



Jesus Christ, Our Center

"We are looking back over the successes and failures in our experiment at living like Christ. The experiment is not over ..." These words were written by church elder David Price in the First Presbyterian Mirror of 1935, and now, in 2003, the experiment is still going on. Since birthdays and anniversaries are often times for reflection as well as celebration, let's take a moment to think about our own part in the ongoing experiment. Who are we at First Pres? How did we get to be who we are?

In any conversation about the enduring character of First Pres over time, five main qualities emerge. The most obvious of these is the fact that *we have always had Jesus Christ as our living, vital center*. We are a Christ-centered church. We look to Him, we learn about Him, we worship Him, through study of His holy Word. *We are a Bible-based church*. Because we know the blessing of living in our Lord's presence, we undertake to spread the gospel. *We are an evangelical church*. Because Jesus Christ is at the center, we feel secure enough in a diverse and changing world to maintain a church culture that is open, responsive, and welcomes debate and enquiry. *We are an open church*. Finally, we actively live out our faith in works. *We are a church of do-ers and prayers*.

The centrality of the living Lord can be seen looking back all the way to our inception. In the earliest church bulletins activities were undertaken "in the Lord's service," and worship and works were for "the glory of the Lord." College groups of the 1930s dedicated themselves to "learning about and serving the Lord." In 1949 Pastor Robert Boyd Munger preached and published the sermon "My Heart, Christ's

Home," a meditation on turning our whole lives over to Christ that has also served as a model for the church as a whole.

Our focus on Jesus Christ as our living center has helped us to survive and thrive through turbulent times on this particular corner. It has kept us from being sidetracked by the storms of radical change, while giving us a solid foundation from which to respond openly to that change. *Our central devotion to Jesus Christ* has given us the spiritual vitality and fortitude to sustain conflict within the church, including several schisms that led many to believe that First Pres could not survive. The living presence of Christ at our center is what calls new people to the church – we are a congregation in constant transition. It is also what keeps them here through decades – we are an intergenerational church. We are increasingly a church of significant racial diversity, for many of whom our congregation is their first non-ethnic church experience.

We have maintained our focus on Christ through an ongoing determination to take Scripture seriously. In the 1890s First Pres offered adult Bible study classes, including one in Chinese. In 1904, the church decided to call Lapslee McAfee to the pulpit, as a strongly Scripture-based conservative. This was opposed by the more liberal and progressive set who believed we could accept Darwinism without shaking our faith. This group, including many of the most influential members of Session, left First Pres to form St. John's Presbyterian. Over the years First Pres has offered and hosted Bible study classes and groups, from the Alpha Omega class, the Bethel Bible Class Kerygma, the Alpha Course, to this year's commitment to read the whole Bible.

We expect our pastors to be strong preachers of the Word. We no longer demand that he or she reject Darwin, but we test our responses to emerging issues and questions against the eternal truths of Scripture. In 1938, Pastor Francis S. Downs said "we have always stood on the Bible as the Word of God, holding steadfastly and intelligently to the great essentials of the evangelical Christian faith." Many of us remember the word-by-word exegesis of Earl Palmer's sermons. We have heard Mark Labberton exhorting us to soak ourselves in the Word. We continue to expect the congregation to be serious students of the Word, as witness the many small groups that have met to study and be changed by it over the years.

Because we have always taken the living Word seriously, we have always been an evangelical church. In 1973, Earl Palmer wrote "If any single quotation from the Holy Bible could lay claim to be the life verse for our congregation through the years ... the Great Commission is that quotation." We were founded by missionaries, Presbyterian ministers sent by East Coast congregations to shepherd lay members who came West during the Gold Rush. We have always maintained a strong focus on missions, though the

nature of the focus has changed over the decades.

Lapslee McAfee came to the pulpit in 1905, having been a missionary in the Philippines, and he led us to support missions around the world. When he left First Pres to return there, the church wanted to support him so much that it kept him at his full salary as pastor, in the heart of the Depression. By the 1950's, half of the whole church budget was devoted to mission work – the first church in the U.S. to make that claim.

First Pres has sent many of its children into the world to "make disciples of all nations." In the 1920's, fully ten percent of all Presbyterian missionaries worldwide came from or were supported by this church. Hundreds of members have gone into the full time ministry, into the missionary field, or into lay mission work, and at any one time, the church still supports a number of missionaries and seminarians around the world.

In the 60's, when traditional mission work came under fire as being imperialist, our mission focus changed. Our activities were "directed toward the self-development of people with the goal of helping them to help themselves at the same time the Gospel is being preached and demonstrated to them." Further, "Christian consciences were aroused to meet human needs closer to home," wrote Golden Baird in 1973.

In today's church, we support agricultural development efforts, schools, libraries, and programs to train local church leaders, domestically and around the world, as a visit to our annual Gift World will attest. We send our members out on short-term, lay mission trips in an effort to educate ourselves about the world, as well as to help.

