

ONE IN THE LORD

I too enjoy singing old hymns. I'm a bit partial myself to the Charles Wesley hymns because of the way they teach theological truths. I grew up going to church where hymns were sung to the accompaniment of an organ, and a choir sang anthems. That's what I'm used to. But there are many people who didn't grow up with that, and we want them in church also.

Some may recall that we began offering an alternative worship service, with modern music, way back around 2007. It was the second service in the sanctuary. At that time, we installed new sound and video equipment and were able to put things up on the screen. The purpose, of course, was an attempt to reach more people with the opportunity to share the gospel message with them. [This alternative service was at 11:00, then we changed it to 10:10.] Then COVID hit us, and we went to one service at 9:30. Fortunately we were able to livestream our worship because of changes we'd made years before. It's a blended service – mostly traditional in format with a couple praise songs in the mix. We have both contemporary and traditional music in a traditional setting. I am well aware that this arrangement is not pleasing to everyone. (To be honest, most of the complaints I've heard are from those who don't like the praise songs).

COVID forced us to make dramatic changes and it has also caused folks to drift from regular church attendance. We livestream our worship service and I know a number of our church family rely on that. Livestream worship is embedded in our church and will be far into the future.

Now we are embarked new improvements. The Chapel is being renewed, the Children's Center/ Preschool playground has been improved, and the Hall is being refitted as our multi-purpose room for worship on Sunday and Senior Center on Wednesday, as well as church meals, and wedding and funeral receptions. Of course, you all know that the church is not just the buildings. The church is you and me, and all those who've come to faith in Christ Jesus and heed His call to follow. As we are engaged in renovations of our facilities, I envision a revitalized First Church, a congregation engaged in sharing the gospel and inviting others to know and receive Jesus.

Here's some things I'd like to share with you about these projects:

- Did you know that the bathrooms in the Hall are not handicap accessible? Did you know that plans for their being made handicap accessible were drawn up two years ago? COVID put a halt to those plans. But now we can have more "senior friendly" restrooms able to handle walkers and wheelchairs.**
- Did you know that many churches no longer have a "traditional" worship with organ, choir, and formal liturgy? Yet there are still people who prefer to worship in that style and that's one reason we continue to have traditional worship in a sanctuary made for just that.**

- **Did you realize that moving our alternative worship service to the Hall allows us the opportunity to have that style worship in a “non-traditional” atmosphere, a more casual setting?**
- **Children, and their families, must be a part of our future. I am very concerned that youngsters be introduced to faith in Jesus at an early age and the Bible’s truths about life. Look at what they face in the world in which they growing-up! Some have asked: why can’t we go back to two different worship times like before? We simply do not have the leaders and teachers to have nursery and kids church twice on Sunday morning. There are children whose parents will attend the alternative service in the Hall and parents who will attend the traditional service in the sanctuary. Additionally, many in the choir prefer the 9:30 time, and remember that we still have a Chapel service at 7:30, which will continue.**
- **My hope is that two services at the same time will bring more of the First Church family together on the campus at the same time. One of the challenges we had before is that people from one service never met those who attended another. Let me ask you? if you visited a church that had several different worship services, and you heard people in one service talking down the other services, even with just passing comments, do you think you’d be encouraged to return?**
- **Okay. But how are we going to pay for these building renovations? I want you to know that faithful church members, who have gone on before us, left significant financial gifts to this church. Those funds represent the faith and hopes of the donors ... hopes for a vibrant church that continues on through the generations. Those gifts were given in the expectation that we would use them to promote God’s kingdom here. A living congregation does not “save for retirement.” It must continue to take steps, even risks, for Christ’s sake.**

As a pastor for 39 years, I’ve observed that when there is a passion to share the good news of Jesus Christ, congregations are willing to try new things. That’s because they’re focused outward ... they want to connect with those who are not yet in the congregation. The inward focused congregation tends to be peopled by a majority of folks who want church to be the same as it always was; change is much harder. Oft times those who don’t want change then complain that new people are not coming to church.

But sometimes you must make changes in order to remain the same. The congregation that does not adapt soon dies out. I recall a parable Jesus told in Matt. 25:14-30. Servants were given money by their master to further his aims. A couple invested and grew what they’d been given. But one, afraid of risk, buried his share. He was roundly castigated when the master returned. *...But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us, 2 Cor. 4:7.* The treasure of the gospel in human, earthly containers ... that’s us. God’s business plan is that we use whatever resources we’ve been given to share this good news with those who do not know Jesus. If we bury it, it won’t grow.

St. Paul writes to the church in Corinth: *...I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some. I do all things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it, 1 Cor. 9:22-23.* A disciple of Jesus must learn how to be

a noble man or noble woman amid a crowd of ignoble things. All of us are ordinary men and women, made extraordinary by the mission He has given us. Unless we get this mission in our minds intellectually and in our hearts affectionately, we will be hustled out of usefulness to God. Paul's whole heart and mind and soul were taken up with the great matter of what Jesus Christ came to do. He never lost sight of that one thing. It is not that we have got God, but that God has got us. He is always at work bending, breaking, molding, doing just as He chooses. We must be in God's hand so that He can plant men and women on the Rock of Jesus Christ as He has planted us.¹

Do I know if changes – especially having an alternative worship service in the Hall - will really help us bring more people to church? I do not. I do not know all the routes to “success,” but I do know one sure route to failure: contempt prior to investigation. If we do not try because we have contempt for the vision, then there's little doubt that it'll fail. But I do know that God won't steer a parked car. If we do not move, He will not move among us. [Our new venture is not as new as many may think. We began a contemporary style worship service many years ago – our beloved choir director helped in that effort. In time it was renamed “RENEW,” and the time changed. We went into debt to build that beautiful narthex just as the country entered a recession. Some had grave doubts. We moved ahead and God blessed us with the debt paid off within a few short years.]

We could spend the next year quarreling about changes at church, criticizing decisions, arguing about worship style, worship times, and the details of renovations. We could do that ... and how would that serve God's plan? Sometimes you don't know how all the details fit together until you get into it. Sometimes you have to make adjustments along the way, or even change plans when things don't work. If we knew it all before hand, I guess that wouldn't really be a step of faith. The point is to keep striving to bring more people to the transforming power of Jesus Christ. If we who call on the name of the Lord will not move forward, trusting our Lord to walk us through, then who will?

While we are engaged in this project of renewal, each of us could be asking ourselves how can I introduce someone to faith in Christ? Who can I speak to about my faith in Christ? Who can I invite to church on Sunday? This is our real calling as Christian people, that call which binds us together. This is what Jesus prays: *My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me, John 17:21-22.*

We make changes in order to remain the same. Worship style, music, the preacher, and service times may change ... the buildings, the décor may change, leadership may change, but one thing remains the same: our purpose to bring people to the transforming power of Jesus Christ. Though we may be stretched this way or that, our center must always remain in Jesus Christ. Our goal is to remain centered on Christ right here in the center of Bakersfield.

Therefore, we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day, 2 Cor. 4:16.

¹ Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost For His Highest*,