

Future Story ~ FBC Shelby NC

May 25, 2014

The year was 1918. It was about this time of year. And, it happened right here in this Sanctuary. World War I was still going strong and the nerves of the worshippers on that Sunday were, to say the least, “on edge.” At the height of Pastor Lee McBride White’s sermon, bricks from the ceiling above came raining down on the congregation. Mistaking the noise for a bomb, a stampede resulted among those present as everyone cleared the sanctuary. Close examination later revealed that during the building period a few years before some bricks had been left on the rafters and they finally decided to make a move. (Grace Hamrick, [A History of First Baptist Church](#), p. 20)

Now “fast forward” to the year 2024. This year finds our church having “left the building” again but this time it didn’t take the ceiling falling to get us on the move! Instead, about a decade ago, we felt the crash of a real burden upon our hearts. Or, shall we say, 30,000 burdens crashed in on our hearts! That is the number of people who lived around us in Cleveland County, North Carolina and who lived outside of a relationship with Jesus or his church. Ten years ago we saw God leading us to be broken-hearted for them and to make changes in the way we did church that would position us to better reach them with the Good News of Jesus. We reasoned back then, “*If we are the only Jesus that some of our neighbors will ever see, then we had better become more like Him and get out there in the neighborhood and make his love known.*” So, that’s what we did. And, this is our story!

Because our heart’s desire is for people to “know Jesus” for themselves we set our own sights anew on building a “Welcome Culture.” Jesus has extended an open-armed welcome to us – sinners though we are – so it is up to us to stretch out our arms to welcome folks regardless of where they are from or what they are facing. Jesus said it and we live it, “*Come to me, ALL who are weak and burdened, and I will give you rest.*” (Matt. 11:28-30; Isa. 56:7)

We have come to see our church culture in these terms: “*Everyone is welcome* (every one!) *and Everyone welcomes* (we set aside personal privilege, position and preference for the sake of others).” We have acknowledged the value of, and we have encouraged one another to use, tender and sensitive language in our approach to those who live beyond our fellowship and who choose to bless us with their presence as we worship and study together. As a result, we are today and more culturally diverse congregation.

By 2024, we identified a strategic place on our property for a “Welcome Center” to engage guests and in which members are able to fellowship with one another. Until we came up with this plan we adopted the idea of “Welcome Central” as a flexible and nimble team of volunteers who would position themselves at strategic areas on our property on Sundays. This team started the welcome

carpet rolling toward the 30,000 people in Cleveland County who live outside a relationship with Jesus or his church.

“*Let me tell you this,*” a new member once exclaimed, “*First Baptist Church is Welcome Central.*” He went on to explain how from his first visit to our campus until this day in 2024, he was met and encouraged to be a Christ Follower who lives to be the presence of Jesus in our town. **Welcome Central** makes the following strategic actions come alive every week: On Sundays, a team of FBC Greeters, easily identifiable by common t-shirts and colors, meet guests coming from parking areas and escort them to comfortable welcome areas in four strategic centers in our building (Breezeway, Dale Street Alley, Children’s Area, and Washington Street). From there, an escort accompanies the guest to the worship space or the Bible Study area that best suits their need. Maps and orientation guides are found there. Following worship, guests are encouraged to visit a place where they receive a gift from the church and a friendly conversation with members and ministers ensues. A series of varied kinds of contacts is then made over the next several weeks to encourage a relationship with our church to continue. This kind of **Welcome Central** approach has required us to enlist and train a large number of volunteers to ensure stability and consistency in this ministry of hospitality.

We have employed greater measures of technological help in **Welcome Central** including the installation of video screens throughout the buildings showing maps and announcements, the use of text message follow up with guests, quick commercials before the worship begins, and the incorporation of tablet and laptop registration to capture information for personal contact follow-up.

Since we want people to see Jesus in us, we encourage one another to become more like Jesus with every passing year! We believe Jesus means to “*form us spiritually so that we may live missionally.*” Because we believe this is true, we have made spiritual formation our expectation for ourselves by creating an intentional plan and process for making disciples. Scripture and experience has taught us to expect that **a person needs to be a part of a small group in order to grow as a Disciple of Jesus!**

By 2024, we have capitalized on lessons learned through “Sunday School’s Greatest Hits,” and 40 Day Small Groups organized for a season, but then kept going for years, and our 2014 “100 Days of Discernment Prayer Triplets.” This **lesson** revolves around the New Testament’s call to community building and relationship care within the Body of Christ. Further, we have focused ourselves more and more upon the New Testament **truth** that our purpose for living for Christ Followers is to live to become more Christ-like every day (Romans 8:29). This lesson and this truth are at the heart of our expectation for every member of First Baptist Church.

