**Looking Backward, Moving Forward**

Growing Through Faith is a history of the first fifty years of Guilford Park Presbyterian Church. As I thought about my message today, I recalled that this had been written in 1997 to commemorate the milestone. It tells the story of the founding of our church up to its 50th anniversary. Looking back at the people who founded this church may help inspire us as we face an uncertain future. I quote from the text:

“Under a large oak tree with sweeping branches men, women, and children came to worship, pray, and sing together. There was no building, no pews, no pulpit at this pastoral setting carpeted with red clay. They sat in chairs brought from their homes with their cars parked nearby in case of rain.”

“A desire to worship God brought these people to the corner of Fairfield and Fernwood Drive.”

Think back to this spring, does that sound familiar? Do you remember how you felt when we worshiped together in that same field for the first time in over a year?

It goes on, “On January 13, 1948, 61 members of the “Fairfield-Kirkwood Chapel” as it then was known, petitioned to become an organized church. Twelve days later they voted unanimously to name the church Guilford Park Presbyterian Church, in part because of its proximity to the Guilford Courthouse Park.”

The founders came back from World War II and assembly lines to settle on unpaved roads in Kirkwood, north to Battleground Park, in what was then Northwest Greensboro. There was no church in this area. With the help of the Orange Presbytery, Buffalo Presbyterian Church, and the business community, land was purchased and funds raised for a chapel.

“Though there was not even a building when the first members met in the shade of the oaks now a half-century ago, they were already a church. With care and concern for each other, they planned to build a new community of faith.

The spirit of those early years still seems to flow through the church corridors. It is evident in love and respect, willingness to listen, and loving compassion. There is a genuine search for consensus on controversial topics. Gifts within the members are recognized and used in ways as various as teaching and maintenance, cooking and planning, visitation, and office work.”

“Guilford Park’s bricks may seem more solid than the intangible gifts of love and compassion from the Holy Spirit. In reality, these spiritual gifts are what have guided and sustained Guilford Park through all the years. By God’s good grace, they are part of its heritage.”

The history goes on to tell the story of faith, ingenuity, giving, and sacrifice as the church went from an open field to a wooden chapel, a sanctuary, an educational building, and a fellowship hall. We grew from 61 to over 680 members in 1963.

Mary and I joined Guilford Park in January, 1986. We had 3 boys under 4. Guilford Park was and is literally around the corner from our home. Our first visit was on the Sunday a fund drive called Venture in Faith concluded. This was an ambitious project. The goal was to raise $585,000 to make a number of needed repairs and create the youth lounge from a dark, dank, and unused basement. Nearly $700,000 was raised in pledges. The atmosphere that day was joyous and the excitement was palpable. Don Lannon, our pastor preached “The Miracle on Fernwood Street”. The sanctuary was packed because we only had one service. We never looked at another church.

At that time there was a wonderful mix of families with young children and older couples whose children had grown. Mary and I later became middle school youth advisors with other parents with 20 active youth including our sons and their sons and daughters. The church had about 600 members. That number fluctuated up and down for about 20 years.

We were blessed with excellent pastors and associate pastors. Some of you had the pleasure of hearing David Sutton preach over Labor Day weekend. When David and Finley were called to another church, our interim pastor was Gavin Meek. Gavin often began his sermons by saying that he had a message of comfort for those whose lives were challenged and challenge for those who were comfortable. My message today is one of hope and reconciliation for a church facing great challenges.

Over time, as in all mainstream churches, we aged. Fewer young families joined, leaving older couples whose children had grown. Many of the founding members died. Over the space of the last 14 years, we had several interim pastors. Two called pastors came and left, one in a matter of 9 months, and 18 months ago, after 8 years, Jeff Paschal. We now number 360 members. Over the past 4 years we have drifted apart.

The biggest rift came from an atmosphere that was fueled by social media and words said in this church. We became less tolerant of opinions that we did not share. The messages from outside the church and sometimes inside it interfered with and damaged relationships within our congregation. The messages were often blunt, hurtful, and divisive. Jeff’s abrupt departure through resignation without explanation was upsetting to some. We were divided and adrift.

