

May 15, 2009

Dear TPC family,

We finally get to move into our new building! God be praised! The Lord has blessed us with a beautiful place to gather and worship him. This is truly a sign of the Lord's kindness and faithfulness to us.

As pastor, I am very grateful God has provided for us in this way – and also very grateful to the many in our church body who worked to make this happen, through sacrificial giving of time, money, and talents. God put it in the hearts of many to give above and beyond measure, and in this we should all rejoice.

Obviously, Christians can gather to worship God most anywhere, from catacombs to cathedrals. It's possible to "do church" without a building. But having a building is a great advantage. It gives us a place we can identify with, a home base from which we can do ministry, and a surrounding community into which we can sink our roots. It gives us more freedom to create the kind of worship environment we want and it gives us more flexibility in coming together for various events. Having a building is one way the church becomes more visible in the world. In our case, we have been largely invisible for the last several years while meeting at BPBC, so this should be a huge benefit for us. A building also provides stability since we do not have to worry about sometimes tenuous rental relationships and increasing lease fees.

As great as a building is, we should never let the tail wag the dog, so to speak. The church building is *not* the church; it's the *place* where the church meets. The church – the people, the faithful community – is the *true* building of living stones in which God dwells (Eph. 2:11ff; 1 Peter 2:4ff). We can speak of church buildings as "sacred space" – but the emphasis in the New Testament is on "sacred people," or, as Paul calls them in virtually all of his epistles, "saints." We must keep our priorities straight. The building is important; people and relationships are more important. Having a building of our own is a blessing, but it is more important for our church *to be* a blessing to our city (and hopefully the building will help us do that). God has entrusted this building to us; we must take good care of it and use it wisely and generously as his stewards. The transformation of the building over the last several months has been amazing to watch; but it is far more important that our lives and our community be transformed by gospel. It's great to renovate a building, but renovated, beautified lives will always be more

crucial. Let's make the building serve the church rather than the church serve the building. The building is servant, not master.

My hope and prayer is that we will use the building not just for worship, but also as a way of building community and extending hospitality. Community ultimately means sharing life together in both structured and spontaneous ways. We are embodied creatures and so community always requires a place – we must come together where we share common space if we are to share a common life. Sure, our technology allows us to bridge space in amazing ways through phones, emails, text messages, etc. But these forms of communication over space do not allow us to share a meal, or shake a hand, or give a hug, or look into another's eyes and read their "body language" – all of these things require shared space. Communication in person is vastly superior to these other technological means of interacting with one another. A building is a way a of respecting the physicality of human community. It allows the threads of our lives to be woven together into a strong and beautiful fabric. Inhabiting the same space allows us to build much thicker relational bonds over time. We now have a gathering place in a way we did not before. We have a place for our church family to call home. For a congregation that is somewhat scattered around the Birmingham area, as ours is, this is tremendous asset.

Buildings also allow for hospitality in greater ways. I have been a part of several churches that functioned without their own buildings, and certainly there are ways to compensate for that lack. But having a building is a great advantage when it comes to reaching out to the wider community. Many of us have learned this from personal experience: It is often hard to show hospitality as families until we get our own homes. So it is with the church. It is my hope that our building can become something of a base from which we carry out our mission and mercy work to the surrounding neighborhoods and the entire city of Birmingham with ever greater effectiveness. God has not blessed us with this building simply for our own benefit and enjoyment; God will not be pleased unless we use the building as a means of service to others. Every blessing God gives is meant to be shared. There is a very real sense in which we want to be able to say to our neighbors in Cahaba Heights, "This building does not belong exclusively to us – how can we use it to serve the Spiritual and social flourishing of this neighborhood?" The building should enhance ways in which we seek to fulfill our vision. Eugene Peterson once said that when it comes to the mission of the church, geography is as important as theology; thus, buildings are a reminder that the church lives at the intersection point of geography and theology. Having a place – and a *sense* of place, a *love* for that place – is vital. Christians have often

referred to such places as “parishes.” We now have a parish to call our own – an arena in which we can concentrate our service (of course, without neglecting wider arenas of service in the greater Birmingham area and the world).

Moving into the building will be a time of transition for us, and it is vital that we be patient with one another as we get adjusted to our new home. It’s going to be a bit crazy at first. As we have talked about, this is something of a “soft launch.” It is going to take a while for us to get settled in and we will have to bear with some things in the meantime. Here are some thoughts (most of these were discussed in Sunday School a few weeks ago, but I know many of you were not there):

1. We strongly desired a lively acoustic worship space to go with our liturgical, participatory form of worship. Worship is a performance – but the performers are not just a handful of professionals up front. The entire gathered community is engaged in the work of offering Spiritual sacrifices to God. You don’t come on Sundays to watch but to worship; you don’t come to spectate, but to sacrifice.

