

Revival Without Revolution:

The Story of How a White, Agricultural Church Became a Multi-Racial, Multi-Generational Body of Christ

By

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Abstract

Nestled along the Little Calumet River, twenty miles south of the City of Chicago, lies the 165-year old First Reformed Church in the historically Dutch Village of South Holland, IL. With a rich and proud history as a flagship congregation in the Reformed Church in America, “First Church” has experienced a quarter of a century decline in membership, an exodus of younger families to more affluent areas in the south suburbs of Illinois and into northwest Indiana, and a lull in congregational morale amidst a rapidly diverse community that now is nearly 70% African American. As a result of racial migration, conflict in worship and a growing sense of congregational despair, First Church was forced to confront their ecclesial mortality in their given context for ministry. Dynamics of sharp change experienced in racial migration resulting in a changing community, the legacy of past, consistorial leadership and in corporate worship have given voice to charter a course for a future season of ministry.

Russ' Restaurant

We sat in a corner booth at Russ' Restaurant right at the split between 8th Street and Chicago Drive in Holland, MI. Across from me was one of my professors, who just so happened to be arguably the best preacher within the Reformed Church in America. Directly to his right was the President of one of the leading radio ministries and audio scripture ministries in the country. Both of them had last names that carried weight in our denomination and both had pastored the First Reformed Church of South Holland, IL. It was a few weeks earlier that the profile for First Church popped up in the Office of the Dean of Students at Western Theological Seminary. Being a first semester senior who was soon to be married, looking for a real job making the Classis minimum of \$33,000 a year with the golden ticket of health insurance, I was eager to explore any and all pastoral opportunities.

I had brokered a lunch meeting with these individuals for the purpose of doing a bit of reconnaissance work about First Church. Their church profile was recently sent via email to all the seniors at the seminary as a potential call into ministry. I had stopped by the Admissions Office that housed the giant filing cabinet that was like a treasure chest for all the would-be job opportunities. I wanted these two former pastors to share with me what this church was like. What was their experience? Were there solid people to pastor in South Holland? What was the community like? Most importantly, would they recommend I turn in my candidate profile to the chairman of the search committee? So, I began with what I thought was an open-ended question: "So tell me about First Church." The professor of preaching looked at me square in the eye and said, "Matt, going to First South Holland is like going to see your grandma in the nursing home. She kind of remembers you and every once in a while she looks up with a twinkle in her eye, but then she goes back to being feeble."

I raised one eyebrow, took a deep breath and tried to visualize what he described when the President of the audio scriptures ministry responded. He looked out the window facing Chicago Drive, took a deep breath and blew out all the air at once, puffing up his cheeks. "Oh, First Church," he said. "They really should just sell that old building and move out to the suburbs." On the bright side, my cheese broccoli soup was delicious and they picked up the tab for lunch.

The Onion Set Capital of the World

First Reformed Church of South Holland, IL has been praying, praising and proclaiming the Gospel at 15924 South Park Avenue for over 166 years. In 1848, W.C. Wust became the church's first senior pastor as the congregation worshiped in the back half of a barn. Built on the back-bone of Dutch immigrants, First Church began her humble ministry as "Low Prairie Church" in the mid 1800s. Now nestled on nearly five acres of ground between South Park Avenue and the Little Calumet River, First Church remains a staple in the Village of South Holland. Many members trace their roots back seven generations to the Widow Paarlberg herself whose husband died on the voyage from the Netherlands to the United States. One rumor suggests that after her husband took a good look at her, he jumped overboard! After overshooting their mark of Holland, MI, the widow and her battalion of small children settled down in what today is South Holland, IL.

Like many Reformed Churches, First Church rode the wave of biological growth all the way to becoming one of the largest congregations in the Reformed Church in America. The recipe was simple and effective. Dutch families have children, who in turn marry other

Dutch people and have Dutch children that all go to the same church. In the 1950s, First Church planted Calvary Reformed Church less than a half mile to the south on the same street. Later that decade, they also planted Faith Reformed Church less than two miles away.

Dutch farmers perfected the trade of harvesting onion sets and put South Holland on the map making her “The Onion Set Capital of the World”¹ by the mid 1970s. As a result, sub-divisions began sprouting up all over town. Farm land quickly turned into prime real estate for homes post-World War II. First Church’s membership swelled under the pastoral leadership of individuals like Ted Zandstra and Arnie Punt, whose names are still spoken with a hush reverence. To this day, there is not a denomination gathering that does not include at least one person or pastor with a direct connection to First Church. Even the RCA’s annual session, General Synod, was referred to as a “family reunion” for elders and pastors that were part of First Church. The cabinet holding the pictures of all of the pastors who have ever served First Church is something of a “who’s who” list within the Reformed Church in America.

