

I Love My Church

By Clair Bolender

Recently, my wife Sande and I had occasion to visit two different churches. At one church we attended a memorial service for my brother-in-law and the next day we watched our tenth great grandchild be dedicated in another sanctuary. For very different reasons both of these visits reminded me of how much I am blessed by being a part of God's family at Harbor Covenant church.

The hundred-year-old Presbyterian Church, where we attended the memorial service, was warm and comfortable. The beautiful stained glass window brightened the front of the sanctuary and accentuated the natural woodwork that was evident throughout the interior. The pastor, in his clerical robe, delivered the eulogy and directed the service from a pulpit in the left front of the sanctuary with a large choir loft (empty at this time) behind his left shoulder. The setting was worshipful, reverent, peaceful and traditional. Many spiritual journeys were begun in this holy place and on this day we celebrated the beginning of a heavenly journey. It was a fitting ceremony to honor a good man, a loving father and husband.

After the service the celebration continued in the fellowship hall where my sister, Glenna, was surrounded by loving and supporting family members, a multitude of long-time friends and Christian brothers and sisters from the several churches she and Ken had attended. For me it was also a wonderful time for reunion with my cousins, nephews and nieces, and friends. It was also a nostalgic experience as I enjoyed the solemnity, reverence and beauty of the service and the surroundings that were reminiscent of an earlier time in my life.

After the memorial service as we journeyed home we passed by the re-purposed First Congregational Church. A block further on we passed the new wing of the Tacoma General Hospital that now replaces the hundred-year-old First Methodist Church. Proceeding west we passed the former home of Sixth Avenue Baptist Church which now is used for worship by a contemporary, non-denominational congregation. Just a couple of blocks from there is the beautiful sandstone building that used to be Epworth Le Sourd Methodist Church. This was the church where Glenna and Ken worshipped before it was forced to consolidate with another struggling Methodist church.

My mood became more somber as I considered the possible, if not probable, fate of my sister's church. Although it is stately, architecturally beautiful and basically sound, it is old. I don't know for sure, but I think the membership also is trending toward "elderly." In the case of many other traditional churches, maintenance of the ageing structures and their inherent inefficiency became financial burdens that

could not be overcome by the dwindling membership and the limited incomes of the remaining worshippers.

Note! After writing this portion of my essay I spoke with my sister about the status of her church. She assured me that her church is viable and healthy. I was very pleased to hear that, and I am comforted to know that she will be surrounded by a loving and supporting congregation.

The next day the dedication of our great-grandson was a part of the Sunday worship service at a large and popular church in Tacoma. Although Kevin and Holly and their boys now live in Vancouver they still consider this to be their home church and it is where Maddox and Myles were dedicated and they wished to continue the tradition with Morgan. I had attended this church when Maddox was dedicated so I had a good idea of what to expect.

Everything about this church is contemporary, including the architecture, the decor, the lighting, the worship style and even the message.

As Sande and I arrived at the entry a couple welcomed us at the door. They wore badges that identified them as “greeters” and smiled as they wished us a good morning. The idea of designated greeters always bothers me because it sends the message that all the other members are excused from the obligation of being hospitable to newcomers. And that is the way it was. All of the regular attenders already had their circle of friends and didn’t want or need any more so we were ignored or at least not noticed.

They have a very nice espresso bar so I made a stop there for a cup of coffee and shelled out \$2.25 for a twelve ounce, regular, drip, no cream coffee. It wasn’t even Starbucks. I was later told that if I had told them I was a visitor it would have been free. You would think they would use this as an opportunity to ask if you were a newcomer. “I don’t recognize you. Is this your first time at our church?” “Let me buy you a latte.” What a great opening line that would be! I guess their baristas are just there to sell coffee.

Since the dedication was a part of the service our family was directed to seats at the left, front of the auditorium. That’s okay with me because Sande and I have always been “front row” people. We like to be where the action is.

There was plenty of action. Sometimes at our church the music is louder than we would like, but this was Harbor Covenant on steroids. I have never been to a rock concert but I understand that smoke and strobe lights are prominent and that was the case in this venue. The drums, bass and other accompaniment were so loud that the words went unheard. No matter! The lyrics were mostly inane and sophomoric

and for those who wanted to follow them, were flashed on the huge video screens above the stage. I noticed that no one in the audience was singing anyway. A few people were swaying and some waved their hands in the air but that was the extent of any audience participation.

After the dedication ceremony a church official took the stage to remind the worshippers of their responsibility to financially support the work of the church. I understand the need to encourage generous giving but his five-minute spiel reminded me of the lame excuse that non-believers use to justify their non-participation: "All they want is my money."

In keeping with the casual atmosphere of the service the pastor wore a black T-shirt with a white logo under a jeans jacket, and penny loafers with no socks. I wasn't expecting a clerical robe but it is really difficult for me to take someone seriously who presents himself so lackadaisically.

His message was well delivered and included clever nuances and anecdotes and a simple message. Although it was somewhat shallow it was appropriate for the age group that was targeted and entertaining to all. No one left the church feeling uncomfortable or overly challenged.

To be fair I must acknowledge that this church has been viable for many years. Multitudes of Tacomans have worshipped there and call this their church home. They surely have been doing many things right and will probably continue doing kingdom work well into the future. God works in mysterious ways.

We left the church the same way we arrived and were sent on our way with a "Have a nice day" by another couple wearing "Greeter" badges.