One striking aspect of our evangelical character is our ongoing commitment to minister to the University. First Pres was very deliberately located near the campus, anticipating the need of University students for a vital, concerned church home. Rev. McAfee had only two duties explicitly spelled out in his contract: to preach the morning sermon, and to minister to the University. We have always had a pastor for University students. Early college groups, including Calvin Club, numbered as many as 300, and FOCUS, the current group numbers at least 100. Our links with Westminster House, the Presbyterian campus ministry, has often been very strong. Yet, as Arba Hudgens said, "the real impact of the church at UC took place outside the walls of the church. There were many people who were actively embedded on campus and who really lived out their faith in a way that had an impact on all kinds of people."

Our evangelical perspective has also led us to be an international or

global church. Beyond our commitment to missions worldwide, we have always been aware of living in a larger world than just "this corner." When the first pastor was called, there were only two candidates, and one was Japanese. We offered Bible classes in Chinese in the 1890's. We have long hosted visiting scholars from China, and elsewhere around the globe. For years, we had a pastor whose special calling was ministering to the international population in the UC and the East Bay. Today, members hold English classes in their homes for non-native speakers. Over the years, hundreds of people from our congregation have gone into full-time, cross-cultural missions, many are still our mission partners. Our commitment to new efforts such as City Lights and Global Lights today embody the vitality of our desire to live and share the Gospel locally and internationally.

Our awareness of being a global church is also a reflection of our fourth central characteristic, the openness of our church's culture. Because of our strong focus on Christ, we have felt able to address the emerging issues that challenge us in a spirit of enquiry and lively debate. We have been able to wrestle with these issues in a variety of forums, while never being distracted from our central message.

The strength of our Christian Education programs, for adults, youth and children, both reflect and foster the openness of the culture by simultaneously deepening our understanding of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit, and allowing us places to work out our responses to the issues of the day. In 1944, the college group undertook a study of the "Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and Mohammedan faiths." In 1955, the Session's committee for Social Education and Action worked for the "Intelligent understanding of social and moral issues." In 1963, the UC group had discussions of Christian psychology, civil rights, Existentialism, and the works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. More recently, we have fostered enquiry and Christian thought in the community, sponsoring Logos Bookstore, co-founding New College Berkeley, sponsoring the Berkeley Lectures, and supporting the Veritas Lectures. In the 1990's, we have grappled with homosexuality, the role of women in the clergy, divorce, and many other concerns.

This openness has often been a very deliberate choice. In the 1960's, when worshippers came to church across the lines of the National Guard, when members were moving away to the suburbs, and when the storefronts of Telegraph Avenue were boarded over, we decided to build a transparent sanctuary with clear glass walls. We chose not only to stay on this corner but to do so in an open, welcoming, and vulnerable way.

We test whatever issues we confront against our living relationship

with the living God. We have tended not to draw lines of exclusion or orthodoxy based on doctrine so much as to ask "how shall we then live," faced with the eternal realities of life in Christ set in the temporal realities of our situation in the world.

Our open culture also leads us to worship in many languages and forms. Music has always been one of the central languages of worship at First Pres. In the 1890's, the church offered regular concerts as fund-raisers and as worship. The choir has presented "The Messiah" and other sacred works since the church's founding. We have gone from having adult and college choirs to an array of singing and bell choirs starting as early as kindergarten. The Chancel Choir went on a tour of Eastern Europe in 2001.

We worship in traditional forms and in contemporary forms. We worship in large and small groups. We have worshipped according to age – for years, the evening service was specifically by and for the college group. We worship using dance, drama, and literature.

The final view of the church is really the expression of our evangelical devotion to Christ, fed by the Scripture, lived out in a culturally open way. It is the living out of our faith authentically in fellowship, in service, and in witness. Read any bulletin from any year in the church's history and you will see examples of service and love. In the earliest years, the King's Daughters donated food and clothing to the needy. In the 1930's, Rev. Lewis Hills described the college group as "a congregation of do-ers and pray-ers." They served in orphanages, retirement homes, infirmaries, and at the Open Door Mission. Today we have many members who live out their faith by building homes with Habitat for Humanity, tutoring in local schools, serving meals to the homeless, serving as Lay Counselors, hosting Bible studies, and being faithful friends. They share their faith in quiet and effective ways. "People show up in this church because they've been touched by the authentic way someone is living out their faith," said Arba Hudgens. It can be truly said of many of us that "they'll know we are Christians by our love."

Looking back over our history, we can see that the qualities that have informed the character of First Pres Berkeley since its inception are the same traits that will carry us forth into our future and will keep our fellowship and ministry vital and life-changing. We have always been an evangelical church, centered on Christ, as revealed by Scripture, with a culture of openness and a faith that shows itself in works. May God grant that we continue to grow in our maturity in Christ as we seek to be this kind of church now and in the future.

Thanks to contributors: Arba Hudgens, Kathie Johnson, Mark Labberton, Joel Oas, Camille Peterson, Roland Peterson, Al and Dorothy Olson and Archivists Anonymous.



*Living from
the Center
by
Amy Osterholm
2003*