Thankfully, a friend of mine who is an acoustical expert offered to help us with our renovation design and as a result we have ended up with a *very* lively sanctuary – just as we had hoped. But it is hard to tell if it is going to be *too* lively. If you have been in the building since the hardwood floors were laid down, you know that there is a lot of echo. We do not know how adding approximately 150 people to the space will soften that reverberation. *If it is hard to hear speakers the first few weeks in the new building, please bear with us as we work towards a solution.* We may have to experiment with a variety of ways of addressing the problem, but we will get it solved.

For the same reasons, our musicians will be experimenting some. We may have to tinker with volume levels, accompanist placement, etc., to get it just right.

Overall, while we are in this break-in phase, figuring out how to handle the acoustics, we will have somewhat shorter services.

2. The lively acoustics also mean we have to pay more attention to ways in which we might be disrupting the worship service. Because of the way sound carries in the building, people moving around during the service, people leaving for the restroom, people opening the doors at the back, people coming in late, people

whispering, children crying, etc. will all be magnified. We ask that if you come late or have to leave the sanctuary for some reason that you do so only during singing parts of the service if at all possible. Please be respectful of others and use sanctified common sense. Because BPBC was so dead acoustically, we got away with a lot we will not be able to get away with in the new sanctuary.

3. Parents, we ask that you oversee your children in the fellowship time after worship. This doesn't mean you have to be with them, or even keep them in your sight continually. Obviously, the older kids are going to want to run around and enjoy the property. But please remind them to be good neighbors. Note the land has a few pitfalls: dogs get walked across the property regularly, there is a wet bog area, the woods are full of poison ivy, we are bordered by streets on two sides (one of which can be somewhat busy), and there are homes on the other sides. We want everyone to be safe and respectful of others around us; please instruct your children accordingly. Also, we ask that kids stay out of the air conditioner area outside between the two parts of the building. In the future, obviously we hope to develop more specific play areas for kids, but we simply could not get everything done, in terms of money and time, before moving in. Again, bear with us.

4. We will need to work out logistics for things like refreshments and (eventually) events like Second Sunday lunch. Again, this may require some experimentation to see what works best, so we'll give instructions as we go. We want to get a crew of our younger men together to help with chair rearrangement and table set up when we're going to have a meal together. This is a great way for the young guys to get involved and serve the body.

5. The nursery will be very easy to find and is very close to the sanctuary. It is in one of the classrooms off the narthex on the side of the building that faces Bearden Road and the apartments.

6. As owners, we want to take good care of property. Do your best to clean up after yourself, throw away trash, etc. If something breaks, let a deacon know and we'll take care of it. We are going to do our best to maintain our sizeable piece of property in a way that reflects and witnesses to Christ's worthiness (Colossians 3:17, 23) – but to make that happen will require all of us working together.

7. We will now be kneeling on hardwood floors during the service. Some will be tempted to complain about this, I am sure. But I don't think we should give too

much thought to our own comfort when it comes to our posture during the confession of sin. Maybe the pain will be a reminder of what's going on!

However, those who have physical need for pads in order to kneel should certainly feel free to bring them. (Same goes for seat cushions.)

Also, in the new building, we ask that everyone kneel forward, facing the altar/table at the front of the church. There should be room between the rows of chairs to do this.

8. This move is a great time to make some other minor liturgical changes. I will introduce new vestments soon. We will be getting a new altar table towards the end of the summer. Over time, we hope to be able to beautify the sanctuary in a way that reflects the themes of the different seasons of the church year. We want to make our worship space rich in Christian symbols, as we are able.

We will also make a small change to the way we do the Lord's Supper. As the wine comes around, we will drink it as it is passed. In other words, you will take a cup, drink it, put the cup back in the tray, and pass it along to the next person. (Obviously, parents will help small children as needed.) In terms of the overall sequence: I will drink first, then give trays to the elders who will drink, then the trays will be passed throughout the room. (We are not changing the way we do the bread.)

There are a variety of practical, theological, and historical reasons for this change. I am not going to try to give a full defense here; it's something I'll explain more fully when we have an opportunity. Just consider a few thoughts with me:

Logistically, we no longer have communion cup holders in the pews in front of us. A lot of parents put their children's cups in those holders while waiting for the rest of the congregation to be served so wine is not spilled. It's going to be a bigger pain for parents to hold multiple cups or to put them on the floor while the trays make their way around the sanctuary since we no longer have the pew holders. By drinking as the tray is passed, we minimize spills, make clean up afterwards easier (no cups to pick up!), etc.