As the church grew, so did her impact in ministry. Dozens of missionaries came from her ranks. Entire weeks dubbed “Mission Weeks” were dedicated to Missions and Missionaries with a culminating service to raise thousands of dollars for foreign missionaries. Still, mission was synonymous with foreign mission. Up until the 1990s, the central dividing question in town was whether one was a member of the Reformed Church in America or the Christian Reformed Church in America?

Both the church and the Village of South Holland grew on parallel tracks. As the Village grew, First Church became known as the church where the community leaders went. This bolstering relationship saw civic, business and community leaders call First Church home. The past three mayors and half of the Village Board of Trustees all were active members of First Church. If there was a fire on Sunday morning between 9:30-10:30am, one would see four or five firemen in the congregation quietly get up and leave the sanctuary to serve the Village. From worship, to mission, to service, life and witness were good for the First Reformed Church of South Holland, IL.²

Why this Story is Important

Telling the story of how a white, agricultural congregation became a multi-racial, multi-generational congregation is an important story to tell. It is important for me personally and for our congregation as a whole, so that we may be better equipped to learn from our past, celebrate our present and be hopeful for our future. It is important because the Reformed Church in America is a historically Dutch denomination comprised of congregations in communities that have experienced tremendous racial change and are ill-equipped to engage gracefully in diversity. It is important because of events like the ones that took place in Ferguson, MO or Baltimore, MD, or even right here in Chicago remind us that issues such as race and ethnicity continue to be polarizing ones within our nation and our communities.³ Lastly, it is important because woven in the fabric of the Good News of

¹ Carrie Steinweg, *Images of America: South Holland* (Arcadia Publishing: Chicago, IL, 2003), 8.

² *The First Reformed Church 100 Years Book* (The Shopper: South Holland, IL, 1948).

³ For more information, the RCA’s website at rca.org has been an extremely helpful resource for me. In addition, in the weeks that followed the events in Ferguson, MO, Tom DeVries, the General Secretary for the RCA wrote a blog highlighting congregations in

Jesus Christ is a call to engage, embrace and worship in multi-racial and multi-generation communities.

Not a Recipe for a U-Turn Church

It is my hope and prayer that this paper is a humble and celebratory story of redemption. Redemption in a people. Redemption in a ministry. Redemption in a community. After nearly ten years with me as their Senior Pastor and going on 170 years in ministry, First Reformed Church of South Holland is a microcosm for many bread and butter congregations, not only in the Reformed Church in America, but also across denominational lines. Churches that are desperately trying to be faithful to God's call in ministry in aging buildings in changing communities with limited financial and people resources. Churches that have seen the next generation leave her sanctuaries, youth room and Sunday school classrooms. Churches that are trying to do ministry with the shadow of a glorious past looming large over their present and future. Churches that will not sell their souls to a consumeristic, individualistic and materialistic ecclesial culture.

As I attend more classis meetings and talk with more pastors, I sense this growing frustration of "just trying to do the best we can with what we've got." Most congregations can't afford to attempt a satellite ministry in another community. Most congregations can't add three new staff members with benefits in next year's budget. Most congregations cannot just up and trade-in their aging senior pastor for some young, trendy, hot-shot preacher with wire-framed glasses and a tattoo revealing he's had a past in an attempt to become more relevant. No, the reality is that a great many congregations are in changing communities, worshiping in beautiful, old buildings with aging congregations. It is my earnest desire that this paper will be a source of hope for those kinds of congregations. Congregations and leaders might find a glimmer of hope in learning that change does not always have to be negative, organs can complement with guitars, and being a diverse congregation doesn't mean we have a "gospel service," and a "traditional service," and a "contemporary service."⁴

I truly believe that while we hear and read more and more about the church multiplication movement from both denominational leaders and large-church pastors turned authors, there is a growing sense among pastors and congregations who feel they have no voice in that story. To make matters worse, to speak up against Classis assessments being directed more and more towards church multiplication or to ask the response, "Why are we planting more churches in affluent white sub-divisions" portrays the attitude of "Oh, you

communities similar to that of Ferguson in terms of their racial composition. First Church in South Holland, IL was one of two that were highlighted. A helpful voice in this conversation has been Eric Law's book *The Bush was Blazing But Not Consumed*. Specifically in chapter 1 he draws upon the experience of the 1992 race riots in Los Angeles. Spanning more than 20 years, race riots in Los Angeles and Ferguson has been catalytic in nature for sparking dialogue in and outside the church.