Therefore, we have developed an intentional plan and process to encourage spiritual formation through small group participation that is ever-changing to meet newly acknowledged needs. Our assumption is

that for every Christ Follower, regardless of age and of how long they have been a Christian, needs to take a **next step** in spiritual growth. Because of this assumption, we have made a commitment to an Annual Self-Assessment Check-up through which every member takes a look at God's direction for their "next step" in being formed in Christ. These small group experiences include, but are not limited to:

- **New Member Group:** Introducing new members to our church and to our expectations for spiritual formation and to orient them to the process of growth available to them through our church.
- **New Christian Group:** Introducing new members of the church to the basics of spiritual discipline that position us to put on Christ in deeper ways every day. Mentors walk with the participants for several months to encourage their early development in faith.
- **Traditional Sunday School:** Fostering the Sunday morning small group tradition of care, outreach and Bible Study.
- **Maybe Not Sunday Groups:** Allowing small groups the flexibility to form and meet at various times and locations through the week but to intentionally focus on:
 - **Outreach Groups:** Offering "special need/interest" studies that have the potential to attract those who are not a part of our church, e.g. Money Matters, Marriage Enrichment, Parenting Issues, Support Groups for varied needs, etc. In these groups, FBC members form a core and then intentionally invite others to join them.
 - **Next Step Groups for Adults:**
 - **"Mere Christianity" Group:** Helping Christ Followers and seekers to realize the role of spiritual disciplines in the life of the believer in becoming like Jesus.
 - **Spiritual Gift/Ministry Group:** Helping Christ Followers identify their passions and callings within the life of the church and the kingdom of God through which God intends to work through them in ministry and service.
 - **My Mission in the World:** Helping Christ Followers to grapple with the Lord's calling upon our lives to live his difference in the world. Every member is to have a ministry and every member is to have a mission.
 - **Prayer and Share Groups**
 - **Meal Fellowship Group:** Intentional mixing multiple generations of Christ Followers to know and to encourage one another in the faith.
 - **Bible Study/Topical Study Groups:** Helping Christ Followers to learn together about the Bible's approach to current topics.
 - **Online/Learning Community Groups:** Helping members and others who have schedule struggles or live at a distance (military, college, etc.) to stay connected to a nurturing discipleship relationship.

This plan and process require a ministry staff person to coordinate the connections of members with small groups along with the regular and on-going process of teacher/facilitator enlistment and training. Our training also includes "atmosphere adjustment" reminders to encourage all groups to remain "open cell" groups so as to include new members into the group and to encourage pastoral ministry care for

members throughout the congregation through the small group experience. Also, periodic retreat based experiences are planned to address specific needs and specific issues of growth in Christ. This staff person organizes the constant flow of information to publicize groups and “next steps” through brochures, visible sign-up opportunities and website up-dates to keep the plan and process relevant.

In order to make the small group experience available to everyone, we have quarterly “new starts” for small groups to provide new members and others the opportunity to become part of a group. Some groups stay together indefinitely as well.

Children! We have to say something about the kids! Jesus said, “*Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.*” (Matt. 19:14) So, we made it our aim to create new spaces and new approaches for creating a safe, nurturing, and engaging environment for children and their parents to learn the ways of our Lord.

Our children’s ministry look in 2024 has been built on the assumption that the kingdom of heaven belongs to children and it is our responsibility to provide an excellent experience in the Lord and among his church every time a child comes our way. This assumption of excellence has positioned us to ask ourselves, “What is ‘excellence’ in experience from a child’s point of view?” What do we need to do week by week to make the kind of memory for a child that has him or her desiring to come back to the place where God’s word is alive, God’s love is evident, and God’s people are the most loving and joyful they meet during the week!?

Our ministry to children (Birth through 5th Grade), begins with a team of volunteers who begin contact with young couples in anticipation of the birth of a baby and reaches out to that couple when the baby is born to offer encouragement, but also to anticipate parent-child dedication and participation in our children’s ministries. We have also employed the “Welcome Central” philosophy for children’s ministry by enlisting a team of “Children’s Champions/Welcome Specialists” who are the first to greet parents and children and help them begin their experience in the Lord every Sunday morning. This welcome excitement was enhanced as soon as we moved our children’s spaces (1st-5th Grade) onto the same floor of C-Building with our preschool spaces (Birth – K) and created a welcome space at the heart of the floor following an update of the painting and equipment in those spaces.

