

The message given by Rev. Dr. Tom Zoelzer on Sunday, August 23, 2009 based on Psalm 84.

A Building is only ½ the Story

Rev. Edward Hammett lives in Hendersonville, NC. Rev. Hammett's ministry is being a certified professional coach that coaches congregations to help them be the best church they can be in the name of Jesus Christ.

I met Rev. Hammett or Eddie as he likes to call himself a few years ago in Portland, OR when he led a seminar entitled, "Reaching People under 40 While Keeping People over 60." Eddie began the seminar by telling the story of his grandmother. He loved his grandmother, especially the family tradition of going to his grandmother's home for fried chicken after Sunday services.

His grandmother belonged to a Sunday morning women's Bible study group that met in a big room in the church. There was a time that over 60 women belonged to this group. But over the years, ill health and death had diminished the group. Counting his grandmother the group was down to eight women. But they still met in this big room that they had decorated and furnished over the years. One of the group's traditions was to make needlepoint pillows that fit over the backs of chairs with the name of the member of the Bible study needle pointed on each pillow. Whenever a member of the group died or resigned from the group, their pillow was framed and mounted on the wall of the room. There were now quite a few frames on the wall.

But the congregation was growing! The various ministries of the church were reaching a wide variety of people in that town and families

with children were starting to come. The nursery room for the children during worship was far away from the sanctuary and could no longer hold all the children. One day the pastor asked Eddie, who had now joined the staff as student pastor while he was in college, if he would go down to the women in the Bible study and asked them if they would consider moving to a smaller room in the church. The room they were in was the perfect spot for a new childcare area and the church was willing to redecorate the new room.

Well, you can imagine the reaction of the women. When Eddie and his family arrived at his grandmother's that day, she met them on the porch and told them that there would be no fried chicken that day. She was too upset to cook. That began weeks of telephone calls, rumors, angry meetings, protests, and strained relations in Eddie's family.

Finally, Eddie couldn't take it anymore. He made an appointment with his grandmother, and he came over for tea one afternoon. He took time to listen to his grandmother. He learned about the history and importance of that room and how the women in the group felt like they were being cast aside by the church. But Eddie also had a chance to talk. He talked about the new life in the congregation and about how a new generation needed to hear the gospel but they needed to know their children were safe and close by and how he didn't mean to upset his grandmother and the ladies. Grandmother told Eddie that she was hurt about what the pastor was asking but that she would think over what he said.

The next Sunday, grandmother sat in her chair in the big room with the other ladies, looked around and said, "Girls, I want our church to live." Upon which she picked up her chair with her embroidered pillow and walked out of the room to the new room. The other women of the group looked at each other for a moment, picked up their chairs and did the same.

Well, good morning everyone! It is good to see you! How are you? As many of you know, I was away for 2 weeks on vacation. My wife and I went to the west coast and had a wonderful time. But I am glad to be back. I came back to the office last Monday and was glad to be back in my ministry and back with you.

Before I left, I was planning today's service, and I discovered that Psalm 84 was the suggested psalm for today. When I read it, I immediately thought of this room. Psalm 84 is a song written about the temple that King Solomon built in Jerusalem over 900 years before the birth of Jesus. That temple stood for over 400 years as a symbol of faith and stability for the people of Israel until it was burnt to the ground in 587 BCE by the Babylonians. Part of the old Babylonian empire is current day Iraq.

Apparently, the temple that Solomon built was quite stunning. I Kings 8 reports how King Solomon, the priests, and the people brought the arch of the covenant – that sacred relic from Moses into the temple and how the presence of God filled that sacred place. Psalm 84 would have been said a chant that pilgrims would have recited as they walked along in pilgrimage to the temple in Jerusalem.

On a pilgrimage, the leader would chant:

- ¹ How lovely is your dwelling place,
O LORD of hosts!

And the crowd would exclaim:

- ² My soul longs, indeed it faints
for the courts of the LORD;
my heart and my flesh sing for joy
to the living God.

The leader would continue:

- ³ Even the sparrow finds a home,
and the swallow a nest for herself,
where she may lay her young,
at your altars, O LORD of hosts,
my King and my God.