⁴ I have sensed the pursuit of "the magic bullet" for congregational transformation most powerfully in Classis and Regional Synod gathers of pastors. Books like Thom Rainer's *Breakout Churches* are referred to as a recipe for success for congregations clinging to the past and fearful for their future. At an 2013 Synod of Mid-America meeting it was suggested that congregations that are struggling numerically use Faith Church's Senior Pastor, Bob Bouwer, as a consultant. This suggestion only speaks to a larger sense of despair, lack of self-awareness and fear felt by so many congregations.

must be against church multiplication.” Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, I believe that categories like revitalization and multiplication do not have to be mutually exclusive. Rather, I believe they can learn and grow from and with one another. In 2008, I was something of a Church Planter. I came and planted a new church within the shell of a 160 year old congregation. I was just given the benefits of a staff, a budget, a building, and a Consistory. I want both the multiplication and revitalization movements to find a source of hope in this story.

Undoubtedly, this will not be an easy recipe to turn a church around. This will not be a 1-2-3 step plan to success. This will not be complete. This also will certainly not be without flaws, without frustrations or without failures. I have been referred to too many books written by pastors heralding all the wondrous things God has done in and through their ministries, as if to say “If you do what we are doing, God will bless you and you will have a faithful ministry.” We do not have revitalization, multi-cultural ministry, or multi-generational ministry all figured out. Far from it. Moreover, this project seeks to chronicle the messy, patient and fruitful work of transformation and renewal.

White Flight

By 1990 the population of South Holland had doubled again in 30 years to 22,105. The significant change was that now, 11.6% of the population was African American. As African Americans migrated from the City of Chicago seeking refuge from violence and liquor stores on every corner, many white families took this as a sign that their village was changing for the worse. Fear of decreasing home values, dilapidated care for property and the anxiety surrounding racially mixed education became a perfect storm for families to move out of South Holland.

Ten years later, while the population increased by just 42 residents, the percentage of white individuals dropped from 85.9% in 1990 to just 45.0% in 2000. Significantly, African American individuals were now the majority, making up 50.8% of the village’s population. In 2013, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that South Holland’s population reached 22,170 individuals, of which just 20.5% were white and 74.2% were black. It is interesting to note that the Hispanic population rose from virtually zero to 5.8%. Recent census tracking shows an increase in the number of Hispanic individuals spreading into surrounding suburb communities. Harvey, which neighbors South Holland to the west is 75.8% black and 19% Hispanic or Latino. Calument City, which neighbors South Holland to the east is composed of 15% Hispanic or Latino individuals.⁵

South Holland continues to be a bedroom community for the City of Chicago with the average commute one spends to work is 34 minutes, which is 15% longer than the average commute of an Illinoisan. The median value of a home in South Holland is \$169,100, where the median household income is \$64,285. What makes those numbers interesting is that the average home in the state of Illinois costs \$190,800, whereas the median household income is just \$56,853.⁶ These numbers only accentuate the changes in the community that ultimately become factors for how effective a ministry can be for First Reformed Church.

⁵ *South Holland (village) QuickFacts from the US Census Bureau.*
<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states.html>. (Accessed on July 7, 2014).

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Biological Growth & a Decade of Decline

When South Holland was no longer a white, agricultural community, neither was First Church. The paths of growth, decline and racial change within the Village of South Holland can also be traced to life and witness of First Reformed Church. From her humble beginnings in 1848, the church steadily grew as the village grew. Membership records indicate that in 1958 church membership was 843 communicant members, and it was not uncommon for extra chairs to be set up in the Narthex for the overflow of people on a Sunday morning worship service. Due to the size, influence and missional impact, First Church was considered by many a flagship church within the Reformed Church in America as recently as 1980, when First Church had over 800 communicant members. Both the current President of Western Theological Seminary and the President of Words of Hope pastored First Church together from 1981-1983.

These feelings not only created a great sense of pride within the church, but also made it difficult for outsiders to break into tightly knit Dutch enclaves. There was a growing sense that First Reformed Church was the “Country Club Church.” Dort, a ninety-two year old widow, shared that because she married a Dutchman and came into the Church through marriage she never felt like she belonged. Others indicated that there were certain clicks within the Church that were built around economic status and family names. There was an unspoken mentality that “If you’re not Dutch, you’re not much”.

However, biological growth can only take a church so far. Throughout the 1990s and into the mid 2000s, membership steadily declined at First Church. Migrations further west and south left roughly 657 communicant members in 2000, and 392 communicant members in 2008. When I arrived in the spring of 2008, there were roughly 175 people spread out among the pews on a Sunday morning.⁷ This was an extremely discouraging time of ministry in the life of First Church. The morale of the congregation was bleak. The vision was unclear. The anxiety surrounding members continuing to leave was high. As one of my friends and former Clerk of Consistory, Russ, said, “there was a genuine feeling that the last one here would just turn off the lights.”

