

Renderings

a publication of First Baptist Athens



Building Community

By: C. Franklin Granger

Building community. Having completed our renovations earlier this year these words have a dual meaning. We have been tending to the physical building here, making updates and improvements. Our building makes possible the gathering of our community. We are also focused on building community, growing as a community of faith in number as well as in quality and depth.

As our renovation project was drawing to a close we invited a number of people in our church, some long time members, and some more recent, to share a story of remembrance from their experiences which this building structure has helped to make possible. Stories and remembering are significant rituals in the life of faith. We are called to remember, each and every time we gather at the table of our Lord. We remember his life, death and resurrection. We remember Jesus' teachings and ministry. We remember God's unconditional and unquantifiable love. We remember our own experiences when we have gathered at the table in times past. We remember, and are commended to continue to tell this good news.

Chapter 4 in the book of Joshua begins, "When the whole nation had finished crossing over the Jordan, . . ." The story continues with Joshua receiving a message from God that he delivers to the people. Joshua is instructed to ask them to collect twelve stones for the making of a monument, a physical and lasting memorial. The intention is not only to commemorate the event, but to have a tangible monument that will be there for generations to come that will prompt the questions from the children who will one day in the future ask the all-important question, "Why?" "Why are these stones here and what do these stones mean?" It is the "why" question that allows for the story to be told. And it is not merely the story that is recounted; it's the meaning of what this story holds which is to be conveyed. This storytelling is identity making, and identity reminding. We become reconnected to our foundations when we are prompted to tell what is of value to us.

Eleven stories of remembrance are included in this edition of *Renderings*. They are by no means an attempt to represent all the stories and experiences which have occurred here in the buildings, spaces, and ministries of this congregation. They are being shared in the spirit of telling what the "stones" of the structures here mean, and more importantly, what meanings have been inspired, lives nurtured, and faith sustained through participation here. They will no doubt stimulate your own stories.

Nearly daily during the renovations I would walk through the building, yes even in the "do not enter" areas, to see what progress was being made and how things we being deconstructed in order to take on new shape. I admit to being fascinated by all that lies behind the walls and ceilings, and I love to see the stag-

es of how things come together. I have also learned through experience with previous building projects that it is necessary to walk and watch regularly – it helps to improve the chances that things are done as intended.

On these routine walks in some of the early stages of the renovation project, near-original designs of the structure could be seen. For example, one day I captured a picture of the “nursery” wallpaper in the 1950s building. There was still a remnant of it on the wall which had survived multiple renovations and redecorations. As I walked the hallways on the first floor, I could picture and recall Wednesday evening suppers in the old fellowship hall which is now our new elementary children’s area. Then, the serving line was literally in the kitchen, and what is now the Arctic Room was then a pantry and kitchen storage.

There have been a variety of uses, transformations, and adaptations of the rooms and spaces here throughout the years. When reading these stories our members have written, the reality of the space having changed, and not always being the same, comes through. What emerges when recognizing this fact is that though our space is important, it isn’t so much the space that we remember, but what we experience within the space, and the people with whom we share this experience that becomes the subject of our remembrance.

Another space which holds many memories and meanings for me is the sanctuary. A number of the stories here reference this one particular space and the multitude of meanings that flow for them from this space. I admit that on some recent occasions I have had moments during worship, when I look out over the room I remember with a near literal vividness past members in their “regular” places. In a flash it is as if all are present with us, all intermingled. Perhaps it was an experience like this which gave basis for the author of Hebrews to pen the words of being “surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.”

If you have seen the movie, *Places in the Heart*, you may recall the closing scene of the film. It occurs in the church. There, on Sunday, the people are gathered, and the service moves in to a time of communion. As the communion trays are passed one to one down the row, something begins to happen. At first, the viewer might be confused, thinking that something is out of order, because it seems that someone was in the row that had previously died in the film. But as the scene continues, and pans out, the room is filled with many in the pews who have recently and long-since passed from this world. It becomes a mystical, beautiful melding of the whole people of God.

There are eleven stories in this edition of *Renderings*. Read them, enjoy them, and remember. You may recognize in their story something of your own. You may remember someone you have not thought of in many years. Also, remember your own stories and experiences you have had in the spaces, rooms, and sanctuary here.

There were twelve stones collected under Joshua’s direction. We have eleven stories here, so our telling, so to speak, is not yet complete. We need a twelfth story. We need your story to add to this stack of precious stones that will provide this and future generations to hear what this community means to us, and how God has been faithful in our journey together.



Sanctuary Defined

By: Paula Hooper

My first memory of sanctuary was when, as a preschooler, I was whisked from the pew by my very proud father and plunked soundly beside the pulpit of the small Presbyterian church we attended. Beaming with pride, my dad listened to the minister as he announced that the service would be concluding in a special way, with one of the congregation's youngest reciting John 3:16 'by heart.' My cue to begin was given and, with my heart pounding, I began my proud moment by ushering in a silence that settled in the room like a heavy case of shingles. Smiles were aplenty from the awaiting congregation, accompanied by a bit of congregational twitching, apprehension and discomfort.

As the seconds grew more deafening, my dad got on the cue stick, looking at me and droning out in long cadence the word, "For..." I remember deftly repeating, "For..." Again, silence. Daddy resumes his coaching. "For God..." Without hesitation I jump in: "For God..." "Sooo..." In the frozen state in which I found myself, I knew we were getting absolutely nowhere toward the result for which Dad wished, but still we trudged onward. "Sooo..." I uncurl from my lips. Unfazed, Dad continued with me repeating in exact rhythm the continuing fill-in-the-blank verse which, perfectly recited in our home den, was now becoming the most disastrous of worship service recitations to date.

We, and I do mean *We*, persevered to the end of the beloved verse, arousing the small congregation to glorious applause, not for a job well done, but for a fiasco blessedly over. Not only was my father as proud of me as if I had descended the Miss America runway, he even eagerly received for me the Tootsie Roll pops, offered to me by several sympathizing ladies.

Sanctuaries have always been a part of my life. On the business or pleasure trips Charlie and I have made over the years, we have always included the discovery of church sanctuaries as part of our visit. From the Spartan to the majestic, I have loved each one, First Baptist notwithstanding.

