

Protagonist's Corner

"Still Crazy After All These Years"

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For most of the program year of 1995-1996, the church I serve conducted an extensive restoration and renovation project. The principal focus of this project was the Victorian-era sanctuary—designed as a stone German Gothic “preaching palace” with a sloping floor, semi-circular seating, a three-sided balcony and a high central pulpit. It was an imposing space, with a heavily carved pulpit area that reminded one of nothing so much as a battleship, and that all but dared generations of preachers against even thinking about stepping into that high pulpit unprepared. To venture into that space was to be reminded of a time when Presbyterian worship was, in the greatest measure, a matter of preaching.

The restoration project was our attempt at correcting some logistical problems—like a choir that couldn’t see or be seen, and an acoustical deadness due to carpeting everywhere—and adjusting to the evolution in Presbyterian worship that has brought to greater attention the sacramental life of the church.

Now, the pulpit is as high as it ever was, but a new and larger Lord’s Table sits on an elevated platform so as to emphasize the heightened importance of the Eucharist. The pipe organ which leads our singing is restored to its original visibility in an archway behind the chancel. Those who lead worship—liturgists, preachers, and choir—now sit in full view of the congregation, where it is more likely that they will remember that they are participants, not performers. Stenciled on the chancel wall is a forest of multi-colored celtic crosses and trinitarian trefoils (just like the trefoils that were carved in woodwork all over the sanctuary when it was completed in 1884). And standing behind and above the pulpit is a large floor-mounted cross.

It is harder than ever to enter this majestic room without noting its symbology and remembering that it is a special place—a holy place, set apart for the worship of God. And, if we are to believe a growing refrain about such places, it may be more irrelevant now than ever.

Recently I heard of another urban, mainline church—not a Presbyterian church, but it hardly matters—that, like us, hired a consultant to direct the renovation of their historic sanctuary. Right off the top, this consultant told them, in reply to their questions about where to place the organ and the pulpit and the choir, that those were in fact the wrong questions. All of those cherished spaces, he said, would be extinct in a short while. Today, on the other side of that church’s renovation project, an old sanctuary tries as ably as it can to create what in contemporary parlance is “a seeker-friendly space.” There are no signs of a pulpit, an organ, a choir, a cross, other Christian symbols, or anything else that might offend or put off those venturing in for the first time from nowhere in particular, religiously speaking.

Charles Trueheart, in his must-read article last year in *The Atlantic Monthly*, suggests that the rationale for such changes in liturgical space, and the whole style of being church, is driven by sophisticated research into what the “market”—often a narrow niche of it, as defined generationally and economically—wants. The market

is adamant about nothing so much, by the way, as generationally-segmented attitudes toward music that are spawning “boomer” churches and now “buster” churches. Trueheart quotes a young staff member at a Dallas mega-church saying, “I don’t have an organ. None of my friends has an organ. Why should I listen to an organ on Sunday?” He also quotes Chuck Fromm—the chairman of Maranatha! Music, which supplies churches with contemporary praise music—as saying, “We better think about our sound and how we are reaching our community, or we will be the Amish of the twenty-first century.”¹

Well, preachers, it is certainly true that the church in every generation needs to find new ways to speak to the surrounding culture. It is also true that music, and musical instruments, are always evolving (some of my favorite hymns—which one can hardly hear these days without thinking of the church at its most “encrusted”—are set to tunes that, four hundred years ago, were German drinking songs). Thankfully, it is further true that many of the techniques discovered and ably demonstrated by the mega-churches (a.k.a. full-service churches, seven-day-a-week churches, pastoral churches, apostolic churches, new tribe churches, new paradigm churches, seeker-sensitive churches, etc.) have been helpfully applied in churches like the one I serve. A new interest in small groups, service bulletins that are “user-friendly,” renewed intentionality with respect to growth—all of these are examples of ways in which many mainline churches have benefitted from the insights of new trends of being church.