These stories of loss, despair and uncertainty marked a very difficult period in the life of the church. While the leadership of the church had made a conscious decision to remain faithful in the Village of South Holland, the dream of becoming a multi-racial, multi-generational congregation would still be a long way from a motion approved on the floor of Consistory to a current reality. Questions surrounding how liturgy would be expressed and understood, what impact the preaching of the Word of God would have, and what role pastoral and consistorial leadership would play have still needed answering. Perhaps above all, First Church still needed to understand and embrace how a difference in congregational composition would impact congregational practices as a body of Christ.

Congregational Composition

Currently, there are 352 confessing members at First Church, along with twenty-two adherents. Since 2008, 118 individuals have joined First Reformed Church. Of those 118,

⁷ It should be noted that when I came to First Church in the Spring of 2008, the rolls of communicant members were full of individuals that had not been in attendance for years and some that lived out of state. However, there was a reluctance to upset anyone by removing their names from the active rolls of the Church.

eighteen individuals have joined First Church through transferring their membership from another congregation. Of those eighteen, fourteen transferred from another Reformed Church, two from a Christian Reformed Church and two from a Baptist Church.

Since 2008, 100 individuals have joined the church by way of Profession of Faith or Re-Affirmation of Faith. The majority of these individuals would classify themselves as “non-practicing Catholics.” Many of these individuals grew up in the Catholic Church, attended Catholic schools, and then, for a wide variety of reasons, drifted from the Catholic Church. Another large segment of those 100 individuals have come from some particular sliver of Baptist denominations. Moreover, what unites the vast majority of these 100 individuals is that they were inactive in their former congregation.⁸

Prior to 2008, racial diversity at First Church consisted of one African-American family of four, along with two Asian girls adopted into a Caucasian family. Currently, there are seventy-one non-white individuals on our membership rolls. This figure represents a combination of members, and adherents. Thus, the current body of Christ at First Church, including confessing members along with adherents, is 20.1% non-white.⁹

Beyond Traditional & Contemporary

So often in the conversations surrounding “church revitalization,” the thought is to equate revitalization with an electric guitar and a drum set. However, the journey of becoming a multi-racial, multi-generation congregation has also been a journey in lengthening the breadth of our liturgical understanding and implementation. Given the cavernous gap in ecumenical background among congregants, the musical pallet used on a Sunday morning must be reflective of this gift in diversity. Ultimately, a spirit of self-sacrifice was needed to accommodate the musical preferences of a multi-racial, multi-generational congregation.

While liturgy is far more than songs and musical elements in the life of a worship service, issues related to music tend to be the most explosive and potentially divisive. Historically, words like “traditional” and “contemporary” were more like grenades in the life of First Reformed Church. Specifically in terms of music, we do not use the word “blended” to describe the texture of a typical morning worship service at First Church, simply because we felt that “blended” is not an appropriate category for worship. Instead, we have leaned into the riches of ancient hymnody along with the energy of modern day praise and worship. What has been reflected is a unique repertoire of songs, creeds, confessions, prayers and responses that greatly bring our multi-racial and multi-generational congregation together. The Ten Commandments, the Heidelberg Catechism and the Apostle’s Creed are elements that are championed and are used to unite our congregation. As Tim Keller says so well, “I believe the solution to the problem of the ‘worship war’ is neither to reject nor to enshrine

⁸ It is interesting to note that the common phrase spoken by so many of these individuals is “I want to raise my kids in the church.” As a result, our primary Sunday School program has grown from four kids in 2008 to 32 in 2013. Our secondary Sunday School program has grown from six students in 2008 to twelve in 2013. To God be the glory.

⁹ All of this information was gathered through the membership records of First Reformed Church. A special thank you to Gerri VanBaren, who serves as Administrative Assistant, for compiling this data.

historic tradition but to forge new forms of corporate worship that take seriously both our histories and contemporary realities, all within a framework of biblical theology.”¹⁰

Something that became helpful for First Church to realize was that worship is not confined to a three minute song or hymn. As Roseboom and Plantinga write, “It (healthy worshipping community) is defined not by whether Twila Paris, Johann Sebastian Bach, or Kirk Franklin moves us or offends us. It is defined first by the fact that we are together children of God, and that we bear the indelible watermark of baptism, the seal of our adoption.”¹¹ Our unity in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit is what unites the musical elements in a typical Sunday morning service. Practically every Sunday there are roughly two to three songs that incorporate the organ and two to three songs that incorporate an electric guitar, keys and drums in addition to at least one song that involves both sets of instrumentation.¹²

