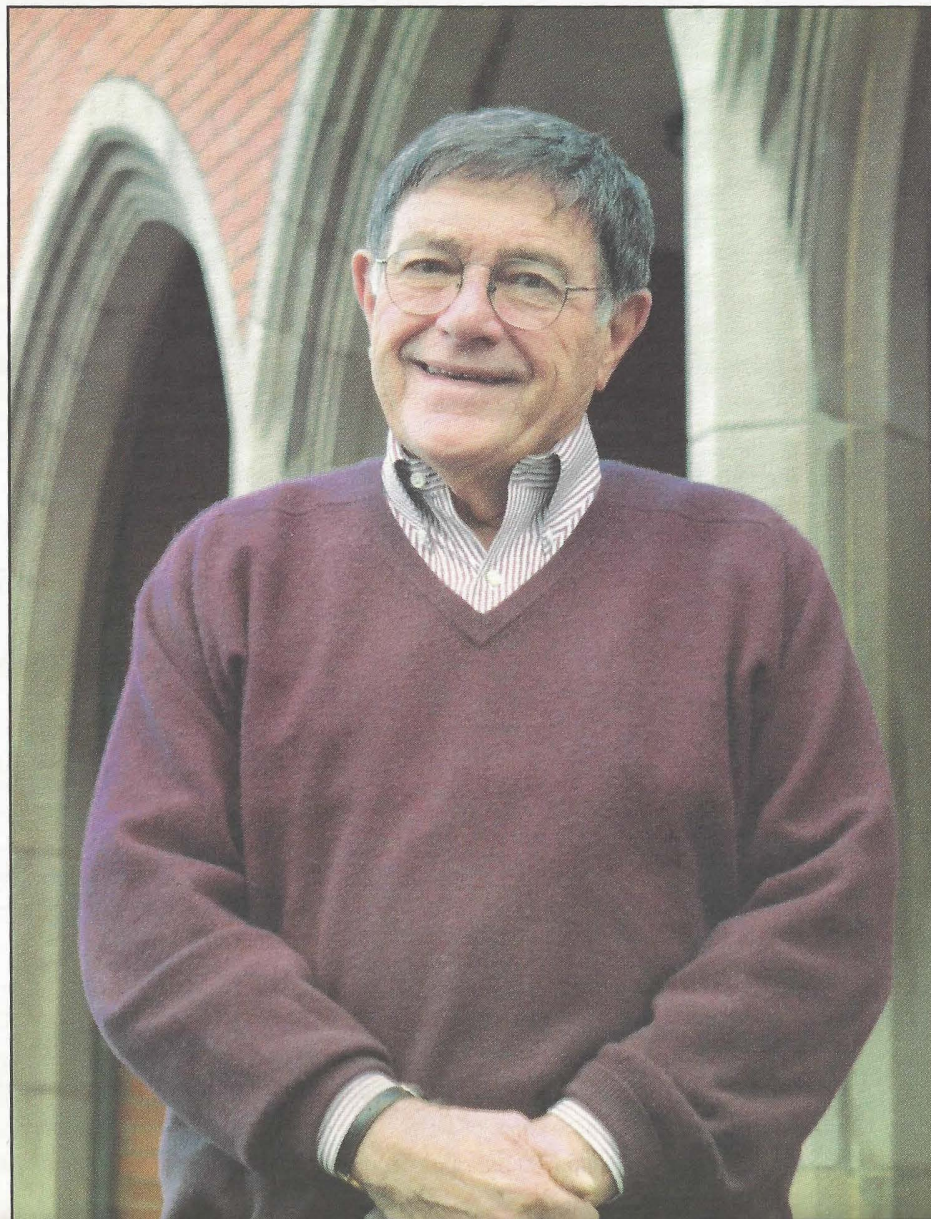
A new season: Earl Palmer will keep doing most what he does best

by Sue Lockett John

Anyone acquainted with Earl Palmer or his preaching knows that UPC's energetic, intellectually alive senior pastor cannot retire. He takes seriously the biblical mandate that "six days you shall labor, one day you shall rest" as God's wisdom for a healthy rhythmic life. However, he also believes that life's work has seasons and takes new forms.

As he waits on the cusp of his own new season of ministry, he seems at ease with not knowing exactly when it will start. Before he and his wife Shirley left last month for their trip to Asia, he talked about his plans as he prepares to transition from senior pastor at UPC to his role in the forthcoming Earl Palmer Ministries (EPM).

Earl will learn the identity of his UPC successor at the same time as Session and the congregation — when the Pastor Nominating Committee (PNC) completes its search and makes its recommendation. After a candidating sermon and congregational vote, the pastor-elect will need time to wind up his/her own duties, then move to Seattle.



laity here and around the world." Their proposal was patterned after the ministry of John Stott, All Souls' rector emeritus, as "teaching pastor to the world." Given Earl's commitment to finishing strong at UPC, Scott says the board's job is "to be ready" for the change when it comes, "but not yet."

Earl's goals for EPM reflect his philosophy that "you should try to do most what you do best — what you like to do, and what energizes you." He would like to offer ongoing supportive ministry to pastors and, in partnership with Shirley, to pastoral couples. Having been a pastor for nearly 52 years now, he wants to encourage and mentor younger pastors and laity, especially those with church-based campus ministries. Both Earl and Shirley look forward to spending time at First Presbyterian Church in Tacoma, where their son-in-law is now senior pastor.

Earl is excited about the prospect of holding monthly "Evenings with Earl" in connection with Dick Staub's Kindlings Muse. These informal programs connect live audiences in secular settings (such as

is supremely confident that "this outstanding [pastor nominating] committee will choose a wonderful person to lead us. I think that person is fortunate. He or she will be joining a terrific staff, faithful elders and ministries that are really on fire. The new senior pastor gets to join into all that."

