

**Grove Presbyterian Church**  
**7 March, 2010**

*I feel worship brings a certain calmness and clarity to my life. I often leave feeling uplifted and with a more positive outlook on life in general.*

We here at Grove have been examining our style of worship and how it relates to worship attendance. We have a good thing going and we want to make sure it continues. Every pastor works for the next pastor.

Our eye is on increasing worship attendance. Not for the sake of numbers for numbers sake but for the sake of ministry. The chance for others to show how Jesus is alive in their hearts. Not for them to come in and conform to what we offer, but for them to arrive here so God can improve all of us.

After all, if we can enjoy sharing worship with 179 persons, that's when resources match expectations. When churches drop to 100 or fewer at Sunday worship, they can still be worthwhile; but they also gradually become chapels. Then they quickly become museums. We have enough nursing homes, thank you very much.

Healthy, vibrant, growing churches - those that grow horizontally as well as vertically - require a carrying capacity.

Which is why we are keen on learning what people experience here.

Now, there are factors that influence what exactly people do experience.

One factor has to do with which day do you come? Which church did you experience? We differ (I hope) from Sunday to Sunday. Was your impression based upon a one time experience when it happened that that Sunday that the sermon was terrible, the Scripture passage tedious, and the hymns torturous?

Many people -- and young people in particular -- tend to make up their mind about a church in the first five minutes. Which is about as accurate as visiting my office one day and I'm playing Edith Piaf and you conclude he's

weird with his French Cabaret music. Of course, on another day you might find me playing Bruce Springsteen. Or another day Madrigals.

Form your opinion, please, on the basis of the book rather than one paragraph.

Second, I just finished reading John Steinbeck's book about his five month cross-country tour, called Travels with Charley. He wrote: "What I found was closely intermeshed with how I felt at that moment."

So true. Very true. You come to a party feeling grumpy; odds are you're going to have a grumpy time. You come to worship stressed, it likely you're going to have a stressful time. Like trying to untie a knotted shoelace when you're already flustered and fed up. Get me the scissors, will you!

Unless, unless (and here's the third factor): what we offer helps you calm down, gain meaning, and find clarity. What stumbling blocks can we remove? How can we help you find refreshment, challenge, renewal, revival?

How can we help you stand like Moses shining in the glory of the Lord up on the mountaintop?

Shake it up, ask questions, explore improvements, toy with new ideas about the hymns, nursery, church school, what I do, coffee hour, even the hours of Sunday worship. Everything is on the table. There are no sacred cows.

Or course, today's text supplies a pretty good recipe for a healthy, vibrant, growing church. Listen:

**Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.**

There's a secret for success! Makes sense. Give me a church filled with glad and generous hearts. Or more

accurately: exuberantly joyful and sincerely simple hearts.

Sure beats a church joyless and insincere.

You've met the type before. The Eeyores of the world. Not the Poohs or Tiggers. The Eeyores. They'll depress the life out of you. Who wants to be part of a church so depressing it could depress a hyena? I don't. I won't.

These Black Holes of the social and spiritual cosmos. Where their gravity is so extreme, even light cannot escape.

Astronomers say Black Holes are light years away. Not so, not so. I've bumped into a few around town and Presbytery. Angry elders. Resentful pastors. Passive-aggressive members. Grumbling, complaining, critical. Blaming everyone but themselves.

Drain the life out of you.

Give me instead bright Shining Suns -- burning, on fire -- instead of Black Holes. You've met the type: brimming and radiant. They've been to the mountaintop and it shows, even when they got to come back down into the valley. Even when they walk through those shadows. This kind won't drain the life out of you; they make you feel even more alive. They fire you up. Fire kindles fire!

Exuberantly joyful and sincerely simple hearts.

Why are they joyful and sincere, those very first Christians?

Why? Because their hearts have been fed.

The heart: the center of our physical life and the center of our spiritual life. Atria and ventricles, upper and lower. One for casual one for best.

Please note that it is their **hearts** that are glad and sincere. Not their brains, not their stomachs, not other organs, not even their feet (though it is fun to have happy feet).

What made all the difference was that they came receptive.

They came ready.

Ready and willing.

They made room to receive what God and their fellow Christians offered. They dumped all the other stuff, all the other baggage. They came empty, hoping, eager, enthusiastic, willing to be surprised.

Then the Word filled them. Love lifted them. Glory surrounded them. Bright shining as the Son.

Blessed are those who come here hungry. Feed me, don't drain me.

Well and good, but hold on here. Is it a fair comparison? Can we really compare us today with those earliest, original Christians? After all, they had the thrill of the new. Untested. Unsullied. Untraditional. The adventure and excitement of it all. They were the first, like young brides and grooms on honeymoon time. Giddy. Discovering. Excited. Fresh. So what's going to happen to them when they hit their 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary?

Still shining? Or gotten by the blues. The B.B. King blues: "the thrill is gone... "

This old church is older and wiser now. Comfortable. We now wear sensible shoes.

Can we compare?

You bet we can. We had better. I count on it. I'm not 57 years old. I'm only one day old. Every marriage is only one day old. And we - you and you and you - we are the first Christians!

How? Because it is the same Jesus. It is the same Spirit. And today is the day that the Lord has made . . . {let us rejoice and be glad in it!}

. . .and the church, just like you, is as old and as worn out as you choose to feel. What you find is closely intermeshed with how you feel.

Or as Fiona, one of my daughter's best friends, says: You want positive things to happen? Surround yourself with positive people.