While there have been some growing pains along the way, and while we continue to discern how the Holy Spirit is speaking, the congregation has taken a strong liking to the liturgical elements of a morning worship service. Dacia, a twenty-two year old African American preschool teacher said, “When I came here I loved the way we incorporated the older hymns along with the newer songs.” Others like Bill, an eighty-seven year old white farmer, acknowledged that “music has been a big change.” He went on to say that, “I wish we would sing more hymns and I would like to see the choir sing more.” Dave, a fifty-four year old white mechanic, shared that he misses the hymnal as words are now projected on a screen. Still, Emily, a twenty-four year old white student, reflected, “...there is definitely a good balance. Our services are both traditional and contemporary.” Even John, a seventy-eight year old white retired architect commented, “I enjoy singing hymns. I always enjoyed singing parts. I love the enthusiasm of the praise team along with Anthony’s (Director of Worship & Student Life) leadership.” Living in this tension is not for the faint of heart. It requires patience, grace and selflessness from those leading corporate worship to those participating in corporate worship.

As author and pastor, Tom Long writes, “Some don’t like the ‘traditional’ versus contemporary lingo either, because it swings the bias toward ‘traditional’ forms, implying that they represent the stable, weighty, and unchanging wisdom of the ages while ‘contemporary’ forms are whims of the moment.”¹³ The balancing act of the guitar and the organ complementing each other on a Sunday morning is a collaborative effort of our Director of Worship & Student Life and myself to discern how best to bring more traditional elements such as an Adult Choir, Bell Choir, Special Ensembles and the use of the Organ alongside a more contemporary worship team that include drums, guitars, brass and woodwinds. The balance is difficult, but important in maintaining an authentic worship service that reflects the diversity of age, gender and musical preference in the life of the

¹⁰ Tim Keller, *Worship by the Book* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 198.

¹¹ Plantinga & Rozeboom, *Discerning the Spirits: A Guide to Thinking about Christian Worship Today*, 111.

¹² One area of growth that we have yet to fully live into is the role of a gospel choir. While we have added African spirituals, as well as more gospel rendition of hymns, the inclusion of a full gospel choir is something that we long for, but have yet to experience.

¹³ Tom Long, *Beyond Worship Wars: Building Vital and Faithful Worship* (The Alban Institute, 2001), 3.

congregation.¹⁴ To help in that process, a Worship Committee was formed of a dozen lay leaders from varying ages and musical preferences that work with the Director of Worship in planning, listening and reflecting on how our liturgical life is shaping our spiritual formation as a body of Christ.

Victory from the Pulpit

Along the journey of transformation, the proclamation of the Word of God continued to be at the center of a morning worship service, and also at the heart of transition. However, one of the critical understandings came through an acknowledgement of how different atonement theories are used and understood by individuals of different racial and social groups. Traditionally, white preachers filled the pulpit at First Church and preached sermons that focused on a “Substitutionary Atonement Theory,” namely, that Jesus was the substitute for all of us on the cross, which becomes the central symbol for the entire Lenten Season.¹⁵ This was the only way to interpret the events of Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Conversely, as author Denny Weaver suggests that African-Americans tend to resonate more with a “Christus Victor” atonement theory which celebrates the victory over death where the empty tomb becomes the primary symbol of hope throughout the Lenten Season. He writes:

If God is a liberator, then Jesus, who reflects the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and the exodus, can be nothing other than liberator. When African Americans read the Bible, they did not find a docile Jesus teaching a spiritual salvation. Rather they discovered Jesus the liberator, calling his people to freedom and working for their liberation...thus, liberation is the essence of black religion, both in its content and its form.¹⁶

This has been the case at First Reformed Church. As more and more black individuals came to First Church, we began to realize that the liturgy of a Sunday morning worship service needed to reflect an understanding and an appreciation for both a Substitutionary and Christus Victor atonement theory. We began to see the need to embrace the victory we have in both the cross and the tomb. While the cross still hangs in the sanctuary, the presence and power of the empty tomb became an integral part of our worshiping life together.¹⁷ By solely giving emphasis to a Substitutionary atonement theory,

¹⁴Perhaps no author has been as helpful to this project and to First Church than Jim Belcher and his book *Deep Church*. His chapter on “Deep Worship” has been of particular help. Here, he describes that church is more than just a few songs and a sermon. In 2010, the committee formerly known as “The Administration Team” read through this book in hopes of it being a springboard for future ministry.

¹⁵ A helpful resources in understanding how different seasons of the church can more richly be experienced in the context of a multi-racial, multi-generation congregation is Laurene Beth Bowers book *Becoming a Multicultural Church*.

¹⁶ Denny J. Weaver. *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 104.