About the time Jeff left, COVID arrived creating barriers to our coming together to worship, enjoy fellowship and heal at a time when we needed it the most.

I love this church. I missed being in this sanctuary. It is my home. This was built in 1956 by the gifts of its 325 members and many other generous Presbyterians. It is a deceptively simple design of brick and wood. But take a closer look and you will see the wood carvings on the pulpit, the lectern, the walls of the chancel, on the communion table, and at the edge of the pews, white oak carvings lining the main aisle. These were all hand carved by members of this church, many as the sanctuary was being built. In 1966 the organ was built in Germany, dissembled and rebuilt and repeatedly refurbished by members of the church.

I love the people who have been my church family and friends as I have grown older. My children grew to adulthood here and two worship here with their spouses and my grandchildren. I love watching other youth grow from infants to adults as if they were my own. I love singing in the choir. I love hearing the YES choir sing. I love that we have reached into our community in many ways to help those in need. I love how we care for each other when illness or age overtakes us. I love that we are viewed as a friendly and welcoming church.

Think about the things that draw you to this church and this congregation.

So here we are with a big decision to make. We are so fortunate to have David Cagle as our interim and a group of thoughtful people who are our Vision Planning Team. Where do we go from here? I want this church to rekindle its spirit and relationships at a time of COVID when life is difficult for all who gather here. I am under no illusion that we will be that church we visited in 1986. I hope that we can come together for the good of this church and all of the people who love it

In the survey that over half of us took, three issues stood out:

1. Grow spiritually and numerically.
2. Be a diverse and inclusive congregation.
3. Foster unity in the congregation.

We can achieve these goals only by working together. We need everyone in the congregation to come together with their unique gifts, just as our founders. We need to make progress with all three issues before we call a pastor.

Unity is the biggest challenge we face. With it we can accomplish the goals of

growth in spirituality, numbers, diversity and inclusion. How do we achieve unity?

Paul in First Corinthians Chapter 1 verse 10 asked the Church at Corinth to be

“united in the same mind and same judgement”. He went on to clarify that they

needed unity in the spirit of God, that “we might understand the gifts bestowed

on us by God”. I think this means spiritual unity.

Unity does not mean uniformity. Presbyterians have always been diverse in their

backgrounds and life experiences. Most of the time we found ways to disagree

without being disagreeable.

In Matthew Chapter 7: verses 1-3 Christ told his followers to “judge not less you

be judged and to be aware of and remove the log in your eye before attempting

to remove the speck in your brother’s eye”. Spiritual unity will help us regain the

trust and faith in each other and that spirit and God will help us discern the way

forward. We have to be willing to listen to each other to gain insight and

understanding. We will find common ground and learn to appreciate the

viewpoints of others.

Many of you know that I serve on the Plan Ahead Team which began when we

had to close the sanctuary to worship in March, 2020. I will be happy if no one in

our congregation contracts COVID as a result of an activity associated with the

Church. I will be happier when we can safely gather all together as we used to do

to worship and enjoy fellowship.

This has not been easy, but we have safely faced the challenges of COVID

together which allowed us to worship in our sanctuary. We now come together

inside and outside the church and enjoy fellowship, committees, Circle groups,

Sunday school, youth movie nights. It isn’t normal yet, but we are more together now than we have been any time since March, 2020.

Paul’s letter to the Galatians Chapter 5 Verse 22 said the “fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and

self-control”. We need to heed Paul’s words and be those Christians for each

other, for our community, and the world.

I want this church to survive and thrive. I believe that is possible. I intend to

be part of that process.

If we listen to each other; if we seek to reach out to each other with love, tolerance, humility and friendship, then we will heal our congregation, we will be unified in the Holy Spirit. Then all things are possible.

The people who founded this church nearly 75 years ago created a gift that is

priceless. As important as this Sanctuary, Educational Building, and Fellowship

Hall, more important was their spiritual gift of faith, love, compassion, and

generosity. Their willingness to accomplish what needed to be done by working

together in the name of our Lord is their legacy and their challenge to us today. If

we rise to the occasion, as they did, our 75th anniversary February 15, 2023 will be

a true celebration and a tribute to their faith and vision. Amen

Dr. Bill Hickling

Laity Sunday, October 10, 2021