He recalls his own arrival 17 years ago as senior pastor as "coming onto a moving train" and sees his successor as similarly joining into "an alive, moving fellowship." He praises UPC for its "wonderful track record of being a fellowship that really encourages a pastor to do most what he or she does best and therefore thrive. This is the most supportive congregation I know of anywhere."

In the meantime, the Palmers are in Hong Kong visiting their grandsons, Drew, 7, and Tommy, 5 (and, of course, their parents, Jon and Kara Diane). As part of the trip, Earl taught and preached at Union Church in Manila, where the Palmers served years ago. Steve Ruetschle, former UPC Worship pastor, is now pastor of that church.

will serve together as co-pastors for two weeks. "After that time, the church will commission me to my new era, welcome its new senior pastor and then I will retire as senior pastor," he says. He acknowledges some poignancy during this prelude to change.

While looking forward to being freer to accept teaching and ministry invitations that extend across weekends, he will miss preaching every Sunday. For many of his 52 years as an active pastor, he has had to schedule around

While continuing to serve faithfully at UPC, Earl Palmer looks forward to his new ministry of speaking, writing and, along with wife, Shirley, supporting pastors and their families.

those "bookends." He also will miss planning each sermon series, which gives him the opportunity "to interpret the gospel and engage with people week by week."

Months ago he planned the current set of sermons on Isaiah culminating on Easter Sunday, and the series to follow. Titled *Generation to Generation*, it will encompass UPC's centennial, including Celebration Sunday, May 4.

"It will be a grand day," says Earl, noting that conceivably there could be a new pastor by then.

When his new era starts, Earl will be shepherded by the EPM board of directors: Scott Hardman, chair; Richard Greiling, treasurer; Susan Hutchison; Frank Haas; Gordon Stephenson, and Tony Whatley. The focus will be to support a ministry of mentoring, encouraging and teaching. The EPM board

has already established a Web site (www.earlpalmer.com), obtained tax-exempt status as a nonprofit corporation, and reserved preliminary office space for him and a half-time assistant on the Talaris campus in Laurelhurst when the time is right.

The board members were part of a group of UPC members who approached Earl several years ago about being available, in Scott's words, "to serve pastors and

or Hale's Ales Brewery & Pub) with thoughtful speakers on ideas, beliefs and values. Earl's emphasis will focus on theological discussions of books and current events. "Karl Barth, my theological model, held similar gatherings in Basel years ago, and encouraged those who came to think through the far-reaching implications of their faith," says Earl.

Whenever the new senior pastor arrives, Earl believes UPC is in for a "great run, and a great new era." He

China Graduate School of Theology, spoke at a pastor's conference and at an evening meeting open to the public. He then traveled to Beijing with his son and gave a lecture on C.S. Lewis at Peking University and People's University. Earl and Shirley will return March 13, in time for Palm Sunday and Easter.

Earl acknowledges that the EPM board may face a challenge in helping him maintain the balanced life he hopes to achieve. He anticipates a "wider ministry, but not a lot of traveling outside the area." He looks forward to time to write and to spend time with his family, especially his grandchildren. He already has three books in mind: a commentary on 2 Timothy, a collection of his poems and a mystery novel that just needs the finishing touches.

And how can the UPC family continue to support the Palmers? Earl says, "Pray for us that this will be a time of balance and rhythm and growth. I just want to keep growing and developing the gifts that I do have. I know Shirley does, too. We want to be encouragers of young people both outside and inside our family. That's going to be our goal.

"I'm praying that is where the lines will fall." So is a grateful and blessed congregation.

Helping others navigate their thoughts

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understanding and experience of future church leaders but also young adults who will use their experiences to walk alongside people in the workplace and in their communities, to point people to God. Although producing seminarians is not a goal of the internship program, about a third of UPC's interns go on to seminary and leadership positions in the global church.

Perhaps it's not surprising that such a powerful program has evolved at UPC over the years. The intern mentorship program

developed organically from a one-hour weekly meeting led by a different pastor each week into the formal program that Dave leads. More importantly, though, is the way that the program continues the rich legacy of leadership development in ministry throughout the church's history. Reflecting on the importance of mentorship at UPC in its centennial year, Dave explains, "This program is not the key. The congregation is. Walking alongside people begins with hospitality, and this has been a very hospitable congregation throughout its history. People

often pass through this place on their way from one place to another; it's what keeps us vital."

"Church leaders have played an important role in ministry development over the years," Dave says. "Steve Hayner and Tim Dearborn, former UPC pastors, are among those who placed particular emphasis on missions, leadership and ministry development. But, the congregation as a whole has paid particular attention to the opportunities to serve with vitality nearby, such as ministering to students at the UW. The congregation welcomes people who are

asking questions and equips them to navigate those questions, and their thoughts, until their faith becomes their own."

Examples of "walking alongside" others in the congregation and community are prevalent in UPC departments. Children and Family Ministries sponsors a program, Side-by-Side, for families with critically ill children. Youth Mission & Ministry defines its adult volunteers as "people who are growing in their relationship with Jesus Christ and letting his love spill into the lives of students who they come alongside."

UPC is a congregation whose organizational DNA is composed of walking alongside the people who come through its doors. Like John the Baptist, UPC members generally represent what Dave calls "the minister as the proclaimer of the reality of God's love, as one who comes alongside to ask the world to wake up to God."

Just ask Kurt, who says, "I'm still uncertain of my future plans, but I am sure that no matter what career I choose, I see myself being a minister or a witness to the greatness of God."