¹⁷ To the chagrin of some of the older members of the congregation, we now take the cross the down from the sanctuary two Sundays after Easter. We do this because we believe that space, liturgical elements and visual enhancements create a powerful reality for the congregation.

we were not only excluding the story of a group of people, we were also diminishing the power of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Weaver goes on to write:

The narrative Christus Victor thus finally becomes a reading of the history of God's people, who make God's rule visible in the world by the confrontation of injustice and by making visible in their midst the justice, peace, and freedom of the rule of God. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus constitute the culmination of that rule of God, and also the particular point in history when God's rule is most fully present and revealed.¹⁸

This difference became critical for creating a hermeneutic that reaches a multi-racial and multi-generational congregation. We believe that words create realities. Thus, developing a greater breadth in the language we use in worship begins to impact the congregation's spiritual formation. As a result, Sunday morning worship began to reflect more of the victory in Christ. We began to sing, preach and pray the victory we have in Christ. As Corey, a thirty-two year old African American Prison Chaplain commented, "sermons and sermon series are very creative. What is preached can be remembered. I can be involved in the sermon." Another African-American, Dacia, commented, "I can relate as a young adult to your sermons. Your sermons relate to all ages. You touch on many issues of my life." As a result, sermons and sermon series began to reflect the greater victory individuals have in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. Victories over addictions, relationship divides, emotional bondage and health worries began to be named and celebrated.¹⁹

The Full Breadth of the Atonement

The nuances in different atonement theories have not only broadened our theological capacity, but also our ability to experience the full breadth of the atoning sacrifice of Christ. We believe the victory in the tomb is not mutually exclusive from the victory on the cross. Rather, there is power, beauty and meaning in each of these central theological symbols. As a result, we have become more intentional on leaving room for the victory in each. As author James Cone writes in his book *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, "The final word about black life is not death on a lynching tree but redemption on the cross – a miraculously transformed life found in the God of the gallows."²⁰ Not only is there death on the cross, but there is also life and life abundant on the cross. Re-claiming a more robust sense of the atonement has not only cast a wider theological net onto the congregation, but has also impacted our identity as a body of Christ.

Along with the victory we have in the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus, we also have experienced conflict. Ultimately, we believe that the full breadth of the atonement confronts everything from the way we worship to how we spend our money to

We also believe that removing the cross two Sundays after Easter only adds to the sanctity and importance of the cross during the holy season of Lent.

¹⁸ Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 68.

¹⁹ As an older Dutch member shared with me, "when we grew up, we just didn't talk about those things. It wasn't anyone's business." As First Church has become a multi-racial, multi-generational congregation, there has been an intentional effort from the pulpit to talk about these kinds of struggles and victories.

²⁰ James Cone, *The Cross & The Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Publishing, 2011), 23.

whom we break bread with. Author James Forbes picked up on this idea when he wrote, “If we dare to preach the gospel of the kingdom; dare to make plain the social, economic, and political, as well as the traditionally defined spiritual consequences of pursuing that kingdom, we should expect conflict.”²¹ The wide variety of stories and experiences present challenged me not to shy away from the power of the Good News of Jesus Christ to transform lives, families, societies and even old churches. The relationship between a blood-stained cross and an empty tomb have the capacity to impact the spiritual formation of individuals, families and the congregation as a whole.

Trina, a fifty-two year old African American nurse shared, “...the preaching has shaped a lot of me. It has had a major impact on me and my behavior. I have changed a lot. I still lack in my prayer life, but I feel more grounded.” She went on to share that the preaching of the Word has become “intellectually attractive preaching that moves to the heart.” The preaching of the Word has remained the focal point of a Sunday morning worship service at First Church. Preaching has been a marriage of head and heart which has been a catalyst for a people of varied ecumenical backgrounds to gain traction and grow in their faith. The awareness of different people groups represented on a Sunday morning, each with a different history and story to tell, have all led to a greater sense of the victory we all share in the full breadth and power of the atonement.²²

Change is at the Heart of Christianity

Acknowledging systemic brokenness begs questions surrounding change. Author Richard Foster wrote, “In worship an increased power steals its way into the heart sanctuary, an increased compassion grows in the soul. To worship is to change.”²³ Changes were not only experienced in the preaching of the Word, but also in the art of leadership. Specifically, issues related to the *who* and the *how* of leadership had tremendous impact within the life of the congregation. As Glenn, a seventy-three year old white retired teacher shared “...leadership used to come from families that were the most dominant here. Now we have a broader spectrum of leadership.” Clint, a forty-one year old white financial advisor agreed when he reflected, “...it used to be like a silo. Few people involved and now much more of a shared responsibility.” As First Church shifted into a multi-racial, multi-generational reality, the stake of control, influence and power were all up for grabs in this new season of ministry.²⁴

²¹ James Forbes, *The Holy Spirit & Preaching* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989), 87.