We have also an intentional event on Sunday mornings to minister to children through worship in age-appropriate experiences; in addition, we have provided age-appropriate materials for use when children worship alongside their parents in corporate worship.

Spiritual formation is at the front of our strategy for making disciples and that strategy is equally important for children. We make regular review of our curriculum choices and stay abreast of current

materials and methods in teaching children, including the use of technology in the classrooms. We make plans to harmonize topics from classes with experiences for adults so that there is a family “tie in” to the rest of the week as the topic/issue is discussed during times when families are together. By 2024, we have developed and are tracking spiritual formation goals for all age groups including, a scope and sequence of benchmarks children should “know” in their faith journey. This journey concludes with a 5th grade experience that lets every child process the full picture of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus, giving them an opportunity to make their decision to follow.

We have an on-going system of teacher/leader recruitment and training that allows our members to explore their gifts of teaching children and that builds a leadership force for this growing ministry in the life of our church. Security monitoring and background screening continues to be a part of our enlistment process as we carefully check all backgrounds of persons working with children so as to provide a truly safe environment for all.

The Jesus we want our neighbors to see in us is the Jesus who is so glad when his Body gathers to bring praise to the Father. That’s right, worship is at the heart of who we are in the Lord! And, we have intentionally planned for our worship times to be entry points for our neighbors to come to Jesus. In worship, we come *“to call to mind the deeds of the Lord and to remember the wonders of old.”* In our various worship expressions, *“we meditate on all God’s work and consider his mighty deeds because God’s way is holy. What God is so great as our God?”* (Ps. 77:11-13) For this reason, before we do anything else in the course of a week, we have committed ourselves to *first worship* the Lord!

In 2024, we have developed varied expressions of worship at First Baptist with a view to grow in our worship language and discipline by calling on the most cutting-edge worship dynamics as well as reaching back to the more contemplative expressions from the history of the church. In 2024, we have a new worship facility tooled with state of the art sound, lights, and open spaces that can be used for varied worship experiences, fellowship opportunities, and community building within the Body of Christ. We have also re-tooled our historic sanctuary for multi-media use as well as fellowship enhancement and worship engagement. But, this didn’t all happen at once.

Step One: Beginning in the Fall of 2014, we adopted a model of united worship with one Sunday morning worship service at 10:55 am in the sanctuary. This service intentionally employed elements of worship and expressions of leadership from the classic “Sanctuary Worship” service AND the blended “First Worship” service of our most recent history. Every week as the church gathered for worship, we were open to and enthusiastically embraced a service that lifted our hearts to the Lord utilizing a great number of gifts, talents, instruments and formats for worship. During the Fall of 2014, we also

engaged in a 40 Day churchwide Bible study. This season of united worship prepared our fellowship and our hearts for the next phase of our worship life, which now includes multiple services that make room for people in our church life.

Step Two: During the Easter Season of 2015, we launched a new “leading edge” worship service in the gym. This service employed a worship band to lead the worship with sounds that are new to our church in worship. So much of our congregational input a decade ago pointed us to the reality that younger people and/or younger families have a hard time getting out early on Sunday morning. So, between Fall 2014 and Easter 2015, we recruited the worship band needed to lead and organized the worship planning team that will look to the future. Then, in Spring 2015, we launched the following schedule:

9:00 – 10:00 a.m. **Worship in the Sanctuary** (Sanctuary/First Worship Blend)

10:00 – 10:30 a.m. **Fellowship Time** that allowed transition time for worship participants and volunteer “Welcome Central” staff, as well as giving a chance for folks to fellowship with one another.

10:30 a.m. **Leading Edge Worship** and *Simultaneous Sunday School*: Gave youth small groups to flexibility of meeting at this time or at other times on Sunday morning along with Sunday and Wednesday evening small groups. Also, this plan made for an opportunity for a larger corps of children’s volunteers in a concentrated time instead of trying to enlist two teams of volunteers with children on Sunday morning and then again on Wednesday evening.

Step Three: In 2014 and 2015, we also began a process to bring our Sanctuary up to date. We recognized that our sanctuary was in need of modifications. We also recognized that whether we were holding the blended style of worship or the leading edge style of worship, the Sanctuary could be re-fitted to house both. So, we designed a plan to angle the front section of pews on the Sanctuary floor to add a community flavor. We remodeled the stage to bring the choir more forward and to bring the band and pulpit area lower and closer to the congregation. We also added projection and screens for multi-media display and enhanced our lighting capabilities.