I couldn't wait for the next Sunday to arrive so I could be back at my own church. Harbor Covenant Church has been our home for 33 years. Sande and I sang in the choir for most of that time. I served as an elder for seven years and Sande counted and recorded the gifts for at least that long. For 13 years I did the maintenance and set up tables and chairs for the many meetings, dinners and services that occur throughout the year. We are invested. It is the place we want to be and here we are surrounded by people who we love and who love us. It is also home for my daughter, my granddaughter and her husband, and my twin great-granddaughters.

Of course Harbor Covenant is not a perfect church. If it were it would not want me as a member. But its short-comings are miniscule compared to its strengths. I sometimes struggle with the contemporary format of our worship services because I have fond memories accumulated over my 80+ years that I long to hold on to, but I understand that the church and its mode of worship has to change to be relevant

to my granddaughter and her family. Nothing is more important to me than that. In keeping with this, my church also does a respectable job of honoring the needs and desires of my traditionally-minded friends and me.

I am thrilled that my church is known as a friendly and hospitable place. Each Sunday morning, 30 minutes before the service, 15 or more volunteers gather around the fireplace in our Gathering Place to prepare, through prayer, to greet those coming through our doors. In the past it was difficult to get folks to volunteer to be greeters but now many of our members have discovered the joy of meeting and greeting and look forward to the opportunity to practice hospitality. It is the desire of my church family that no one should leave our building feeling that they were unwelcomed.

At Harbor Covenant Church our pastoral staff is dedicated to keeping the main thing the main thing. That is “bringing people to Christ.” This they do by preaching, teaching and the example they display in the way they live their lives. The sermons we hear each Sunday are prayerfully prepared and biblically inspired. They always leave me challenged and uncomfortable. I don’t believe I could ever again be happy in a church that made me feel “comfortable.”

My church understands its responsibility to guide young minds to an understanding and a relationship with Jesus Christ, their Savior. Dedicated teachers and mentors provide an atmosphere, curriculum, opportunities and leadership to accomplish this end. The results of their effort is seen in the young men and women that go off into the community to begin lives as mature Christian adults.

Much goes on within the walls of Harbor Covenant besides Sunday services and Kids’ Church. We provide space and facilities for Narcotics Anonymous, Young Life, Peninsula Youth Orchestra, Mommy & Me, Pinochle Plus and various other gatherings. High school and middle school youth take over our building on Wednesday and Thursday evenings. Four days of each week preschoolers are lovingly taught and cared for in our education wing. I love that our church building is available and used by our community and is busy doing kingdom work.

But walls can’t contain my church. Three years ago our leadership recognized a need to reach people who were moving into the North Gig Harbor community where there was no established church. After much research, consulting and prayerful planning, a core group of volunteer families and a newly hired associate pastor established a satellite congregation in the new community. By the end of the second year the group had outgrown its rented space and relocated to a nearby middle school where it continues to flourish. Recently we were informed by Pastor

Michael that our leadership team was exploring the possibility of establishing another satellite campus in a nearby community.

It is difficult to find someone in my church family who is not involved in one of the church's outside ministries. At least every two years a team of eager volunteers is dispatched to Alaska where they build cabins, out-houses, kitchens and other facilities to provide a safe and spirit-filled camping experience for children and youth; some of which have never heard the message of Christ's love for them. Each worker pays his or her own travel expenses and Harbor Covenant lovingly and generously provides much of the funds for the purchase of the materials and equipment.

NW Furniture Bank was founded by a family in our congregation and has been one of our three "Signature Ministries" for several years. Since its beginning NWFB has provided complete furnishings for hundreds of families who are victims of natural disasters and those in need for any other reason. Besides the financial support - sacrificially given - many of our folks participate in this ministry by volunteering to assemble furniture, advise client-shoppers and help with the administrative work.

Near the border of our community, on Vaughn Bay, is Camp Stand by Me. Each year hundreds of young people who deal with disabilities come here to enjoy a camping experience. Harbor Covenant has included this worthy facility into its group of ministries that receives our special attention. Many hours of volunteer work and financial support is donated by our congregation.

Besides these Signature Ministries the people that make up the Harbor Covenant Church family are involved in all kinds of other projects that qualify as "kingdom work." These include the food bank, prison ministries, grief counseling, elder care, community involvement, world missions, and helping those in need in our community.

For several years Sande and I had played pinochle at the YMCA with 10-12 others who enjoyed free membership through their health insurance provider. Two years ago the "Y" ended its relationship with Silver Sneakers and we lost that benefit. We recognized an outreach opportunity and asked for permission to invite our pinochle group to meet in the Gathering Place. My church was welcoming and accommodating and now our group has doubled in size and people who didn't know each other – some church members and some not – have now become good friends. Pinochle Plus is now under the umbrella of Trek which is a program offering fellowship and activities to senior members of Harbor Covenant and our community.

When I tell people about Harbor Covenant Church I unapologetically make it clear that it is not a place to come to be “comfortable.” Not all of the music will be satisfying all of the time. The message may convict you and/or challenge you. You may be encouraged to be generous and available. At some point you may even be asked to participate. You will however, be warmly greeted and made to feel welcome. If you are seeking a deeper relationship with Jesus, you will find other seekers who will walk beside you. If you are hurting or distraught there are those who are comforting and understanding. If you want to be part of something that is bigger than yourself and make a difference in people’s lives, Harbor Covenant may be the place for you. I promise that you will be surrounded by loving folks who will accept and value you as a child of God, just the way you are.

I love my church!

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