²² Another helpful resource in understanding the nuances of African American preaching has been Mark Barger Elliott’s book *Creative Styles of Preaching*. Specifically, chapter 2 that highlights sermons from Valerie Brown-Troutt and Samuel D. Proctor. While I have been intentional to retain my own voice from the pulpit, it has been formative for me to listen and read sermons powerfully given by African American preachers.

²³ Richard Foster. *The Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*. (HarperSanFrancisco, 1988), 173. This book has been extremely helpful to me as a compass for my own spiritual growth and discernment. I would highly recommend to every young pastor to read this book once a year.

²⁴ A helpful resource in this conversation of leadership and change has been Mark Lau Branson and Juan Martinez’ book *Churches, Cultures & Leadership*. In chapter ten titled “Leading Change,” Branson details the specific work of leaders with respect self-awareness, civic trends and personal imagination.

Additionally, Dort commented, “Now no one person is running the show.” This has been reflected in the average age of those currently serving on Consistory. In 2008, the average age of a Deacon was forty-nine years old. By 2013, that number dropped by twelve years creating an increased capacity for new ideas, fresh perspective and an eagerness to serve. Additionally, three African-Americans are currently serving in roles of both Elder and Deacon.

Ultimately, these changes were intentional efforts to cast a new vision for what ministry should look like within the context of a multi-generational and multi-racial congregation. As Glenn reminded our group, “...change is at the heart of Christianity.” However, there are still certain aspects of change related to diversity that have yet to be met. The issue of ordination of women to the offices of Elder and Deacon is something that has happened in the life of First Church, but that gender diversity has yet to be reflected in the Consistory in the past five years.²⁵ As Barb, a seventy-four year old white retired principal shared, “I would like to see women serving on Consistory.” While change may be at the heart of Christianity, it is not always the smoothest transition.²⁶

Changes in leadership composition began when the Consistory approved the call of a twenty-five year old Senior Pastor right out of seminary with little experience. After four major staff changes in the first nine months, hiring a twenty-five year old Director of Worship & Student Life, along with a thirty year old African American to serve as a Director of Mercy & Justice Ministries became additional bold steps of change in the life of the congregation. While these changes have been substantial, older members of the congregation shared their confidence and affirmation in the leadership and direction of the Church. A critical understanding for the Consistory has been learning how being a good listener has built up the pastoral capital to earn the trust and confidence of the congregation to plan and execute change.²⁷

While staffing changes were sharp and decisive, there has been a transition in these changes. It is important to note that literally hundreds of hours of meetings, countless prayers and enough conversations to last until Christ comes again were had to tease out such visible changes in the life of the congregation. As author and former Herman Miller CEO Max DePree wrote, “Transition is not easy, and it’s not assured. There’s uncertainty and ambiguity. There are honest differences, there is hostility, and sometimes there are insufficient resources...Yes, there will be insanity, but there will also be eminently sane compassion and good works”²⁸ I will attest that threads of insanity were experienced during those long and

²⁵ In 2005, the first female was ordained and installed to the office of Elder. Unfortunately, she and her husband moved out of South Holland and out of First Church during the middle of her three year term. This has been the only time a woman has been ordained and installed to either the office of Elder or Deacon.

²⁶ While the scope of this project is specific to the years 2008-2013, in 2015 two women were elected to serve on consistory, one as a deacon and another as an elder. To make matters all the more beautiful, the one woman deacon is also an African American.

²⁷ Wes Granberg-Michaelson’s book, *Leadership From Inside Out*, was a helpful voice in the conversation of leadership. Specifically, chapter ten on changing organizational culture was of particular interest and assistance. In this chapter, he outlines four “vital signs” of health in any organization. They are power, identity, conflict and learning. His insights on how identity is shaped both individually and as an organization as a whole were particularly helpful.

²⁸ Max DePree, *Leading Without Power* (San Francisco, CA: A Wiley Imprint, 1997), 37-38. DePree also refers to a definition of inanity attributed to Einstein that “insanity is when you do

arduous conversations surrounding staffing changes. Transitioning away from four staff members within the first six months on the job brought about great hostility, conflict and fear. That process of change was extremely painful. Still, God's grace sustained us in the desert and led us towards greater self-examination and discovery.

Cough Medicine or Tomatoes?

When I was younger, I absolutely detested the taste of cough medicine. It became so noxious (in my mind) that all my mom needed to do was show me the bottle and I would throw a crying, coughing tantrum. The syrupy texture, the bitter taste and the sticky bottle all made me gag. The only saving grace, as a five year old, was that I could somehow, in the deep recess of my mind and body, muster up the strength and intestinal fortitude to endure the taste of cough medicine knowing that my cough and my throat would begin to feel better.