Many years ago, when I was employed at First Baptist as a secretary, I encountered a visitor who etched an indelible mark in my memory. It was

sanc·tu·ar·y

/ˈsɑŋk(t)ʃəˌwerē/ 

noun

1. a place of refuge or safety.

during a time when the church sanctuary was being painted, and one of the workers came to assemble some scaffolding for the painters. He entered the office on a routine work day, asking where the sanctuary was located. I rose from my desk to walk the brief distance from the office to the sanctuary entry doors, making small talk all the way. I continued my chatting as I opened the closed interior doors, escorting him into the room, when I noticed he had stopped dead in his tracks, frozen several steps behind me. "Sir?" I queried as I stood before him. "Is this not where you wanted to go?" The worker was small of frame, perhaps two or three inches shorter than I, outfitted in his work attire, complete with a cap that bore the business monogram. His reticent gait revealed one who probably announced his entrance into a room with unnoticed, rather than flamboyant arrival.

"Oh, yes ma'am," he responded. "It's just that..." his voice trailed off inaudibly. "It's just that this is the most beautiful sanctuary I think I've ever actually seen." And with that being said, he removed his hat, resting it between two clasped hands, never having moved from his halted stop at the door. As he tenuously made his way into the sanctuary, I thought for a moment he might bow in homage to the cross on the communion table, acknowledging the presence of a God too holy to comprehend. "I reckon, ma'am," he said, "God is surely in a room like this."

"It is beautiful, isn't it?" I offered. "I have always loved this sanctuary." The man's eyebrows arched sharply over his startled eyes. "Oh, ma'am. You go to church here? You are a member?" "Yes," I deferred. "And you? How about you?" He continued, "I go to a small church, it's just a little one, but I like it. I can't imagine attending a church like this." he murmured, his eyes still taking in with awe every facet. "I mean, it's just so beautiful," he continued, his hat still clutched

between both of his hands. Our conversation continued briefly, before I headed back to the office.

Before I left work to go home that day, I dropped back into the sanctuary to see if the worker was still there. The lowering sun was pouring in, its few remaining rays almost sanctifying the windows. All was so peaceful, save the occasional familiar sound of a downtown driver's impatient horn. It was the kind of quiet where the gliding of my shoe upon the carpet sounded irritatingly amplified, and within that moment, I sat on the altar steps and did something which I rarely do; I took in sanctuary. I looked at the open foyer doors, revealing a narthex that had served both as holding pen for rambunctious Brownie Bear choir 4-year-olds before they processed down the aisle on a Palm Sunday morning, as well as holding pen for deacons as they await the go-head to advance toward the altar on Communion Sundays. It welcomes those who enter jovially to celebrate worship or painfully to bid farewell to loved ones. From its doors I took my father's arm, just as my daughter took her father's arm thirty years later, walking the aisle to repeat marriage vows. I looked at the baptistery, summoning the sound of water that I could still hear dripping from the gown Mandy wore when she was baptized, as well as scores of other children and adults we loved who passed through these waters.

The years I sang in the choir were resurrected when I turned my eyes to the choir loft. The relationships I established, both in faith and friendship, were too numerous to count and too poignant to summon without tears. This choir's role in the beginning, foundation and depth of my marriage to Charlie have been monumental. The times are countless that I have floated a prayer during worship, Christmas Eve, wedding ceremonies or funeral services when Charlie or Mandy, or both, were singing.

As I rose to leave, I gave the quickest of glances to the pews, now announcing what seemed the sun's final "amen" for the day. It was in the moment that was almost preempted by my departure that I 'came to the altar,' so to say. For as holy as communion tables and pulpits and baptisteries are, I was stricken with the realization that it is actually the pew that holds the most sacred of all symbols by which we seek to find God, for it is the place that brings us all into sanctuary. The pew provides our coming together, our place where some find God one way, while others seek him in another.

The pew holds us up both when we are depleted and when we are full. In the pew we take; we struggle, question, hurt and rejoice. Equally, it is from the pew we give; we serve, we love, and we pour out, not out of piety but out of humility. The pew allows us to realize the common ground upon which we all worship. It sends us out as hands, feet, and voices. Perhaps the most profound bit of faith that I have learned from my own pew, is that we sit together in humanity, not in divinity. I am grateful that I can bring my imperfect self to a pew that does not require perfection. It beckons me in all of my faults to take a seat. Likewise, I am challenged not to keep my faith within the pew or sanctuary walls but, with Christ's profound commandment that has been the message of faithful ministers over the years, "Go, ye, therefore..."

Sanctuary is not necessarily confined to a building. It is not bound by a blueprint. Some of my most worshipful sanctuary moments have occurred at a kitchen table cluttered with dirty dishes, on the lake or changing a diaper on the baby whose fever has broken. Yet, the sanctuary that rests within the walls of this historic Baptist church on Pulaski Street in Athens, Georgia, has provided some of the most meaningful moments with God that can possibly occur. It is a sanctuary that like all others must be occasionally painted, fixed, strengthened and restored, yet remains unwavering in proclamation.

Charlie and I have both been greatly anchored by sanctuary in our lives. Figuratively and literally, it has heightened our times of thanksgiving and celebration, and challenged us to be the best we can be. We find hearts filled with gratitude for the saints of past generations who occupied the pews before us, for those whom we have come to know and love in our faith journey and who have become part of our family and circle of friends.

I will forever recall a simple visit to an unoccupied sanctuary on a routine week day. I will remember a stranger standing frozen with his hat clasped in his hands with an awe struck reverence that truly this must be a place where God lives. "God so loved...the world." I don't stumble on John 3:16 anymore. This verse for me lies at the center of everything so lovely in our magnificent sanctuary. A place where a message of hope and love comes to those who occupy these pews.

Memories of a Lifetime

By: Allison Cunningham

First Baptist Athens is extra special to us because we were married here 11 years ago! Even though it was a dreary day in June, the day shines so bright for me and Perry. It was in this building that we vowed to love and support each other through thick and thin.

We both first joined First Baptist Athens over 11 years ago having no idea of the adventure that life would lead us through. After living in Knoxville for 5 years and the Atlanta area for 3 years, we were thrilled to have the opportunity to return to Athens. The first Sunday that we were back in Athens and at First Baptist, I had an overwhelming sense of comfort and assurance knowing that every Sunday we could be back in this place and reminded of those special vows that we made to each other.

A prayer was said on our wedding day asking God to double our joy in happy times and our comfort in hard times through each other. I love thinking of that special day each time I'm in the sanctuary. We now look forward to raising our two sweet boys in the church that is so special to us and has recently become very special to them.

By: Carol Jane Thomason Rayburn Cofer

Since my attendance at FBC began shortly after my birth in 1960, I don't have a "memory" of that event. But needless to say, the John H. Thomason family has been an active participant at FBC Athens since before my birth through the present.

