

# Downside UP

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## **Surprised by Joy: Finding a New Church and a New Experience**

*Have you been to Jesus for the cleansing pow'r?  
Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?  
Are you fully trusting in His grace this hour?  
Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?*

Oh, my God, what is this? Melissa and I look at each other and we don't even have to speak to know what is going through each other's mind: What is going on here? What have we gotten ourselves into? Can we leave now? Are they going to drag us to the altar at the end of the service and demand that we declare ourselves reborn in Christ?

We are in the First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) of Pendleton, Oregon, and Melissa and I are definitely in sociological mode as we view the scene around us. It is 10:40 in the morning and church has started. There is a multi-instrument rock band, from harmonica to guitar, knocking out "praise" songs on a stage in front. There is a projection screen hanging down below the Cross to display the lines of the songs. Everyone is singing. It is the "Praise Band" opening to the extended church service.

Every one of our ancestors, 98% of our academic friends, most of our church friends, and who knows what high percentage of *Downside Up* readers would be going nuts. These people must be Holy Rollers. They have to be right-wing, anti-choice, so-called creationist, pro-war, pro-gun, anti-gay, evangelical, Fundamentalist, crazies who think Obama is a Muslim terrorist.

Then the pastor, who also leads the Praise Band, starts going and, heck, he sounds like a Fundie too. And the congregants. A lot of them look poor. Like poor white trash (PWT). Bad teeth, unstylish clothing, fat and/or malnourished in their childhoods if not still. The band looks as scruffy as any of them; the guy playing the harmonica looks like he just walked off his job as a car mechanic.

But the pastor isn't a Fundie. No one is going to call us to the altar here and now to declare Jesus the Only Way. And the songs aren't all (as one clergy friend put it) "happy-clappy, I-love-Jesus-Jesus-loves-me." So we stayed. We stayed; we came back the next week; we look forward to going; ever since, we have gone every Sunday we have been home. I'd expect even our non-religious friends to be saying prayers for us.

### **Time for a Change**

Somehow, Melissa and I were ready this time for something different. I don't know how we got to this point. I don't know how we got to this point at the same time without talking about it, at least without ever talking about it directly.

Certainly our readiness for change wasn't driven by the messages from our past. Our roots are solidly in the Puritan heritage of Congregationalists and Unitarians going back to 17<sup>th</sup> century America. To the extent there was evolution from those roots, it was towards what both Episcopalians and Presbyterians self-deprecatingly and humorously (but I think also proudly) claim as their "frozen-chosen" tradition. That is, people who are conservative, wary of change, undemonstrative about their beliefs, staid, and proper.

Neither did our own experience over the past 40 years provide a model for Pendleton's First Christian Church. We have been American Baptist and Congregational for short periods, Methodist for much longer, and for the past 20 years or so, Presbyterian. We have had high moments of intellectual stimulation and significant revelation. But also dead times of boredom and conflict. Our clergy leadership, both locally and in the larger organization, has always talked about lay leadership and empowering the laity but more often crushed them. The highest moments were wonderful but they rarely reflected the church as a whole and were certainly not as up-beat as First Christian.

It may be that the overall conventionality of our past experience is what itself set us on a path towards something so different from what we imagined. At one point shortly before we moved, I said to Melissa: "I don't know if I am going to be able to join a church this time. I am tired of creeds telling us exactly what we have to believe even when the pastor says we don't really have to believe them all. I am tired of the laity being roughed up all the time."

When we have talked with our closest church friends about the kind of church we would like to have, discussion has always centered in the people. It is always about diversity in population. It is about openness to, and welcoming of, differences in ideas, belief, and culture. It's small. It's not fancy. It's alive. It looks more like Jesus, his friends and his followers, male and female, meeting in homes and talking about purifying Judaism.

### **A Wildly New Church Experience**

Now comes First Christian Church of Pendleton which we decided to try knowing no more than that it had communion every Sunday (not good, we thought), was known by some as the most liberal in town (whatever that meant), and was growing (a rarity among the mainline Protestant churches we have belonged to):

The "Praise Music" turns out to be neither all happy-clappy nor morbidly sacrificial. Even "Are You Washed in the Blood of the Lamb" has another stanza that clarifies the metaphor: *Lay aside the garments that are stained with sin, and be washed in the blood of the Lamb./There's a fountain flowing for the soul unclean;/Oh, be washed in the blood of the Lamb!* As Jesus would have it, the music is also God-centered as in "You Alone," "Awesome is the Lord," and the traditional "Holy, Holy, Holy" tuned up for a rock band.

For all the folksy style of what we think of as Fundamentalist, the pastor gets across a decidedly social gospel message: The sharing of goods in common as the basis of community in the early church and still a model for us. Our serious responsibility to

the homeless, up to and including taking them into our own homes (scary!). The pastor has talked about Christian heroes on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July. He has done a quite brilliantly clear sermon on the Greek word frequently translated, especially and literally (whatever that means) by the Fundamentalists, as “born again.” He carefully explained that a better understanding is “born from above [in the Spirit]” or “born anew.” No lightning bolt must strike us to become a faithful Christian.