I have often wondered whether becoming a multi-racial church was something like taking cough medicine. Meaning, the congregation of First Church knew that in order to remain a viable ministry in South Holland, the composition of the congregation must begin to reflect some of the obvious changes reflected in the Village of South Holland. The thinking was that we knew we had to do it to survive, but we really did not like the process, or the taste of the sticky situations that the journey would lead us through. I believe there are some within the congregation of First Church who believe diversity is like taking cough medicine. They know they have to, but do not really want to.

When I was five years old, I also detested the taste of tomatoes. Ketchup was okay, but as for tomatoes, I could not handle even the thought of a sliced tomato on my hamburger. Now, as an adult, I love tomatoes. I love their texture, taste and rich flavor. When I fast-forward five years on this corporate journey of transformation, I believe there are many individuals who liken being a multi-racial church to my perception of eating tomatoes. At first I did not like them, but over time, through shared experience, I developed not only an acceptance, but an affinity for tomatoes. I believe this is true with many individuals in the life of First Church. At first they may not have been comfortable or have preferred diversity of age, skin color and ecumenical background in the life of their nearly 170 year old church, but through shared experience and over time, they developed not only an acceptance of people different than themselves, but also an affinity for the diversity reflected on a Sunday morning.²⁹

My suspicions were confirmed during a focus group conversation when Glenn commented that "desperation came first and then we realized this is what the Kingdom of God looks like." Undoubtedly, there are still "cough medicine" Christians when it comes to diversity represented in the pews on Sunday morning, and there are also undoubtedly "tomato" Christians worshiping, serving and giving. My hope and prayer is by the power of the Holy Spirit, "cough medicine" Christians will become "tomato" Christians and "tomato"

the same thing over and over and expect a different result." I have shared that definition on numerous occasions with our consistory in hopes of wrapping flesh around a larger ecumenical challenge.

²⁹ A helpful resource in the intentionality of becoming a multi-racial church has been George Yancey's book *One Body One Spirit*. Specifically, on page 68 he describes seven principles for building a multi-racial congregation. In his fourth principle, intentionality, he describes how building a multi-racial congregation doesn't just happen. It takes work.

Christians will in turn witness to their “cough medicine” Christian friends about the sweet flavor of diversity being at the very heart of the Kingdom of God.

Not Up to Us

Transitioning from a white, agricultural congregation to a multi-racial, multi-generational congregation was built on sound theological understanding and concrete Biblical exegesis. Shared learning experiences can also spur a congregation on to reaching God’s preferred vision of unity amidst diversity. Staff changes, leadership changes, worship style changes and theological lenses from the pulpit can all serve as stepping stones towards becoming a corporate body of Christ that champions the colorful flavor of diversity found in Revelation 7. However, all these are responses to what the Holy Spirit does inside an individual and through individuals making up the local Church.

As Armstrong contends, “We must never dictate the results by how we speak, how we pray, and especially how we plan. The harvest truly belongs to the Lord. We must bow before this reality. It is ours to be faithful to ask the task and it is also ours to wait upon the Lord to grant what He ordains. His ways are not our ways.”³⁰ While this is frustrating, it is also freeing. Ultimately, becoming a multi-racial, multi-generational body of Christ is not only of the Lord, it is the Lord’s doing.

In the meantime, the waiting is difficult. Patience does not come easy for pastors or congregations. The days of biological growth infusing the sanctuary, choir loft and nursery with adults and children are long gone and have given way to a new season of ministry marked by multi-cultural and multi-racial components. This season is marked by slow, patient, and often times messy growth where the growing is ultimately done by God. We pray. We proclaim. We serve and we wait with eager expectation for individuals to experience the life-saving power of the Gospel through the bride of Christ on South Park Avenue.

Russ’ Restaurant Revisited

I have a dream of returning to Russ’ Restaurant one more time. In this dream I’m sitting across from the same two former pastors and pillars in the Reformed Church in America. No, they’re not eating crow. Instead, the three of us are singing praises to the Lord Almighty for the work He decided to do in and through the First Reformed Church in South Holland, IL. We’re sharing funny stories of ministry, leadership challenges, worship conversations, nightmares around staffing changes and how people with different backgrounds and skin colors can go from being strangers to good friends. Before the dream ends, we pray that the story of the old First Church would be told and experienced in congregations throughout the country. A story of redemption and revival. A story of hope and grace. A story of family and church. A story of how a white, agriculture congregation became a multi-racial, multi-generational body of Christ. This time, I pick up the tab.

³⁰ Armstrong, *True Revival: What Happens When God’s Spirit Moves?*, 39.