Oh, if the walls of FBC could speak. For me, the walls would surely recount playing hide and seek during church lock-ins as early teenagers, and Girls in Action (GAs) and Acteens coronations, dressed in long white dresses, with attendants carrying a crown, scepter and/or cape. After processing down the center aisle, the young ladies shared the mission activities and studies completed to earn Queen, Queen with a Scepter and/or Queen with a Cape.

The floor under the podium might recount my baptism in the sanctuary before it was remodeled in the 1970s. The walls would sing the songs from the youth choir concerts held in 1973 and 1977 on the risers in the sanctuary as sendoff for the first and second overseas youth choir trips with over 60 singers and orchestra members.

The sanctuary walls would recount my wedding, the baby dedication of 2 children, the baptism of two children, the funeral of my father, and my daughter's wedding. In addition to the walls witnessing those life events, the sanctuary pews have provided a place of solace during some of life's most challenging times.

Even though these are memories of the physical place and presence of FBC and the sanctuary, the underlying connectivity woven through time has been the ebb and flow of people, new and old; all bound together by the search for a relationship with God, each other and our local and global community.

A Side Story: When the church deliberated in the early to mid-90s what type of physical modifications to make to the building (a family life center or the fellowship hall 3 story addition), my dad was on the planning and survey committee which met for several years. Finally, for those who knew my dad, he had enough planning and surveying and felt it was time to make a decision and take action. He purchased a children's gardening set and attached the shovel to his belt. Upon entering the fellowship hall for Wednesday night supper, he said, "Preacher, it's time to break ground!"

If These Walls Could Talk

Young Couples and the Future

By: Bill Hopper

In the early 1980's, then Senior Minister Jon Appleton established a young couples class at First Baptist Church of Athens. A few years later, that class assumed the name of the Callaway-Wilcox class to memorialize two matriarchs of our congregation.

Over the ensuing years, those "young couples" have matured physically, but more importantly, spiritually. Like any collection of people, the class has experienced the many highs and lows of life – births, weddings, relocations, divorces, and even deaths. The Callaway-Wilcox class has even served as the seed for other FBC classes. Through all of the life events, the class has supported each other and developed a special bond and trust as fellow Christians on a similar, yet unique life journey. We have been newlyweds, parents, newly singles, empty nesters, and care takers together. We have studied the word of God and tried to apply the teachings of Jesus to our daily lives. While doing so, the C-W class has become a vital group within the larger congregation of First Baptist Church.

A few years ago, Donna and I were asked to leave the Callaway-Wilcox class for a special mission to co-teach, with Mary and Chris Conley, a "young couples" class in formation. As I now listen to the members of this young couples class, I am often reminded of the Callaway-Wilcox class of the 1980's and 1990's. These young couples are also on a journey as newlyweds and parents. The highs of their journey will need to be celebrated and the lows will need to be supported. Christian love and support are two of the most vital roles of a church family. I can see the bond and trust forming in this new young couples class and it lifts my heart.

It is my sincere desire that the current young couples class will become the future leaders of First Baptist Church. I hope that they comprehend the necessity and importance of their presence to the overall health of our church. It is also my prayer that they, as I do, will be able to look back in thirty or so years and give thanks to God for a loving, supportive class of fellow believers.

Blessings Past, Blessings Future

By: Leslie Gordon

As our church campus has undergone its renovation, we have all experienced moments of displacement from the classrooms and spaces that we normally occupy. I have enjoyed these wanderings and the opportunity to revisit many spaces that I have not seen since my youth. In the late eighties I was a member of the last FBC youth choir to travel to Europe on the "Overseas Adventure" that took us to performance venues in several countries. For over a year preceding the trip, we gathered for regular church activities as well as extra rehearsals, fund-raising, lock-ins, and more that prepared us musically, socially, and spiritually for the trip. I doubt there was an inch of the church that we did not cover in those days, and I still remember it all so well!

During the last year I have walked my children through rooms and hallways taking on a new shape. I have recounted my youthful adventures to them as I described the rooms that used to be at the end of these halls, the corners where my friends and I played pranks on one other, and even the old "Youth House" that once stood where we now hold many of their activities. I am excited for the benefits that our renovations will bring for everyone in our church family, and the many who are yet to join our church family, but I feel particular excitement for my children as they move into their new spaces and the next phase of their youth. This new physical space will be the backdrop for their spiritual transformation. What marvelous blessings await us all, indeed!

Here is the Church... Here are the People

By: Jimmy Thomason

I have heard throughout my life various statements along the lines of “The church is not a building but instead is the people, the love, and the faith inside the building.” First Baptist Church Athens is a loving community of believers who have shaped and influenced me throughout my entire life. This is the church that comforted my father when he suddenly and unexpectedly became the widowed father of four very young children. This is the church that embraced my mother when she became the “automatic” mother of those same four young children. This is the church in which they chose to raise all seven of their children, and this is the same church in which Margaret and I have very purposefully chosen to raise our own family.



While I agree that the church is much more than just the building, I also believe that the house of worship – the actual building – can have a heart and soul of its own. As our renovation process came to an end and I reflected upon the significance of this beautiful building, I realized just how much our church building means to me. Certainly the sanctuary, with its beautiful architecture, adds so much to the reverence of any worship service. However, I also fondly remember some other areas of the “old” church that hold special places in my memory. The old fellowship hall is one such place. Now, anyone who has experienced the “old vs. the new” certainly realizes that our current fellowship hall is a modern marvel compared to the former facility. That being said, while it might have been lacking in some modern conveniences, that fellowship hall was a special place; Ollie’s unique and beautiful laughter coming from the kitchen, Mr. Cox (the Candy Man) giving out candy to all the children, performing on the stage with first the Brownie Bears and then the Joyful Singers and finally the much beloved Youth Choir. All of this, and more, occurred in that special place and was dutifully reported in Ms. Rolline Martin’s “Wednesday Night Notes.”

I also fondly recall what we referred to as the “lower sanctuary.” It sat directly below the main sanctuary. I’m not totally sure if the floor was level or if it sloped toward the stage like a theater floor. But I am pretty certain that it had auditorium style chairs rather than pews. The stage sat where the two restrooms are now below the vestibule of the sanctuary. Carol Jane’s (my much elder sister) cool Youth Group put on a play about Daniel and the Lion’s Den. It even included the lion’s den and a “realistic” looking fiery furnace! We can all still sing the chorus to the main song, *Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, they lived in Judah a long time ago. They had funny names and they lived far away, but they set an example we can follow today...*

My much less cool children’s group also put on a play on that same stage. Rachel Fleeman and I played the leads. Rachel, undoubtedly, deserved the role. I was probably the last boy they asked, and they applied more pressure to me than the others! Our play definitely was not as noteworthy, as I don’t recall the plot nor any of the songs. However, I’m sure Ms. Martin reported in the Wednesday Night Notes that “a fine time was had by all.”

