

December 18th, 2007



THE BELLRINGER
“Current News from a Colonial Church”

COME HOME FOR CHRISTMAS

This is an important time of the year as we recall the birth of Jesus Christ. You are invited to make Wyckoff Reformed Church an important part of your Christmas celebration. Special services have been planned. Also, take time to read about the best known person in history. Read Luke, chapter 2. For in Jesus, God came among us, as one of us, to show us what we were created to be and do.

ADVENT SERVICES this Sunday, December 23, at 9:00 and 11:00 a.m.—these services will anticipate the glory of Christmas with a sermon by Pastor James O’Connell entitled “Follow Through,” Christmas carols and music by directed by Gregory Nalesnik.

TRAVELERS CHRISTMAS SERVICE at noon on December 24—this candlelight service will feature recording artist Jeemin Lee, who is currently planning concert tours to Asia and Europe. Rev. Dave’s sermon will be entitled “Something Wants to be Born.”

FAMILY CHRISTMAS EVE SERVICE at 5:00 p.m.—this is a candlelight service with Kat Naumann and Rev. Dave is for families with young children. The service will include a presentation by the children of the church, as well as singing Christmas carols and visiting the “Holy Family.”

GENESIS CHRISTMAS EVE SERVICE at 7:00 p.m.—A service for families with older children. This candlelight service includes music led by Matt Dittmar, a sermon by Rev. Billy Norden entitled “No Sleep Tonight,” and lighting the Christ candle.

TRADITIONAL CHRISTMAS EVE SERVICES at 9:00 and 11:00 p.m.—These candlelight services will include music by the Chancel Choir directed by Gregory Nalesnik, Christmas carols, a sermon by Rev. James O’Connell entitled, “Intersection of Decrees,” and lighting the Christ candle.

NEW YEAR’S SERVICES on Sunday, December 30, at 9:30 and 11:00 a.m.—these services will be filled with the singing of favorite Christmas carols and a sermon by Rev. Dave entitled “Something Old and Something New.”

Meet our newest missionary, Ruth Estell

The Mission Committee invites the congregation to meet Ruth Estell—a new missionary to China whom we are supporting. Please join us on Saturday evening, January 12, at 6:00 p.m. in Heneveld Hall for a light buffet dinner and presentation on mission opportunities in China.

In March, Ruth is leaving to teach English at Yanbian University of Science and Technology, which is located in northeastern China. In addition to teaching, she will build relationships with students in order to encourage them in their lives with Christian love.

If you will be attending the dinner, please call the church office at 201-891-1782 by January 4.

Natural Church Development by Brian Clark

You may recall from previous summaries I have given that the Consistory’s focus on developing this congregation’s “passionate spirituality” came from a program endorsed by our denomination called Natural Church Development, or NCD. NCD came from a mid-1990s research study on the causes and sustainability of growing churches. And, I should point out that, by “growth” it is just not just ‘growth in attendance’—rather it is growth in relationships within ourselves, with each other, with the greater community, with the world and with God.

NCD has identified eight qualities that are evident in growing churches: empowering leadership, gift-oriented ministry, passionate spirituality, functional structures, inspiring worship service, holistic small groups, need-oriented evangelism, and loving relationships. The methodology of the NCD program is to determine a church’s most undeveloped quality of those eight mentioned and then have the church work on improving that so-called “least

developed” characteristic. The theory is that by improving the lowest quality, all other qualities will improve as well.

In 2004, thirty randomly chosen members of this congregation took the NCD survey and it was determined that “passionate spirituality” was our weakest characteristic. That is not to say that our congregation lacked ‘spirituality.’ Rather we were just not ‘passionate’ in the expression of our spirituality. After that survey was taken, a small group of Consistory members has quietly worked behind the scenes to address this issue. Combined with some other events, you can see that a number of things have changed within the life of this congregation.

A new senior minister has settled into place. There has been some creativity and experimentation in our worship services. For example, each quarter we have begun to have an individual share their personal faith story during worship.

A number of congregants, especially in the new-member classes, have discovered their God-given spiritual gifts and have begun to utilize them to build the body of Christ. The Sunday School has new focus and direction. We have a newly ordained and installed Associate Minister of Youth and Young Families. A month ago, about thirty members of the congregation attended Becky Pippert’s weekend conference and made new commitments.

And finally, the new Genesis service began on December 2 in the Christian Education Building. So, with all this behind us, it is time for the congregation to again take stock.

In fact, the NCD program strongly suggests that each congregation should take the survey every two or three years to reevaluate their “growth qualities.” Accordingly, at the last Consistory meeting, I recommended to Consistory that we do this and your Consistory endorsed this recommendation. So, in February or March, maybe you will be one of the thirty randomly chosen members to participate. I look for your enthusiastic cooperation at that time. We will always strive to grow in our “passionate spirituality” but, possibly, we will have a new focus next year.