But there is also a theological/exegetical reason for this change. Drinking as the tray is passed mimics the common cup procedure, but without the germ/hygiene issues a common cup raises for a lot of people. There is no doubt this is the way Jesus did it at the last Supper: there was only one cup, so the disciples *must* have

drunk from it and then passed it on the next person. The disciples did *not* wait to drink together. There is no way they could have drunk at the same time because they did not have their own cups. Jesus and the disciples passed the cup from hand to hand around the table, drinking as it went; we are now going to do the same thing with our “common trays.”

There is a deep reason why Jesus drank the cup first, then passed it around to the others (see Matthew 20:23; 26:27-29; 26:39, 42). Jesus asked the disciples, “Can you drink [afterwards, after me] from the cup that I drink from [first]?” Jesus drank first (at the table literally and on the cross metaphorically) to pave the way for his disciples to drink. The blessing flowed out from him to them, and from them to the world. Jesus pours out his life for the world first, so that in union with him his disciples can learn to pour out their lives as well.

Some may suggest that the unity of the church is better expressed when we wait and drink together. I agree that practice can serve as a sign of unity, and we will still do this with the bread. (It is not at all clear to me that they ate the bread as it was passed; the key texts do not call attention to this, and it would not have been necessary as with the cup where only one person could drink at a time in the nature of the case.) But with regards to the wine, I would counter-suggest that passing the cup from one person to the next expresses unity and community just as much, albeit in a somewhat different and complementary way: we are *servicing one another* and *receiving service from one another* in a more explicit fashion. And the service we render to each other is (symbolically) empowered by drinking the cup. I drink Christ’s blood and immediately show I am willing to pour my life out for you by serving you the wine as well. Then you do the same for the next person. And so on.

To be sure A LOT more can be said exegetically and theologically in favor of this practice (I might pass along some short reading materials soon to bolster these arguments), and I have been far too rushed to say things as well as they need to be said. But the bottom line is, Jesus said “Do this” (1 Corinthians 11:24-25) and doing the rite precisely the way he prescribed involves drinking the wine and then passing it on to the next person to drink, NOT waiting to drink at the same time. This does not mean the Eucharists we’ve been celebrating in past years were not valid; God is not that kind of God. But we do want to conform our worship practices to Scripture as closely as possible, and this is one way we can better do that.

Historically, drinking and passing is the way the Supper has been done more often than not. In other words, it is the traditional practice of the church for most of the last 1900 years (and of most churches in the world today). Obviously, this is the way they did it in the early church, since no one disputes they used a common cup (or multiple common cups in larger settings). The invention of small plastic cups have made it possible for the congregation to wait and drink together, but those cups were not available to the church until very, very recently in church history (kind of like grape juice, which was not available until modern times either). If waiting to drink together is a modern innovation, shouldn't we at least question its wisdom? (By the way, I think having multiple cups is fine since in any larger church the common cup is going to multiply into several cups for practical reasons anyway. But the *pattern* of drinking and passing is well established in Scripture and church history and that's what we're moving towards.)

At the time of the Reformation, the pastor consumed first, then passed the elements on to the officers and people who ate and drank as they came. This was true for Martin Bucer, John Calvin, John Knox, etc. You can find references to this practice in their written rubrics that went with their liturgies (see, e.g., Bard Thompson's *Liturgies of the Western Church*). The 1946 and 1993 versions of the PCUSA's *Book of Common Worship* continue this Reformed and Presbyterian practice (and while we would see all kinds of problems with the PCUSA as a denomination, the truth is that the historical scholarship that went into their worship books was very good, and very conservative/traditional overall).

I know that any kind of change can rock people – we're comfortable with the familiar and the familiar is comfortable. This is especially so when it comes to something as dear to us all as the Lord's Supper. But I hope this is a change we can make without too much trauma. After all, this is not a radical change for us, but for the reasons above (and several others I have not gone into), it is a change we need to go ahead and make as we move into the new building. Even if you are not persuaded by the theological and historical arguments, allow the pragmatic advantages to win you over – or at least soften you up! Most parents with small communing children will appreciate the change, as will those who would have been responsible for picking up the plastic cups after worship!

A few more notes:

- We will have a building thanksgiving/dedication service soon, probably on a Sunday evening, after we feel a little more settled.
- We are strategizing about ways to introduce ourselves to the surrounding neighborhoods – if you have ideas about any kind of “open house/open church” event we could do, please let us know. We’re looking at dates towards the end of the summer.
- We are in the process of developing building use policies for events like weddings, but in the meantime you can ask an officer if you need the building for something.
- We will be taking down the existing sign and replacing it with a sign of our own as soon as we get approval to do so.
- Other grounds work, including improved landscaping and so forth, will happen over time as we are able. As with home ownership, so it is with church ownership: There will always be a lot of work to do to maintain and improve what we have.

I am sure I have overlooked some things, but I hope this letter provides a helpful introduction to the new facility. We’re looking forward to worshipping together with you Sunday!

Blessings,
Pastor Rich Lusk