Just as I have made memories of a lifetime in this building that houses FBC Athens, I am confident that the children of the church today are doing the same. This renovation process has made it possible for all of us, long time members and new families alike, to continue the mission of the church. Yes, our church is a group of believers and seekers who worship together. It is also a house of worship that, for nearly 100 years, has sat at the corner of Hancock and Pulaski as a beacon for and a testament to the love, grace, and forgiveness of Jesus Christ.

From Birth until Death do Us Part

By: Emily O'Rear

FBC Athens has been a part of my entire life. In fact, I was born into the church, had my infant dedication at church, was baptized at church, and grew up in the church. It holds some of my very favorite memories including wearing the well-known white dress as a GA, being an acolyte during "big church," singing in the children's choir, Sunday School with Mrs. Cooley, Trunk or Treat and the Chili Cook-Off to celebrate Halloween, and lighting the advent candle with my family at the Christmas Eve Service, just to name a few.

First Baptist Athens also holds some of the memories that I just can't seem to forget such as portraying the six geese a laying while singing the 12 days of Christmas during the mother/daughter trip to Camp Pinnacle. During the "Senior Quest" with Youth Minister Hannah Coe, we *climbed* part of the Appalachian Trail after eating Mexican food, stuffed too many girls into one tent and tried to sleep while being drenched with rain. We returned to attend church on Sunday wearing jeans, a white shirt, and lots and LOTS of dirt!

But the thing that makes these experiences most unforgettable is the group of friends I made through

church. Portraying the six geese a laying wouldn't have been the same without catching McGee Hopper's egg, and I couldn't have made it up the Appalachian Trail on the "Senior Quest" without Alex Parker, Mary Jane Young, Wendy Hannah, McGee Hopper, Nathan Caskey, and Laura Kathryn Hogan dragging me up and helping to carry the back-pack! Decorating the O'Rear van during Trunk or Treat would not have been near as fun if this same group weren't all in costume. Although most of us went to different schools, church is where we could spend time together and be ourselves.

On June 9, 2018, I stood in the same church where I grew up, not as an acolyte, or a GA, or as a singer in the children's choir, but on the biggest day of my life – the day I got married. Being the first person to be married in the sanctuary after the April dedication of our renovated facilities was very special for me. Truthfully, it was personally exciting to have had that experience as being someone whose entire life was right here at First Baptist, the church where I grew up and had some of the best experiences, and now where I'm blessed to start the rest of my life.

Missions, Passport and Blessings

By: Charles and Becky Adams

My family moved back to Athens in the late 1960's and joined FBC in the early 1970's. As a child I grew up going to church every time the doors opened. In college I met Becky at UGA and we were married in 1988. Becky joined the church in 1988 and life at FBC began for us as a couple.

Fast forward to 1992 when we came back to Athens from teaching in Germany for two years. During the summer at the southern tip of Florida a devastating hurricane, Andrew, destroyed the community of Homestead. The next summer First Baptist's first Minister of Youth, Lex Horton, took our youth to

Bradenton, Florida for the first Passport Camp. Lex asked me and Becky to be chaperones with our youth group for the week. I drove one van and Lex drove another all the way down without air-conditioning and everyone survived! We participated in worship services, recreation, bible study, and enjoyed getting to know the youth of FBC. Our mission project for the week was constructing hurricane shutters that were going to be sent to Homestead, Florida. It was hot and buggy, but we had a great time and learned a lot about ourselves as a group. Toward the end of the week I remember how meaningful it was to

see all the shutters stacked and strapped on the flat bed of that truck as it drove away. After that trip we found out that Becky was pregnant with Christopher.

Again, fast forward (way too fast) to 2012 and once again 20 years later Becky and I were asked to chaperone our youth on the 20th anniversary of Passport in Wingate, North Carolina with both of our children, Kate and Christopher in the youth group. What a blessing First Baptist Church has been to our community, our family, and to us as a married couple.

Serving with Love

By: Jill Dawson

I love my church! My family history runs deep with First Baptist Church Athens. My great-grandparents and grandparents were members of this church when it was built in the present location in the 1920's. My father was raised in this church, and my mother joined when they married in 1947. They were all members when the 1950's educational wing was built. My sister and I were on the Cradle Roll here and are still members. Rick joined the church when we married in 1975. We raised our two daughters here. My parents, Rick and I, and our girls were all members when we built the 1990's addition.

I was dedicated and baptized here. Rick and I were married in the sanctuary. Our daughters, Laura and Emily, were dedicated and baptized here. Laura was married in the sanctuary. Both my parents' funerals were here. Obviously, this church has been a huge part of my life.

Things have changed over the years and some things have remained constant. This church has always been a presence in downtown Athens. It has always had highly educated, knowledgeable pastors. We have always had loving and dedicated lay leaders and teachers. Our church has always

been forward thinking and open to questioning and new ideas. It is a place of love, knowledge, caring, and acceptance.

But, our church is also always changing. As our late historian, Ernie Hynds, would say, "We are always becoming new." New ways to worship God in Christian community. New ways to serve our community. New ways to spread God's love to foreign lands. And, yes, new ways to use our building for God's work.

It's just Rick and I here now. Our children are raising their families in churches in other states. As I look back, I thank God for all the wonderful First Baptist saints who helped to raise my father, me, and my children in faith and always supported my family with love. I see this faith being passed on to my grandchildren. There is no greater joy!

Now, our church is beginning a new phase. Our renovation is complete. We are open and ready to continue God's good work. Some things will remain constant, and that's good. But it's once again time for new ideas, new ways to share God's wondrous love. Rick and I are ready to serve!