As the place of the American flag in God’s house has long been a bone of contention with me, I was startled to realize that First Christian Church displays no flag of any kind, much less parades it down the aisle on Memorial Day, the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, and Veterans Day.

On Memorial Day, we remembered all those in the church who had died during the previous year, not just Veterans – and tolled a bell for each. At the 4<sup>th</sup> of July service, we sang from the hymnal, “This Is My Song” whose first verse says: *This is my song, Oh God of all the nations./A song of peace for lands afar and mine./This is my home, the country where my heart is;/Here are my hopes, my dreams, my sacred shrine./But other hearts in other lands are beating./With hopes and dreams as true and high as mine.*

On Mother’s Day, we celebrated and gave a flower to all women in the church.

### **An Open, Laity-Centered Church**

The entire worship service exudes the laity. They do the Call to Worship, the Opening Prayer, the Invitation to Stewardship, the Dedication of the Offering, Communion, and the Scripture Reading. The pastor does only the Welcome, the Prayer, the Sermon, and the Benediction.

I have never been part of a more diverse church. First Christian is not racially diverse, though some American Indian blood does flow; it is seriously diverse by class and income. Large-scale wheat farmers are a lot richer than their political image so the wealth here is not, in fact, so different from St. Augustine’s Memorial Presbyterian. But the presence of real poor people is very different. There are actually people offering praise for the fact that they have just qualified for HUD subsidized housing. (They lost it one month later as a result of budget cuts.) And the diversity extends beyond money to age. I have rarely seen so many teenagers every Sunday involved so often in every – and I mean every – lay aspect of the service. It is a church of multi-generational families also rare in our experience.

Communion is the biggest of deals as it symbolizes all Christians’ remembrance of Jesus and his sharing of his last meal with his followers. In the Presbyterian and many other Protestant as well as the Catholic Churches, Communion is a rite which the clergy must first bless or sanctify. At First Christian Church, the laity does it all: the Invitation to the Lord’s Supper, the Communion Prayer, the preparation of the “elements” (bread and grape juice (a whole other history there)), and their distribution to each person in the congregation. The pastor receives the bread and grape juice from the lay servers but does not bless them and has no other participation.

Memorial Presbyterian Church struggled over who would be “welcome” or “invited to the [Communion] table,” as if the most important thing was that we exclude non-believers and lately whether we specifically welcomed homosexuals. First Christian Church says nothing at all out-loud about who is welcome. Nothing. The bulletin simply says, “All who have faith in Jesus Christ are welcome to receive communion.”

You, the individual person, decides. No *a priore* test. Just as Jesus invited tax collectors and sinners to hear his message. Imagine not worrying about the church falling apart if the wrong person took communion – indeed, leaving open the possibility that a person of little faith might be transformed by the act itself.

### **A First-Century Christian**

Over the past decade or so, Melissa and I have been moving steadily towards a vision of the church which I call a First-Century vision. At least it is a Christianity before the 4<sup>th</sup> century when the Roman Empire endorsed it, institutionalized it, degraded the place of women in it, and turned it into what has often been an instrument of oppression. Not unlike the oppression Jesus found in that same Empire and in the Temple hierarchy of his day.

Ours is a different vision of the church and the world: Equality of all people in the eyes of God. Acceptance of all people, even sinners. Diversity of interpretation and faithful understanding. Men and women. Jew and Gentile. All who would follow Jesus gathering together in the name of God to hear and proclaim the Word.

It was the Roman Catholic Church’s corruption and sin against which Martin Luther rebelled in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, opening the floodgates of Protestant schismaticism. The Puritans, and even more so their successors as Congregationalists and Unitarians, represent further efforts at a return to early simplicity, equality, openness, and self-governance. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) broke off from the Presbyterians to the same end.

We know that First Christian Church of Pendleton will have its own problems, conflicts, and deficiencies, but our attraction to First Christian Church is about a lot more than polity and doctrine. The same joy and enthusiasm that strikes alarm bells in my brain and wrenching in my gut is also what gets us excited about the unexpected possibilities of both joy and intellect, enthusiasm and discipleship, faith and scholarship, worship and education. We are amazed that we have found this place, in this time. So we keep coming back.

**Ronald Woodbury** is the writer, publisher, editor, and general flunkey for all of *Downside Up*. While publication benefits from the editorial advice of one of his daughters, a friend, and occasional other pre-publication readers, they will, for their own privacy and sanity, remain anonymous.

Woodbury has B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. degrees in history, economics, and international affairs from Amherst College and Columbia University. In addition to many professional articles, he has published a column, also called “Downside Up,” in the Lacey, WA, *Leader*. After a 36-year career as a teacher and administrator at six different colleges and universities, he retired with his wife to St. Augustine, FL and has recently moved to Pendleton, OR. He has two daughters, one a physician and one an anthropologist/fiction writer, and six grandchildren.

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