

THE CASE OF THE MISSING PULPIT!
DECEMBER 6, 1987

Page 1

Have you ever returned home to find that your spouse or parent had moved the furniture? Other than those of you who are here for the first time this morning, you probably noticed that the pulpit is missing. It was decided by the Committee on Worship and the Administrative Council, and endorsed by the Trustees, to take the pulpit out and see what the chancel looks like without it. When you change furniture at home, you might draw diagrams. I don't know about you, but I have difficulty visualizing what a room will look like from a diagram on a piece of paper. So we decided to take it out and see how we like it.

Now, why? One of our church's major goals is to offer God a service of worship that is celebrative, warm, inclusive and involving everyone. God is to be worshipped by all of you, not just by the ministers and the choirs. To help you feel more like a participant and less like a spectator, we want to open the chancel, to remove the barriers that separate us, to make the communion table visible to all the congregation, and not only visible, but the focus of the building rather than the pulpit and the preacher. We want the worship center to create a sense of openness, accessibility, welcome, and participation.

We made a change in the look of the chancel this morning. I'm going to make another change. I'm changing the sermon. As I worked on the sermon this week, I thought about the impact of removing the pulpit. I realized that any change, especially in the sanctuary of a church, touches the emotions of people. Some of you may be disturbed. Some may not have noticed the change. Some are ecstatic. Some think this is a great improvement, and the best thing that has happened since garlic!

A good sermon is relevant to what is happening around us. A good sermon interprets events, trends, situations, experiences in the light of the scriptures. Because that is my philosophy of preaching, I changed the sermon. The scheduled sermon was to be about deserts and wilderness, the wilderness from which John the Baptist came and preached, the wilderness to which Jesus went to sort things out and get his priorities straight. As I may yet be transferred to the wilderness, I decided not to preach about it! The title of the changed sermon this morning is, "THE CASE OF THE MISSING PULPIT." As you can tell, I'm a Perry Mason fan!

Let the missing pulpit be a symbol, a statement, that we as a church are willing and ready to make whatever changes are necessary to serve God in this generation. Let this be a symbol that we are a church of the 1990s. Now, I realize that the moving of a piece of furniture is hardly monumental or significant in the context of world hunger, homeless people, the wavering economy, and arms control. We are not talking about changing the course of history, or even changing the course of our church, by making a change in the chancel. But, it is a symbol. We want our congregation to be united. We want all our people to be able to see the worship center. We open the chancel so the communion table, which symbolizes the presence of God and the sacrifice of Christ, is accessible to all of you. Let the change in the chancel be a symbol that we are willing to make whatever changes necessary to remove all barriers that separate us one from another, so that everyone may feel welcome in our church, and an important part of the worshipping and serving community.

This magnificent structure in which we worship will be 25 years old next

THE CASE OF THE MISSING PULPIT!
DECEMBER 6, 1987

Page 2

year. We are now preparing for that celebration. Isn't it amazing that this building has been here for 25 years now and no renovation has been needed? We had a few years of trouble with the roof, but that is now repaired. It is a tribute to those of our church who planned this structure. Their work was so thorough that little change is needed. I know of a church that completely renovated its sanctuary when it celebrated its 25th anniversary, because it was inadequate and unable to meet the needs of the present generation. Our sanctuary has proven the test of time, and those who built this sanctuary, led by Bishop Stuart who was pastor then, did an outstanding job.

About the only change needed is to open the chancel to create a more expansive environment. The pulpit was a barrier. It is now missing. As we complete our 25th year in this sanctuary, let this minor change in the chancel be a symbol of our commitment to the future. We are a church of the 1990s, seeking to meet the needs of people, and be a strong force in the work of God. A statement, a symbol of our commitment to the future is needed because since this magnificent sanctuary was built 25 years ago, the congregation has steadily declined. You can look at the statistics and see steady decline. In the last 25 years there have been moments of plateau, and short growth, but overall the line is a steady, diagonal decline. If the pattern continues, this building will eventually become a museum. In the words of a member of our Administrative Council, "We've been sitting on the bank while the river goes by!"

The church membership has declined from a high of 3,000+ to 1,091 which is what it is today. We are approximately 1/3 the size of what we were 25 years ago. The plain fact is we are too small a congregation to maintain the buildings, provide the staff necessary to do the job, and proudly fulfill our obligations to world missions. We are not able to pay our share of the denominational expenses, world service and other benevolences. It has been years since we've been able to pay our conference apportionments in full.