Serving Solutions with the Community

By: Linda Lacy

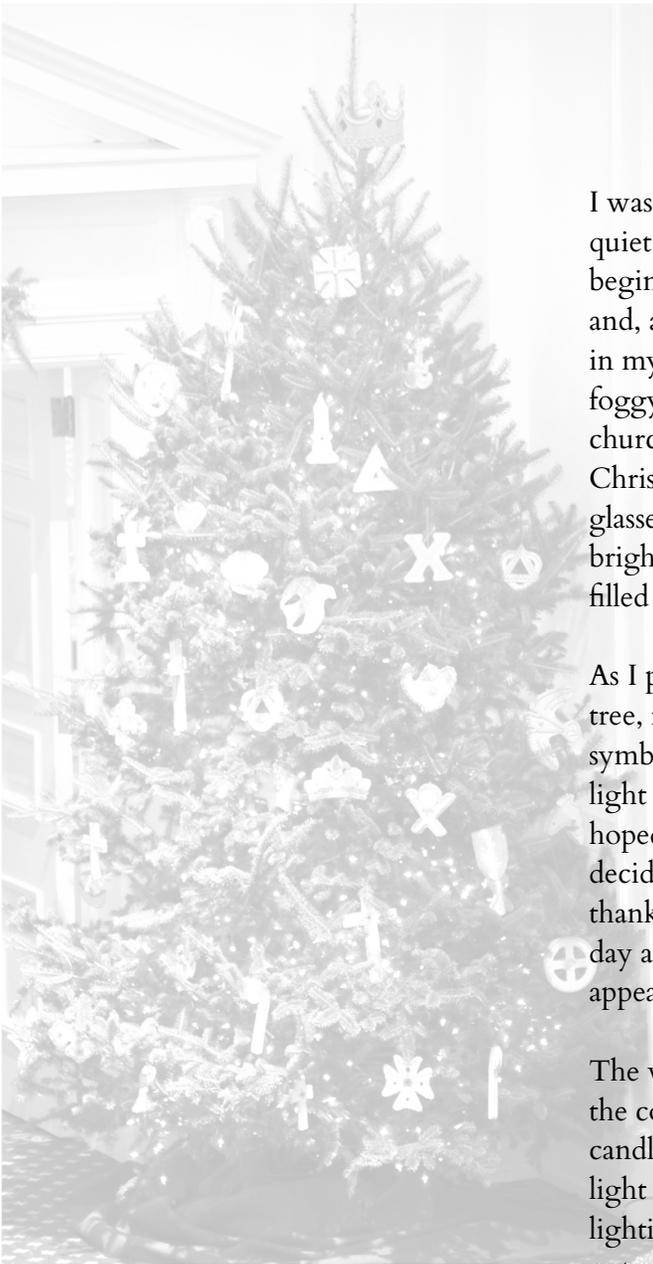
It was 2002 and Athens had a problem. Homelessness in Athens was not a new issue but the increasing number of families with children experiencing the crisis of homelessness was. Existing homeless ministries were not able logistically to handle families. Too often, families had to be separated with fathers and older boys going to one area of the shelter and moms and daughters going to another. When members of First Baptist Church and other Athens congregations learned of this, they knew something had to be done. No question God led us to the Interfaith Hospitality Network.

The national organization had developed a unique way for congregations to team up to keep homeless families together and most importantly to help these families work their way back to finding jobs and achieving sustainable independence. In October 2004, several Athens churches were involved in establishing this ministry for our community, but the FBC ministerial staff and missions committee provided key leadership. FBC was and still is a major financial and volunteer contributor to IHNA and allows the Hancock House to be used as the center of IHNA operations for a nominal fee.

Our congregation has gained much from this ministry. Serving homeless families has certainly been a blessing and seeing most of those we have served eventually move into their own places has been thrilling. But in addition to that, the friendships and community we have built with sister congregations in the IHNA network have been priceless.

A Beacon of Light to the Community

By: Patsy Hogan

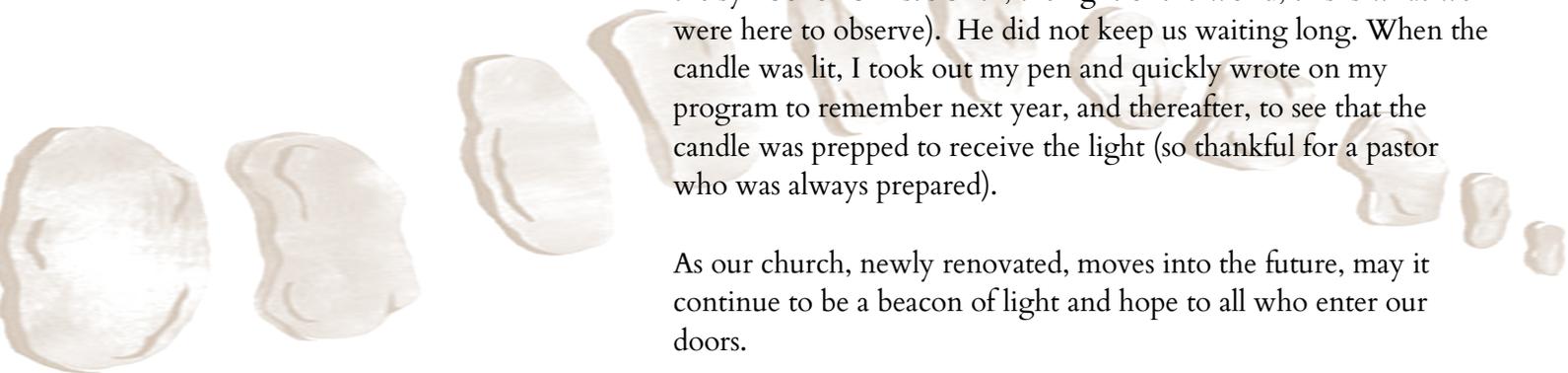


I was accustomed to arriving early at work, hoping for an hour of quiet before the telephone began to ring. The church was just beginning the Season of Advent which called for much preparation and, as one of the secretaries, I already felt overwhelmed. The clock in my car registered just before 7:00 a.m., and it was still dark and foggy outside. As I came up the hill on Hancock Avenue with the church in the distance, I was astonished to see our very tall Chrismon tree covered with white lights shining through the glassed Branyon foyer entrance to the church. It was burning very brightly! I was almost stunned by the sight and immediately felt filled with hope and strength.

As I pulled into the empty parking lot and continued to stare at the tree, it occurred to me that this might be a beacon of hope, a strong symbol, to more than just me in the early morning blackness – a light shining in the darkness to the people in the surrounding area. I hoped so. Apparently, the janitor who always arrived early, had decided to plug in the tree. He greeted me at the door, and I thanked him for giving me this welcoming sight on such a dreary day and wished that early passersby might also be touched by its appearance.

The weeks passed by quickly and finally Christmas Eve arrived and the congregation gathered in the sanctuary for the traditional candlelight service. Dr. Appleton approached the Advent wreath to light the Christ Candle. I noticed that he was having trouble lighting the candle, and then realized that he had his pocket knife out and was probably cutting away the old wax and trimming the wick. (I thought, how will it be if the Christ candle does not light; the symbol of Christ's birth, the light of the world, this is what we were here to observe). He did not keep us waiting long. When the candle was lit, I took out my pen and quickly wrote on my program to remember next year, and thereafter, to see that the candle was prepped to receive the light (so thankful for a pastor who was always prepared).

