

## **Reflections on Shared Ministry**

**Joel Brown, February 21, 2009**

Good Morning, I have been a member of this church for eight years. I am a member of the Welcoming Congregation Committee, Services Committee, Committee on Ministry, Green Sanctuary Committee and pretty much whatever requires somebody with more enthusiasm than brains.

I am speaking this morning as a member of the Committee On Ministry (COM) and the incoming chair of the Services Committee. The Services Committee is a perfect example ...it has been in the hands of Charlotte Lipson for the past couple of years and only a complete idiot would volunteer (or allow themselves to be volunteered) to take over as chair when it has been done so well. All I can hope for is to maintain.

To put this service together, I thought of *Memorable Services* I have participated in.

Notice I said “memorable,” not great or good.

Palestine, TX. I was 4 years old and I don't remember the service so much as I recall the aftermath. At evangelical churches, they ask for people, in this case children, to “witness” with a song or a short rant. Apparently, inspired by my new two-tone loafers and slightly too big sport coat, I provided a pretty cheesy version of, “You Ain't Nothin' But A Hound Dog.” That was where I first encountered the adult use of the term “mortified.”

The next [memorable service] occurred a few years later, and also involved music, at the A G church in Comanche, OK. I was about 13 or 14, and the Rev. Cecil Brown, whom I respected greatly, called rock and roll evil and the work of the devil. It took a couple of years, but they pretty much lost me right there.

Most of the truly memorable services I remember have taken place in this church:

Shortly after we joined the church, 9/11 occurred and our interim minister Shirley Rank brought the perspective of a New Yorker to the terrorist attacks. We were all struggling to come to grips with what this really meant. Shirley provided insight that helped me realize that this was not really about national security or global terrorism, but about a tragedy befalling someone's hometown and the friends and neighbors they loved.

Barbara Myers service on the joys of baseball, even though it was a thinly disguised Yankee-hating rant, was about one person's lifelong love affair with a national

institution and the joys and frustrations of a true fan. I think of it every time I go to a baseball game.

Reverend Nancy's services-

The chocolate service of a couple of months ago because Peggy Brown took what could easily be interpreted as a minor part of our daily lives and followed the trail of its production and distribution from a human rights perspective. For the rest of my life, I will never eat a piece of chocolate without thinking of that service and the lives of people involved in that trade.

Traci C., in two or three services went from someone scared to death to stand up in front of a group of people to someone that is pretty darn good at it.

As they should, our services in this church reflect not only our beliefs, but also the way we believe things should be done (our processes). We belong to a church that expects us to take the responsibility for our own spiritual journey. We don't have someone telling us that rock and roll is wrong, although we certainly may have someone telling us in no uncertain terms they think it lacks the complexity and creativity of jazz.

Part of that journey, for many people, takes the form of participating in a service as a greeter, choir member, musician, service associate, or even an active participant in designing or delivering the service. One reason I really like our services is that they are built to challenge our intellect as well as our emotions. What really sets us apart is the liberal nature of those messages and challenges.

A report called *American Higher Education Transformed, 1940-2005*<sup>1</sup>, suggested "The aim of a liberal education is to unsettle presumptions, to de-familiarize the familiar, to reveal what is going on beneath and behind appearances, to disorient people and to help them to find ways to reorient themselves."

I like to think of our services in this educational context, if you consider education in its broadest aspect. Thinking back on my own educational experience, it has occurred to me that they [the sermons] are not lectures, they are labs. You remember labs, many of you may still teach them on a daily basis. In the lecture, the professor walks in 1 minute before the beginning of class, opens the notes and proceeds to fill the next 50 minutes with organized facts and figures then leaves as quickly as possible to avoid any

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<sup>1</sup> Smith, W. and T. Bender. 2008. *American Higher Education Transformed, 1940-2005: Documenting the National Discourse*. Johns Hopkins University Press. 544 pp.

of the stupid questions. Labs, on the other hand, are practical exercises where participants spill chemicals, build bridges that collapse, write computer programs that freeze up the machine; they get the wrong answers on the way to right answers...or better yet, they figure out how to get the answer.

Now obviously you need both labs and lectures. We need the discipline of sitting for an extended period of time with a single focus on what one person is saying. But, we also need to supplement that focus with the creativity of making mistakes and finding new ways of thinking. I taught labs for five years, it took me a couple of semesters to figure out what I was doing. Labs give you the chance to look at people and to look at them long enough and intently enough to figure out whether they are “getting it” or not.

Of course, you can always wait for the exam, but that’s a little late. The most important lesson I learned from teaching labs was to figure out what it was you wanted to communicate to the students in the class and seek the most effective means of doing it...traditional or not. It takes a while, sometimes it almost takes being so tired that you have to just give up on all the decorations and pretensions and just talk to people.