Sisters and brothers, it is time to stop the decline! It is time to turn the church around. It is time to take this church off the list of "stable and declining churches." According to Lyle Schaller, there are four categories of churches: Rapidly Growing Churches, Stable and Growing Churches, Stable and Declining Churches, and Rapidly Declining Churches. Thank God we are no longer in the "rapidly declining" category as we were a few years ago, when we rapidly declined. We are now in the "stable and declining" category. Are you comfortable there? I'm not. Let's move up to the category "stable and growing." The Church Conference adopted evangelism as our #1 priority in 1988, and set the goal to welcome 10-15 persons into church membership each month.

Sisters and brothers, let the missing pulpit be a symbol of our commitment to make whatever changes we have to make. If removing the pulpit will help improve our worship service, let's take it out. If changing anything else in the sanctuary will help us be a church where people feel comfortable and involved, let's make that change. If there is any change we can make in the education building to make it more inviting and conducive to children's ministry, let's do it. If there are more changes we need to make in our organizational structure to make us more efficient, and to get us out of the slow, snail's pace we've been in, let's make that change. If there is any change we need to make in our goals, if there is a need in the community or in

THE CASE OF THE MISSING PULPIT!
DECEMBER 6, 1987

Page 3

the world to which God calls us to concentrate our efforts, let's do it.

I fully believe we have the potential to be the church God wants us to be. We have the buildings. We have the staff. I am now in the fifth year of my ministry here. According to those who study churches, the fifth year of a pastorate is a critical year. At the Church Conference in my annual report, I asked, "Is our congregation ready to make the changes so that we may grow?" The staff is ready.

Glenn is also in his fifth year here. He has done and is doing a good job in leading us in our outreach ministry and in pastoral care. His goal is to make pastoral calls in every home of our membership. He is well on his way of meeting that goal and is having a grand time being in your homes.

Ann Clausen, our Director of Program Development, is now in her second year of ministry here. The Sunday School is not only running smoothly and enthusiastically, but it has grown this fall. She has successfully launched the Covenant Group ministry which was our major goal this year. Over 70 persons are involved in covenant groups, and we are only beginning.

Susan Marx Pecot, our administrator, also in her second year, has surprised us all with her understanding of the church, her competency in directing the office staff and volunteers, and her friendly way of meeting the public.

Leroy Kromm is the granddaddy on the staff, in his seventh year. I challenge you to find a better Director of Music anywhere. Giving credit also to Linda Jordan and Sara Salsbury, every choir has grown this fall. We even have a Boy's choir again, and the Chancel Choir is the largest it has been in years.

We have a new organist, David Parsons, and in the short time he has been here, he is already loved and appreciated not only for his competent playing, but also for his sincere interest and commitment to our church's ministry.

We have the staff ready to take on the challenge, and we have the lay leaders. You have elected exceptionally competent and committed persons to serve on the Administrative Council and the other committees. Our Sunday School teachers, Covenant Group leaders, United Methodist Women and Methodist Men officers, our youth and their leaders, are exceptional. (Friday evening, fifteen youth had an overnight retreat downstairs, led by Bill and Terri Michel.)

We have seen significant improvement these past few years. On an average Sunday now there are 100 more persons worshipping than there were four years ago. The financial giving of our congregation has increased at a phenomenal rate these past four years. There are many signs of growth, but sisters and brothers, we have a long way to go to turn around the 25-year old decline. We have a long way to go to make this a church that is meeting the needs of persons in this area so they will come and participate with us in being the people of God. It is time to speed up the process of change. A hundred year old congregation with a 25 year-old sanctuary is so slow in moving, so resistant to change. We have a long way to go, but I believe we can make it. I have committed my life to this ministry. I have not committed my life to serving a stable and declining church. No way! But I have committed my life to help this church become a growing church.

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What about you? Your church needs your wholehearted commitment, the commitment of your prayers, attendance, service and the sharing of your financial resources. Later in the service you will be asked to come forward and make your commitment by placing your covenant giving card on the altar or on the table at the foot of the stairs. Let your commitment be, first of all, a commitment to give your life to Jesus Christ. For most of you, this will be an act of re-commitment. For some of you, it may be the first time you have consciously and publicly declared to yourself and before your friends here, that you will be a disciple of Jesus Christ, confessing Jesus Christ as your Lord and Saviour, and committing your life to the service of Christ. When you come forward this morning, let the act be a commitment of your life to Christ.

Secondly, when you come forward with your covenant card, let it be a commitment to your church. Let it be a statement, "Yes, I want to be on this team. I want our church to do God's work and be God's people. Yes, I will do my part to fulfill our present goal to invite, welcome, and receive new people into this congregation. YES, I will be part of the team, and I will commit my prayers, my attendance, my service, and my money, my tithes, to my church."

Sisters and brothers, this is an exciting time to be a part of this church. The future is promising. We together, with the power of the Holy Spirit, can do what God calls us to do. Wholeheartedly, let us serve the Lord with gladness.