As our church, newly renovated, moves into the future, may it continue to be a beacon of light and hope to all who enter our doors.





By: Randy Brittain, Minister of Music

“First Baptist Church is a thriving community of Christ where we all participate in worship and are transformed by mission.” One of the ways that we participate in worship is singing. Corporate singing is one of the most important ways that Christians have identified throughout two millennia to form community and practice the presence of God together. Hymn singing has been one of the great strengths of the Protestant tradition in general and the Baptist tradition in particular over the past 500 years of church history.

We Need Each Other's Voice to Sing

Ernie Hynds' history of First Baptist Athens, *Always Becoming New*, tells us that the first hymnals for this congregation were purchased in April 1854. Even though printed copies of worship service programs of that time period are lost, one can assume that the hymnal mentioned was *Baptist Psalmody*, published in 1850. This hymnal by Basil Manly (1798-1868) and Basil Manly, Jr. (1825-1892) was very popular in the South because it was endorsed by the Southern Baptist Convention meeting of 1851. This early Baptist hymnal was a words-only affair mainly because the book was easier and cheaper to print without music. And you could print a lot of hymns in this kind of hymnal. *Baptist Psalmody* contains 1,295 hymns for worship!

What is it about singing that helps us form a community of faith? Why do we sing together in worship? Why doesn't the congregation just come and listen to the music on Sunday morning like an audience for a concert? There are many theological reasons why we sing together but I will offer just a few to ponder. Worship is at the heart of what we do as a community of faith. It is the formational act that cannot be done without. And worship is not a performance like a concert but rather a time for the people of God to gather and participate in the liturgy. We sing together because we believe that congregational singing is the primary musical expression in worship and that the most important choir in the church is the congregation. We sing together to offer praise and adoration to God, to give God our thanks, to pray for God's mercy and guidance, to proclaim God's word, and to be challenged to live for God's Kingdom. We sing to teach ourselves and our children what we believe about God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We sing to pray for one another and carry's each other's burdens. We sing our laments when we are suffering or grieving and our praise and thanksgiving in times of rejoicing.

The last 50 years have been a time of increasing individuality in our American culture. In Robert Putnam's book from 2000, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Putnam writes about how Americans have become increasingly disconnected from family, friends, neighbors, and our democratic structures. We belong to fewer organizations, know our neighbors less, meet with our friends less frequently, and even socialize with our families less often. Of course these same deep trends can be seen in the continuing decrease in weekly attendance in our churches. The very fabric of our connections with each other has plummeted, impoverishing our lives, our communities, and our churches.

But we know in our hearts that we go it alone in this life at our emotional and spiritual peril. Being a well-rounded human being, an informed citizen of this country, or a deeply committed Christian cannot be done in isolation. Thomas H. Troeger's hymn, *We Need Each Other's Voice to Sing*, remains for me one of the most beautiful descriptions of community. And though we believe in the act of corporate singing on a deeply theological level, Troeger uses singing in his hymn as a metaphor to describe all the ways we connect with one other in the community of faith, bound together by the power of God at work in us.

My prayer is that as we move into the fall and our *Let's Talk* series that we will use this hymn during times of prayer and reflection, remembering all the ways that each of us is a gift to each other and to God.

*We need each other's voice to sing the song our hearts would raise
to set the whole world echoing with one great hymn of praise.
We blend our voices to complete the melody that starts
with God who sets and keeps the beat that stirs our loving hearts.*

*We give our alleluias to the church's common chord:
Alleluia! Alleluia!
Praise, O praise, O praise the Lord!*

*We need each other's strength to lift the cross we're called to bear.
each other's presence is a gift of God's incarnate care.
When acts of love and tender speech convey the savior's voice,
our praise exceeds what words can reach and we with song rejoice:*

*We give our alleluias to the church's common chord:
Alleluia! Alleluia!
Praise, O praise, O praise the Lord!*

*We need each other's views to see the limits of the mind,
that God in fact turns out to be far more than we've defined,
that God's one image shines in all, in every class and race,
and every group receives the call to sing with faith and grace:*

*We give our alleluias to the church's common chord:
Alleluia! Alleluia!
Praise, O praise, O praise the Lord!*

*We need each other's voice to sing, each other's strength to love,
each other's views to help us bring our hearts to God above.
Our lives like coals placed side by side to feed each other's flame,
shall with the Spirit's breath provide a blaze of faith to claim:*

*We give our alleluias to the church's common chord:
Alleluia! Alleluia!
Praise, O praise, O praise the Lord!*

A Community Where Children Thrive

We are a faith community that helps children thrive in their spiritual journey and as we pass our faith on to the next generation, our community will be sustained. This brings to mind the passage in Joshua 4: 1-7, where an altar of stones was built. “Someday your children will ask, ‘why are these stones here?’” Joshua wanted the people to have a visual reminder of the many ways God was with them as they crossed the Jordan River into the Promised Land.

We begin the process of passing on our faith as a congregation each time we make a commitment at a parent/child dedication service. “Will this congregation receive this child into our church family to love and nurture?” And all the people respond: We Will. “Will you seek to provide both child and parents opportunities for worship and spiritual growth?” We Will.

So how do we love and nurture a child in our faith community? To begin with we provide a space on our campus where children can be welcomed and loved. A space that is inviting, clean, safe and nurturing. A space where children are provided an environment to discover their world and feel accepted. A space where they can explore, express their creativity, and be celebrated as the unique child they are.

While physical space is important, relationships are even more important. We can all think of people in our lives who have helped us discover God. Children need people to walk with them and guide them along the way as they grow in their understanding of God in their lives. As a faith community we have a responsibility to nurture and love our children as a basis for helping them begin to understand how very much God loves them. Our teachers in Sunday School, Extended Session and Children’s Worship, to leaders of Children’s Choir, Mission Kids, Vacation Bible School, Fine Arts Camp

and Passport Kids — these are angels who desire to nurture children and help them discover God.

We have heard it said it takes a village to raise a child but truly it takes a community of faith to raise a child. A community willing to invest time, talent and resources into the lives of children so they can discover God and walk with him. A community that values intergenerational interaction. A community that values worship in which we all participate; children, youth, college, young adults, middle age adults and older adults. A community where we are all transformed by mission from our youngest children to our oldest seniors. A community that is committed to passing on our faith to the next generation.