Congregational Celebrations and Concerns

Born. Brady Robert, son of Amy and Bill Dill, and grandson of Mike and Kathy Bowers

Recovering. Olive Yennie after surgery

Kudos to the family and friends of David Kennedy for setting up our Nativity crèche

Kudos to Aren and Esther Breen for the Christmas tree and wreaths on our church campus

“Christmas is Spelled H-u-m-i-l-i-t-y”—a Stillpoint by Rev. Dave

When my mother taught my brothers and me how to pray before going to bed, she taught us to kneel alongside our beds, fold our hands, bow our heads, and pray a prayer of thanksgiving. Although my prayers changed as I grew older, one thing did not change. Throughout my grade school and high school years, I knelt alongside my bed nearly every night and prayed a prayer of thanksgiving.

When recently thinking about this, I realized that what was even more important than my praying, was my kneeling. How smart of my mother to teach her sons to kneel before God. For to be on one’s knees before God is a lesson all in itself.

As we begin our worship service, our traditional “Call to Worship” is “O come let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker.” These words come from the book of Psalms. What we here learn is that worship and bowing down go together. What we here learn is that recognizing the Lord as our Maker and kneeling go together. This is why nearly all of our fellow Christians, including Catholic Christians, Lutheran Christians, Episcopalian Christians, Orthodox Christians, and Pentecostal Christians kneel during portions of their worship services. When we come before God, there is one proper response, and that is humility—which is symbolized by kneeling.

I am deeply grateful for Becky Pippert’s teaching about this. From time to time you and I have heard about “original sin.” What, you may wonder, was the original sin? The original sin was a lack of humility. The original sin, the first sin, the sin which was, and is, behind every other sin, is arrogance. The original sin was, and is, the unwillingness of humanity to be human. The original sin was, and is, humans trying to be like God, trying to be their own God. The original sin was “created beings” thinking they could be like their Creator. Genesis describes this in the most ancient of all stories.

The book of Genesis tells us that humans were created from the earth and the breath of God. Interestingly, the words “human” and “humble” are both derivations of the word “humus.” Even though Adam and Eve were created from humus they nevertheless, and wonderfully, had full access to their Creator. Indeed, God’s passion was to draw near to them, to be with them, to walk with them, to talk with them, to be their friend, to help them, to encourage them, and to provide for them. That continues to be God’s passion in relation to every one of us today. However, that was not enough for Adam and Eve. They were not willing to accept their humanity. They were not willing to worship and bow down. They were not willing to kneel before the Lord their Maker. They wanted to be like God. So when the talking snake tempted them saying, “If you will eat of the forbidden fruit, you will be like God,” they were eagerly ready and willing to eat the forbidden fruit.

You know the rest of this story. In the process of trying to become more than what they were, they lost much of what they were. Because they refused to be humble, because they, who were created, refused to depend on their Creator, because they wanted to be who they were not, rather than who they were, they were forced to leave the garden.

Simply stated, they were unwillingness to kneel. Choosing to kneel, or not to kneel, is also an important part of the Christmas story. For at Christmas wise men came from the east and knelt before Jesus. The Wise Men knelt down and paid homage to Jesus, which means that they got on their knees and bowed down until their heads touched the ground. And at Christmas shepherds also came from surrounding fields and knelt before Jesus. At Christmas the God who created the universe humbled himself and came to earth in the person of Jesus Christ. That's why Christmas is spelled h-u-m-i-l-i-t-y.

A king once asked a monk, "What is the greatest thing God has done?" The monk replied, "I can only answer that question if you are willing to exchange your fine purple robe for my tattered robe." Reluctantly, the king got off his throne, took off his crown and fine robe, and put on the monk's tattered robe. Then the monk said, "The greatest thing God has done was humble himself by exchanging the splendor of being heaven's King for the squalor of being the earth's servant." The king asked, "But why would God do that?" To which the monk replied, "He did it as an example."

This is also the message of Mary's song. Today, the song which this pregnant teenager sang is called "The Magnificat." As we listen to this magnificent music, it is easy to imagine Mary sweetly singing, accompanied perhaps by a full orchestra. But our imaginings would be wrong. Mary was not singing sweet platitudes while pregnant with her soon-to-be-born son. Mary was singing a surprising song. Maybe we have never truly listened to her words. Some of her words are, "He has scattered the proud, he has brought down the powerful from their thrones, he has lifted up the lowly, he has sent the rich away empty, he has filled the hungry with good things." As we think about Mary, as we think about this pious teenager, it is easy to forget that she was also a radical teenager. Mary was obedient, but she was also strident. She somehow knew that the child she was carrying would turn the world's values upside down. The arrogant, all striving for power and wealth, would be brought down—and the lowly would be raised up. We may, or may not, like that. Yet, that was Mary's song. That was Mary's burden. That was Mary's message. That was Mary's prediction. The future belongs to the humble. The future belongs to those who kneel.