These changes positioned us to have functional worship space in the Sanctuary as well as to be positioned to reach out to our community and to grow. We realized that in a couple of years, we would then have an earlier service and a later service that could use the same space for worship. And then, by 2024, we now have a simultaneous service at the later time in a newly equipped worship space in a new building that also was built for enhanced youth ministries in our community.

Our time with Jesus in discipleship and worship compels us to get out there in our neighborhood and make his love and message known to those 30,000 people for whom we feel a deep burden! Jesus said, “As the Father has sent me so I am sending you.” (John 20:21) In response to our Lord,

we expect the members of First Baptist Church will be a missional people, i.e. Christ Followers “sent with a message” of love, grace and salvation into both our local community and throughout the rest of the world.

Our church has an incredibly rich heritage of missional engagement with the world since its beginning in 1847. Now in our 177th year, we have taught ourselves the language of “burden” to lead us outside the doors of our church and into relationships with people who are our neighbors, waiting for Jesus’ love to show up through us, and to lead us into relationships with people who do not have a relationship with Jesus or his church. The early church was charged to “*carry each other’s burdens and in this way to fulfill the law of Christ.*” (Gal. 6:2) So, we have made it our practice to ask ourselves, “What is my burden for another? What has Jesus placed on my heart as my mission in our community and in the world? Since Jesus calls us to “*take up our cross daily to follow him*” (Luke 9:23) it makes sense that we each one acknowledge this calling and identify the ways the Lord is leading us to accomplish it, and then, act on it.

To this end, we have developed a church-wide sensitivity for understanding and being open to the unchurched, under-churched, de-churched, pre-Christian peoples who live around us. We have opened ourselves to greater degrees of cross-cultural interaction and embraced greater levels of diversity. We have also given ourselves to greater levels of 21st century communication by employing the benefits of Twitter, Facebook, You Tube, Blogs, and Kaya to interact with our neighbors.

Yes, evangelism, “telling the good news,” is at the heart of our walk into the world. We encourage each other to share our faith, and we seek opportunities to speak about our relationship with Jesus within our daily relationships. We further encourage one another to share our faith because we know of the life-transformation that comes when Jesus takes hold of a person’s life. We plan to hear regularly the stories of people who have come from diverse backgrounds and into a life changing relationship with Jesus.

It remains true for it was well said: “*A great commitment to the Great Commission and the Great Commandment will build a Great Church.*” Jesus sends us. He says, “Go!” So, we go regularly into our community with love and compassion to meet needs we see and to live and speak the presence of Jesus here in Cleveland County. We go intentionally through our prayers, our giving and our going beyond our town because we know we are a part of the kingdom of God that extends around the world.

We praise God for the multi-faceted look of the Body of Christ ministering in our community because we’ve heard Jesus say, “Go,” and then we have asked, “What is my burden, Lord? Who is my burden, Lord?” Having received his direction, First Baptist Church has left the building...and it happens every day without falling bricks to stir us up!

One other thing ought to be said in this story! We realized, as a wise teacher once said, *“In times of change, it is the learners who will inherit the earth, while the learned will find themselves beautifully equipped for a world that no longer exists.”* (Cynthia Ann Broad, Michigan Teacher of the Year, 1990 quoted in Len Sweet, [Aqua Church](#)) So, we decided back in 2014 that we would stay as technologically up-to-date as possible so as to strengthen our attempts to make Jesus known.

By 2024, technology has become more of a servant of the Lord’s work at First Baptist Church. Our moves toward more tech-savvy approach to ministry have included a part-time staff member who organized a team of tech volunteers. This team helps to coordinate the work of various ministries and keeps our website up to date and engaging with everything we do “information-wise” tying back to the website for greater levels of interaction and efficiency. We have a growing number of small groups using online studies that we have prepared and made available on the website.

Our tech ministry has led us to produce live-streaming worship experiences as well as to offer online resources for viewing and listening to our worship services. The tech ministry has expanded every year to include the development of video commercials for use within and without the congregation. We have increased our digital capacities through the upgrade of equipment in the worship areas including simulcast capabilities for simultaneous worship times.

Well, that’s our story, except for the fact that we are still telling it! This is one of those never-ending stories. You see, we have not stopped thinking that *“If we are the only Jesus that some of our neighbors will ever see, then we had better become more like Him and get out there in the neighborhood and make his love known.”* So, that’s what we’re doing. We’re living to know Him, and make Him known!

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