Research shows that children who have a positive, active relationship to spirituality are:

- 40 percent less likely to use and abuse substances*
- 60 percent less likely to be depressed as teenagers*
- More likely to have positive markers for thriving and high levels of academic success*

(Cited from “The Spiritual Child” by Lisa Miller)

Our faith community commits to walking alongside parents in their efforts to raise their children to experience God’s love and to love God with all their heart. Lisa Miller describes a spiritual community in her book, *The Spiritual Child*. “Spiritual communities create opportunities that are beneficial to our children – intergenerational company, support, memories, ritual, song, and friendship. A spiritual community shares spiritual values, celebrates the child and parents, prays each family through challenges and is committed to the well-being of all.”

The NPR radio weekly broadcast “On Being” begins each interview with the same question. “What is the spiritual background of your

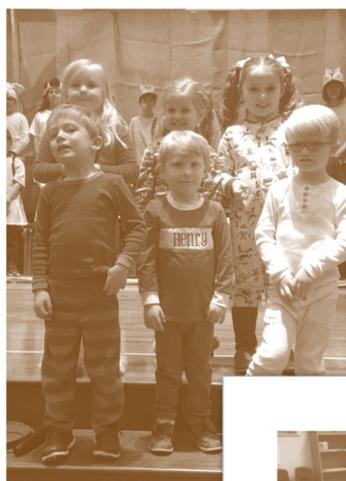


childhood?” Each week, I am ever amazed as a different person is interviewed, how crucial their answer is to their life story. A wide cross section of people in our world are interviewed — but to a person there is always a relationship between their spiritual life as a child and who they are as an adult.

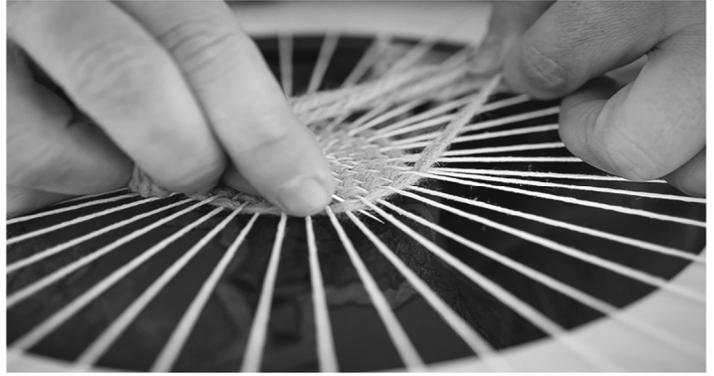
Even as you read through this “Renderings” you will read stories of what the church has meant to people and how their childhood experiences here have impacted their lives. Make no mistake what we do as a faith community to impact the lives of our children has an eternal effect. God works through people and as a people of faith we are tasked to share God’s love and discover the amazing God we have with our children.

Together we can lay the foundation stones of faith for our children so when they ask, “why are these stones here?” We can answer with grateful hearts, stories of how we are discovering God and choosing to live our lives loving God with all that we are. From rituals to relationships and everything in between passing on our faith to our children is one of the most important things this community of faith will do.

As a thriving community in Christ let us continue to all participate in worship and be transformed by mission across all generations. A community that loves and values our children and walks with them and their parents as we all discover God together.



Weaving a New Thread



By: Brandon Pendry, Former Minister of Youth and Mission

Mission trips were always sacred cows for me as a teenager, so much so I teared up the year I missed one due to driver's education class. They pushed me to learn new skills and I got a great sense of accomplishment and self-worth from doing work that had a higher purpose. But it was the community that was grown and nourished, the late nights spent playing cards with friends, the shared experiences that transformed us from simply volunteers to a new community.

It's not lost on me after nearly 20 years of doing mission work that perhaps it wasn't anything I did or anything about those specific trips that created a sense of community. It could only be the work of the Spirit, the third and oft forgotten member of the Godhead, interweaving the life of God with the life of humanity. In our mission work, we open ourselves to the work of the Spirit, doing far more in us and through us than we can imagine or even know at the time. The work of the Spirit has only been confirmed in the endeavors we've begun and continued here at FBC Athens.

If you've ever spent extended time at Our Daily Bread's Community Kitchen in our fellowship hall, you know the community that is there. It's a place where regulars gather, where those needing a meal to help ends meet are fed, and where everyone who partakes becomes a thread of hospitality and nourishment in the tapestry of the community. Volunteers giving meals, homework help, a listening ear, sleeping overnight, driving a van and more for Interfaith Hospitality Network weave threads of hospitality into the community. Youth & adults who've given large amounts of time and money to add their threads to the larger tapestry of God in the world have gone as far as Slovakia and all across our United States, weaving threads of understanding, compassion, inclusion, relief, and encouragement. Threads of grace, humility, solidarity, selflessness, love, and kindness are interwoven by all those who serve and are served, creating an ever growing and ever intricate beautiful tapestry where we realize our work is not singular — nor superfluous — but valued and life-giving.

Even the small interactions we have or the little things done behind the scenes are part of how God builds community through our shared mission work and experience. And in fact, sometimes the little things are what takes it from being simply work to being mission work, reminding us that mission work and community building are synonymous. It's not about how much you get done or the overall impact, but rather the ways God grows a community together and toward God in those shared experiences. And I think this is one of the main reasons missions has to be a centerpiece of any church plans to reach a community.

Reaching out often carries an overtly evangelical tone to it, but reframing outreach as community building through shared experience and shared hospitality offers something different. It invites church members, community members, and anyone interested to band together for the good of the larger Athens area community. When this becomes our priority, the Holy Spirit has new opportunities to move in that shared work and create things we didn't ever think were possible. Part of our goal is just getting out of the way to allow the spirit to move and change our communities, external and internal, to be more like the community of God.

My hope is that the ways we've woven our community at FBC within the community and culture of our Athens community over the past 6 years has begun to foster new and exciting opportunities for the Spirit to seize. I know many of you reading this have been an integral part of that work, but that some are still looking for a way to add your thread to the communal fabric. The good news is the Holy Spirit is still interweaving God's plans and love throughout all we do, whether it's official church mission work or the way you interact with a co-worker or a stranger. Everything you and we do is part of the outreach of God, since as Christians and Baptists we're all a priesthood of believers, each one of us having the same Spirit in us that resides in Christ.

As I go from this place to weave my own threads in new communities in North Carolina, my prayer and hope is that all here will see the ways this community is strengthened when we're all bound and guided by the Holy Spirit, when Christ is our rock, and when God's kingdom is made larger and more unique. God's outreach has only begun, how will you add your thread?