Nonetheless, something bothers me about what I suspect is an increasing reflex among mainline churches to discard without question elements of our tradition—out of the fear, perhaps, that we are the next Amish—and to replace them uncritically with what somebody decides that people *want*. People may indeed *want* the church to be at a convenient location. They may indeed *want* adequate parking, cappuccino bars, a 9:30A.M. country-and-western service and an 11:00A.M. fusion-jazz service, and bowling alleys and aerobics classes and all the rest. They may *want* us to find a less threatening word with which to identify the “pledge” (after all, it makes us think of commitment and we’re scared of commitment, don’t you see). They may *want* us to rename the “sanctuary” as the “worship center,” and they may *want* the worship center to look more like a sports arena than a church in order that its sheer “otherness” might not be off-putting. Above all else, they may *want* for someone to see to it that the last thing in the world that belongs in church, because it is *so* offensive, is the cross.

But I am persuaded that, deeper than any of these, there is something people want that they hardly know how to express. Patrick Willson preached a splendid sermon a few years ago in which he made this observation: “Among the things I want, I want the truth: the truth about me, the truth about other people, the truth about the world we live in, the truth about God. Over the years,” he continued, “I have come to suspect that the truth is a great deal larger and more complicated than my getting what I *want*.”²

We will not become extinct if we continue to find ways to remind people of what they want most deeply—a relationship with the One Who called together a community of faith around such market flops as “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”³

A couple of years ago, during the sharing of personal faith experience which is part of our annual examination of new elders, it came time for a prominent attorney to stand

up and speak. “I wish to serve on this session because you people are crazy,” he began. Having so startled all of us, he went on to describe his universe, and the wisdom of the world with which it is characterized. He spoke of an ethos in which everyone knows the price of everything, including themselves; in which power reigns unambiguously and declares victory over all else; in which the church’s job is to be a good sport and do what it’s told. Then he mused about the essential craziness of a church like ours, having the audacity to stay where it is across the street from a hall of such power, the Georgia Capitol building, and to lift up on its steeple the most countercultural thing he could imagine—the cross of Jesus Christ. “This is crazy,” he repeated. And, before he sat back down, he said something to this effect: “I want to be a part of such craziness, because, in the end, it’s a craziness that makes sense. It’s a craziness that reveals the wisdom of God.”

He was speaking the language of faith. Thanks be to God, you and I serve churches that are filled with the practitioners of such language. It is the language of reversal—language that constructs, in the imaginations of those who speak it, a different world that rebuts and judges and redeems the world in which we live. It is a hard language to master if, in our consumer-driven anxieties, we lose the nerve that it takes to speak it. And surely, if it’s just the latest opinion polls we’re listening to, it’s a language which a popular majority would prefer that we not speak. It’s just not what people think they *want*.

But I, for one, will stick with our sanctuary loaded with symbols that bespeak a heritage and suggest a future. I will hang on to the hymns, however clunky and sentimental some of them can be, that enable us each Sunday, as I heard a musician put it recently, “to sing around the world and back and forth through time.”⁴ I am at my best, religiously speaking, when I am pulled out of the particularities of my time and place and market niche and am reminded of the profundity of that larger community to which I belong which includes babies and octogenarians, spans the globe and marches resolutely through all the generations that have been and will be. I will listen for ways to approximate what is useful from new experiments at being church, but I will strive to hang on to what, in my opinion, is not negotiable—the regular acknowledgement by the community of faith of such matters as sin and forgiveness, and the sovereignty of One Who is not just our friend but also our Lord, and the path which pulls us beyond what makes us happy and toward what satisfies a deeper hunger. I won’t call for another renovation campaign just yet; instead, I’ll stick with the cross, unashamedly—the one that stands in our sanctuary as well as the one outside that lifts itself boldly in the face of all the powerful symbols that the world can muster.

For those two crosses, and countless others, are still busy forming me—forming all of us, if we’re crazy enough to notice.

Notes

¹ Charles Trueheart, “The Next Church,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, (August 1996) 44

² From the sermon “The Jesus We Want and the Jesus We Don’t Want,” preached by Patrick J. Willson at Shades Valley Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, Alabama, February 24, 1991

³ Mark 8:35

⁴ Thanks to Richard Clements, Music Director at All Souls’ Presbyterian Church in Richmond, Virginia, for this observation