And the people would respond:

- ⁴ Happy are those who live in your house,
ever singing your praise.

And on and on the chat would go.

Temples and churches are built to inspire. So this is why I thought about this room when I read Psalm 84. Both spaces are designed to cause us to look up and imagine the beauty and majesty that God has in mind for us. Sometimes, people wonder why it is of value to come to a worship space – It causes us to look up and be inspired about how we could be, should be. That's the power of this sacred space, and you have done such an exceptional job about creating something inspiring.

But one of the things that I also sense about this congregation is that you understand that the building is only ½ the story. You understand that it takes inspiring programs and ministries to complete the circle of what a church is about. I have observed congregations that put a great deal of

time and energy into a magnificent facility, but they skimp on funds for quality ministries and people to resource them. You seem to understand that you need both. I complement you on that!

I hope you are aware about how unique you are when it comes to your size. In the Protestant church world, 80% of Protestant churches worship less people than you. Now that's not necessarily bad, but your size gives you a unique opportunity for ministry. You can do things that small congregations can not.

Alice Mann, a long time researcher for the Alban Institute has concluded that only churches that average 240 people or more in worship are in the best position for numerical growth. The reason is that they can provide the variety and qualities of ministries and programs that meets the spiritual interests and needs of a wide variety of people.

You have passed that threshold. The question is - do you have the vision to go to the next level. I think you do. It just takes faith, courage, and commitment.

Edward Hammett, my seminar presenter, who went on to write a book about how to reach those under 40 while keeping those over 60 talks about doing things like:

- building on strengths rather than weaknesses
- finding and following your focus (like your core values)
- retooling staffing and leadership core for spiritual growth
- Re-inventing the organization

- Creating parallel structures so that people with different interests and in different age groups are growing in their faith and discipleship

He also talks about:

- empowering lay leadership teams
- moving from institutional care to valuing personal call
- helping congregations understand the shifts happening in society so that we stay relevant
- creating networks for lifelong learning, and
- operating from a mission prospective

Many of these things you are doing. Some are growing edges for you. But the point is that just as our sanctuary causes us to look up and have vision, the people of the congregation needs vision to hear God's call, to invite, to disciple, to serve and to be an ever growing, ever expanding mission station of Jesus Christ.

It is all about providing opportunities for communion and connection to God. The purpose of temples, sanctuaries, programs, and ministries is to promote and spark that connection.

At the seminar I attended in Portland, Rev. Hammett also told the story of his paternal grandfather who attended another church in a different town. This grandfather was a long time deacon in his congregation. He was proud of the fact that he was the one who always said "no" at official meetings when it came to trying new things, renovating facilities, or giving permission for people pursue an interest. Rev. Hammett reported that one of his sad duties in his

ministry was to be invited to preach the final sermon at that congregation before it closed. He told the story of his grandparents to talk about the struggle every congregation has about how to stay current and how difficult it is these days to meet the religious interests of different generations.

It is always about fostering communion and connection to God. Buildings, programs, ministries are tools to enhance and inspire this connection.

You will notice that at the end of worship today, we are going to sing "Joy to the World." The reason is because of a member at one of the congregations I have served. In my ministry, I like to occasionally conduct a "hymn-sing" during worship where members are able to call out a song in the hymnal and we sing a verse or 2 of all requests. This is often called "stump the organist" Sunday. But I have been fortunate in most churches to have an organist that is up to the task. Vonda tells me that she is willing.

Well, in one congregation, every time we did a hymn sing, the same person would request "Joy to the World". It didn't matter what time of the year it was. We always sang 2 verses of "Joy to the World." Finally, I ask the person one time about this. Her comment was, "Worship should be joyful, and every time I think about Jesus coming into the world to be my Savior, it makes me glad. So what better way to celebrate by singing 'Joy to the world, the Lord has come!'"

Joy to the World, the Lord has come! This room inspires and proclaims that good news! Once inspired, we are invited to look up and serve a gracious God through Christ – “let every heart prepare him room!” Amen.