Let's Talk – Growing Community Through Conversation

By: Paul Baxley, Senior Minister

This fall we are sharing a series of sermons and conversations called *Let's Talk: The Bible and Public Life*. Over the course of seven weeks, each Sunday's worship service will introduce a significant question for Christians today, with weekly opportunities to discuss these questions in intergenerational groups. Those of you who have been in our congregation for more than two years know that in we offered a very similar experience. Just as in 2016, I am still actively thinking about all of the questions we will discuss together, and trust that the experience of preaching these sermons and having conversations with you about them will also help me grow in my own conviction and understanding.

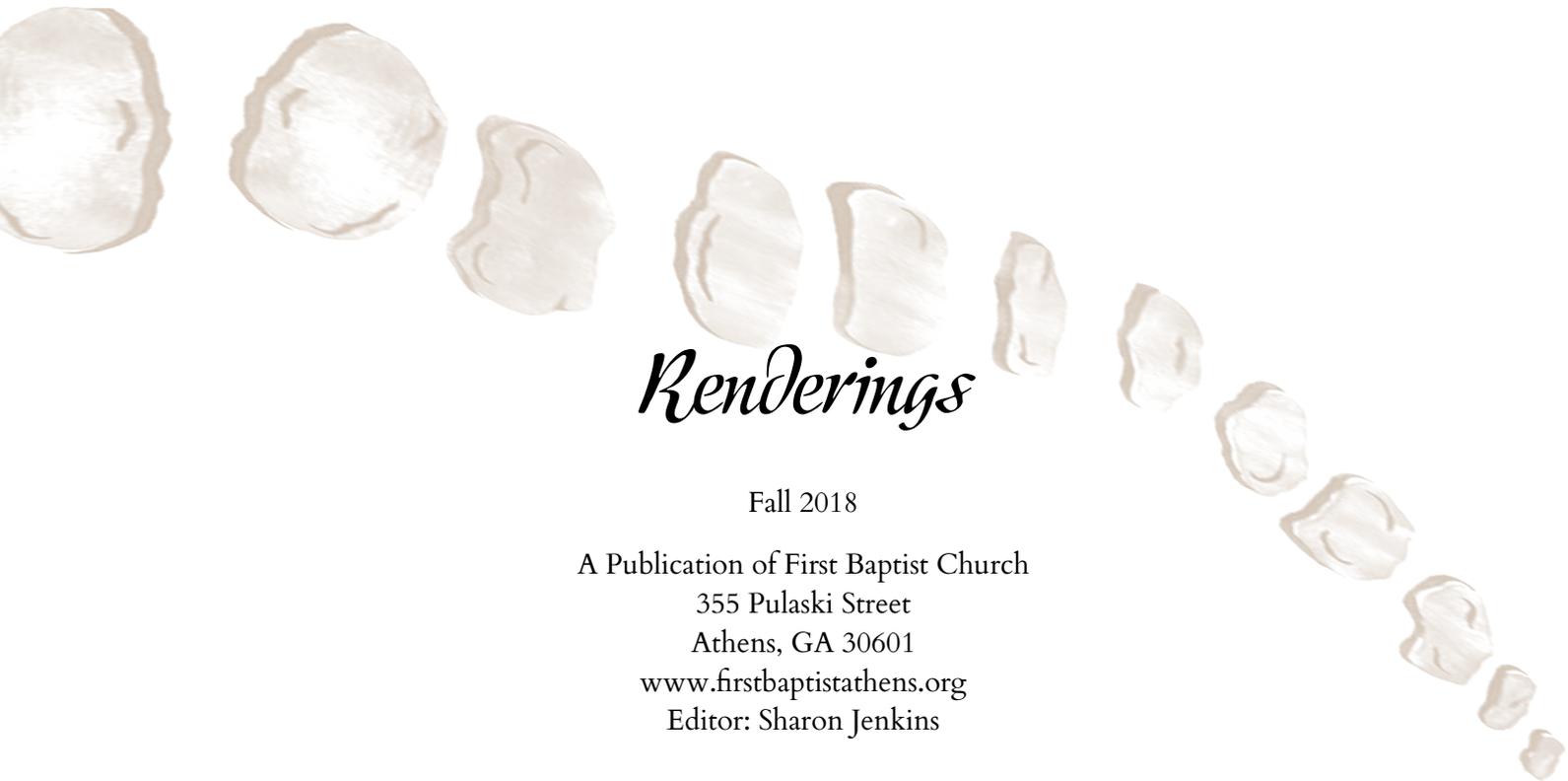
Our experience in 2016 taught us that making space for open conversation about difficult questions strengthened the sense of community within our congregation. We learned more about each other's journeys, we listened to each other speak and ask questions out of convictions, we discovered we could be in Christian community with each other even if we disagreed. While many of us entered that series with some apprehension about where it would lead, many of us found that these experiences strengthened both our personal faith and our sense of community.

During that series I was often reminded that Paul had to encourage the Colossians to "bear with one another" while reminding the Corinthians that love "bears all things." Would that ancient advice have been necessary except for the fact that even in the first century Christians didn't all see life and faith in the same way? Even in the first generation, Christians were discovering that unity was found in a common commitment to Christ, not in intellectual agreement. Because there was disagreement about matters of deep conviction, Paul also had to call the Corinthians to humility and remind them that rather than seeing all things clearly, they at best see through a glass darkly. It is a good reminder to us today.

I hope and pray that our *Let's Talk* series this fall will offer us another opportunity to grow closer to Christ and each other. I believe we will have a chance once again to get to know each other better, to learn from one another, to trust each other more, to discover that we do not all see all things in the same way, but also to experience a unity and humility in the presence of Christ. As we do this, we will embody what it really means to be a priesthood of all believers, seeking and speaking truth in love. Two years ago, one of our emeritus said that the way we have these conversations will be even more important than what we say; the manner of our discussions will be as much a witness to our faith as the words we speak. He was right then. He is still right today.

As we take this journey together this fall, we will also be making a much more significant effort to invite others in our community to join us. We believe there are many people in our community who would love to be part of a thriving community in Christ where these kinds of conversations can be had in this way, rather than in the polarizing and angry way they usually play out around us.

In the weeks that have passed since we first announced this new series, I have heard several people who are newer to our congregation say: "I'm so glad we are going to do that. The first *Let's Talk* series was one of the reasons I came to First Baptist." So we have good reason to hope and pray that this series will give us all a chance to invite others to join us, and that our community will grow and thrive through these conversations. Think about people you know outside church who would want to be part of these conversations and invite them. Pray for us as we worship together and as we talk about deep and difficult matters. And pray that as we do so, the Holy Spirit will move among us, growing our community in every way.



Renderings

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