

## A VISION FOR FIRST PRESBYTERIAN

### A FAITH COMMUNITY FOR ALL SEASONS

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Did you read about a recent study that suggested people have fewer friends to share their lives with than ever before? Despite cell phones, e-mail and instant messaging, when the need arises to talk to someone about something very personal people are not sure where to turn. Add to that an earlier study called "Bowling Alone," which suggests people are much less apt to join organizations than they use to. Together the studies provide an introduction to the third leg of our vision for First Presbyterian: the need to create **A FAITH COMMUNITY FOR ALL SEASONS**.

The experience of a college friend may illustrate what the studies have suggested. He sold his home retiring from teaching at the University of Delaware and moved to North Carolina into what is called "a co-living community." It is a place that is cooperatively owned and operated and provides a common space for meals and activities together. I asked him why he was choosing to live in such an environment. His reply was "That he wanted to have some friends to share with and to support him and didn't have any presently." In other words, he was trying to create artificial community. Later he told me it wasn't very successful and he was moving to Maine to be near grandchildren. Would you agree that in our fast paced technological world with fewer extended families and rapidly changing societal values, there is a growing desire for such community? The trouble is that, as the studies suggest, it is not as easy as it once was to find this kind of community, a community where there is support, understanding and encouragement.

The small letter of James may be extremely helpful as we try to connect with what is going on in our society currently. The book of James, written late in the 1st Century, in just 5 short chapters brings to the surface all that goes into human existence: relationships, joy and suffering, the gap between the rich and the poor. Everything that comprises daily living finds its way into this short little book near the end of the New Testament.

Thus, the writer of James was particularly sensitive to the very deep human need to find a community that basically will stand by the person in all seasons of life. It is just too much as a solitary human being to be understanding in relationships, concerned about the poor, fair in dealings, in a world that often doesn't care. An individual quickly can burn out. Do you know what James prescribed as a remedy for being worn out, frustrated and all the rest? Christian community: places where people could gather and find refreshment, encouragement, and renewal for another week. Isn't it amazing how this small book of James speaks to the needs of 2006?

I think the writer of James would have appreciated the TV show "Cheers." Do you remember that Boston bar where everybody became your friend? You waited for the big fat guy to walk in to a resounding, "Hi, Norm!" You anticipated the hapless mailman Cliff or the innocent bartender Woody. It was a place where everyone knew your name.

One of our great challenges as a church is to be this kind of caring, loving community for people seeking wholeness. We live in a world of insecurity with the rush of life on the verge of overwhelming us. We don't have the same natural community of the small towns of upstate NY 50 years ago. Our youth have so many choices in their activities and thus may not be as close as they once were; we set off for work tomorrow morning in different directions, many may not have family in this area. We are a church with a great deal of built in diversity whether we realize it or not. But we do share one thing in common: we come seeking to grow in our faith and looking to find ways to help others. One of our great opportunities challenges for the future is to provide community for all who come regardless of points of view or background!

I read in an Associated Press report that a nurse in Spokane, Wash. dropped a human heart that had been donated for transplant. After she dropped the heart she threw it in the trash because she assumed it was contaminated. That might have been correct but in order to protect herself she falsified the records. She was reprimanded and fined \$250 when her actions were discovered. The formal charge on her records was "inappropriate handling of a human heart." A husband takes his wife for granted and she feels neglected, alone, unloved. A parent who has "had it up to here" yells at a child for something very small and the child is hurt and confused. A friend shares a special secret of yours with someone else and you feel betrayed and angry. Everyday there are opportunities to take care of another human heart and to bring joy and love or to "mishandle" that heart and to cause hurt and pain. The church may be the one place in society where there is a clear mandate to "care for the human heart." Cards by the deacons, casual conversation in the hallway, phone calls ... it can happen in many ways but the church needs to be there for all who come and those outside. Again we return to that old phrase "it is easier said than done." This church, any church, has to be very intentional in its efforts and particularly conscious of newcomers who arrive at the door not sure what to expect inside and to be keenly aware of what is happening in the world around the church.

You will recall that I said at the beginning of September that the sermons this month would set forth a vision for the future for First Presbyterian?

-Two weeks ago I suggested that God is the bottom line for our lives as individuals and as a church. God is there for us no matter what.

-Last week I said that we need to see that our Christian faith is rooted in a deep and lasting commitment to Christ and not just a lot of running around looking busy. That commitment certainly includes concern for the poor and oppressed. The Book of James strongly implies that Christianity without compassion for those suffering injustice simply will not fit the Christ mold.

-Today I am adding the need to be a true community of faith. The faith we want to cultivate and the justice we seek has to be to be firmly planted in community. First Presbyterian, Batavia needs to be a place where "each heart is handled carefully."

I don't usually use personal illustrations but I'd like to add a postscript from my own life. Marilyn and I were camping and biking on Cape Cod on 9/11/2001. All the information we got came via radio. Our youngest son was living in Brooklyn and worked in lower Manhattan. Along with deep anguish and concern and horror, you know what I longed for? Of course, I wanted to be with family but I also wanted to share in a community of faith where we could pray and hope together. I was to start as temporary supply at Livonia Center the following

Sunday so at that moment had no true church connection and I longed for a gathering of Christian friends to help me get through this tragedy. That's what community is all about.

I hope it will not sound as personal boasting but what about the feeling in worship the last two weeks? Were some of you touched as I was? First there was the 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 9/11. You could sense an "awesome presence" in this sacred place, a Presence giving us comfort and hope in a worrisome time. Last weekend a little child in Batavia had died in a fire, someone else was going for chemo and so it went. People brought a lot of "baggage" to worship. The service started with our choir doing a descant to the last verse of "All Hail the Power of Jesus Name" and chills went up my spine. From that beginning until we all sang, "I have decided to follow Jesus" and "Let there be peace on earth" there was again what only can be described as "a touch of the Holy." All was not despair as we gathered in community. God moved us and gave us reason to set forth to another week.

**My question is quite simple: where else in our society can we find such experiences that touch and empower so deeply?**