Our worship teams have brought people in to the service that would never have thought of doing it before. Being part of a team provides the support and the boundaries to begin to explore that expressiveness that allows us to find our way to communicate what we believe to others. And to do it in a way that adds so much more to it than if we followed a pat format.

But that freedom to express ourselves also brings with it a very heavy responsibility to respect the sensibilities and the values of others.

We also have a responsibility as members of the congregation to listen to our fellow congregants, whatever the language, to consider the message and to think about what they have said. We have a responsibility to do our best to communicate, however it is done, to our fellow congregants. Ryan Sandberg’s said in his induction speech into the baseball hall of fame “I was in awe every time I walked onto the field. That’s respect. I was taught you never, ever disrespect your opponents or your teammates or your organization or your manager and never, ever your uniform. You make a great play, act like you’ve done it before; get a big hit, look for the third base coach and get ready to run the bases.”

“These guys sitting up here did not pave the way for the rest of us so that players could swing for the fences every time up and forget how to move a runner over to third. It’s disrespectful to them, to you and to the game of baseball that we all played growing up. “Respect. A lot of people say this honor validates my career, but I didn’t work hard for validation. I didn’t play the game right because I saw a reward at the end of the tunnel. I

played it right because that's what you're supposed to do, play it right and with respect... If this validates anything, it's that guys who taught me the game ... did what they were supposed to do...and I did what I was supposed to do.”

Obviously, the person that stands up here in any capacity has a responsibility to first explore their beliefs, second to organize those thoughts into a coherent and at least marginally entertaining format and finally to deliver them with the compassion that is achievable only with the effort that allows us to get past the mechanics and into the message.

But those responsibilities run both ways. The audience has just as much of a responsibility. We all get annoyed when our fellow audience members don't live up to their responsibilities. I don't go to movies in the theatre anymore because I can't take the crunching, unwrapping, texting and talking that seems to be SOP. Or worse yet, when you fork over \$300 bucks for opera tickets and some goof says way too loud “ I wish they would do this in English, nobody here speaks Italian.” We spend a lot of effort learning to listen as individuals; we have training sessions in effective listening. But has anybody ever had a class in group listening?

**First, the responsibility to show up.** As federal employees, Cliff P. and I have discussed this one often. Being there is half the battle. Too many times, we look at the order of service for next week's service or the weekly NUUS [news bulletin] and say, “I'm just not interested in that subject or that person, so I'll skip it this week.” The effort that it takes for someone, whether it's Reverend Nancy, a guest speaker, a service team, the choir or anyone involved [in a service] demands that we all get ourselves here on Sunday morning.

**Second, the responsibility to open your mind to new ways of communicating.** Many of our fellow congregants learn best through participation. Some love music...it's all over the place. Personally, I relish the 15-20 minutes on Sunday mornings when I can sit still and focus on what one person says and use my imagination to see it their way. I was a bit taken aback by the service where we built our own bags...until I finally realized that all those decorations could be personalized and quite entertaining. I still have my bag and I will remember the service.

**Next, and this is the big one, we have the colossal responsibility to APPRECIATE.** I am not talking about appreciate in the shallow sense, although we certainly need to appreciate the work that went in to it...but instead, in the sense that you learn in ‘Art Appreciation’ or ‘Music Appreciation’ class, that kind of appreciation that requires you to analyze and contextualize the work that you are experiencing and come to a thoughtful conclusion.

That thoughtful conclusion really should reflect the effort that went into the message. It doesn't have to be praise, one particularly impressive phrase I learned in Art Appreciation Intro was, "The artist really put some work into this, but I think it sucks, lets have a glass of wine." I was less impressed with the use of the lingo when the prof insisted that we have reasoning to back up our judgments. We learned the phrases for judgments on the first day, but it took the rest of the semester to learn the way to intelligently discuss the judgment. I already knew how to drink wine.

So consider every service like an exercise in art appreciation—what is the message? What is the artist trying to tell me? How do I see it? And how can I communicate back with the artist? No...gallery committee, you can't get the commission on that exchange.

A few years ago, the stewardship committee, led by Jim Miller, introduced the ideas that our stewardship of this church is about how we use our TIME TALENTS AND TREASURE. Those ideas are just as applicable to how we participate in services. We have to commit our time to participating. We all have different talents to offer, as listeners, speakers, singers, actors organizers, and some that I can't even imagine but I hope to see.

**Finally, our treasure...**the treasure that supports this place so that we can all find our voice.

## **CLOSING WORDS**

"It takes a lot of courage to release the familiar and seemingly secure, to embrace the new, but there is no real security in what is no longer meaningful. There is more security in the adventurous and exciting, for in movement there is life, and in change there is power." *Alan Cohen*