

## Their Hearts in Their Work

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When a European oil company first started drilling in the North Sea, workers were told never to jump off of the platform; not even to escape a fire. It was thought the impact with the frigid water would bring certain death due to shock.

When a serious fire struck one of the platforms, six workers jumped into the icy water, and were the only survivors. Asked why they jumped despite clear policy to the contrary, the workers all said: "Because the platform was on fire."

Mainline Protestant churches in North America are platforms on fire;<sup>1</sup> and many are jumping rather than be burned. Let me repeat something I've said several times: when I say things like this I'm not talking about one congregation; I'm talking about the entire North American manifestation of "Church." You decide to what extent this congregation fits the pattern; but, regardless of the fit, what I'm describing is the challenge the North American church—and each of its congregations—faces in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

You know, we've been playing "What's wrong with the church?" for forty years—and it's not done anybody any good. For two reasons: (1) there's been too much griping about it and not enough willingness to do anything about it! (2) We've been dealing with symptoms, and not causes.

In the years of my retirement it has become my passion to do something about it. And I have discovered that I am not alone in that passion. In last few years a new movement has emerged – a movement that talks, not about "What's *wrong* with the church?" but rather, "How can we more effectively lead the church into God's future?" This opening story comes from one of those who share my passion to transform the church. He writes...

"Mainline Protestant churches in North America are platforms on fire; and many are jumping rather than be burned." Those who remain aboard struggle to keep the gears meshed and the drill turning. They are driven by a vision."

Actually, it's not so much a vision as a memory. They remember full parking lots and packed sanctuaries and full choir lofts and large, active youth groups; and those memories of better times have become pretty much the only vision being proclaimed by mainline North American churches. Tragically, that vision has suffered the attrition and *embellishment* to which memories always seem vulnerable. Still, it's what keeps us going, and it's better than no vision at all.

"Where there is no vision, the people perish." But, as precious as vision is, no clearly articulated vision has united the church in at least two or three generations; consequently, the memories that have functioned as vision have become very private: each person remembering through the framework of his/her own private

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<sup>1</sup> Robert W. Fisher, "Grow others to do what you are doing". <http://www.ltsp.edu/news/2004-2005/0506/foss.html>.

experience and perception. So, any shared vision remains unstated and unclear, more assumption or opinion than informed understanding. Yet it is on the basis of these private, unstated assumptions and opinions that we attempt to be the church. What's lacking is a consensus vision that unites us in faith and ministry.

The church today is like a football team that never practices. At game time many of the players show up out of shape. They pull out an old game plan from some previous season and take the field. "We all know how to play football. We know the plays"—and they do. "We don't need all that practice and all those huddles. They make the game too long, and we're busy people. Let's just go play the game, so we can go home."

And so the team comes to the line of scrimmage, each player with his own idea of what play needs to be run and what will happen when (if) the ball is snapped.

"Let's just go play the game—get it over with, so we can go home."

There is a great misconception about the work of the church: ...if I get involved they'll expect me to be up there every time the door's open ... meetings three nights a week ...burden; bother; bore; drudgery... "Let's get it over with, so we can go home."

Now, I haven't heard that since I've been in this congregation. Is it different here? Our text this morning presents a different vision:

**NEHEMIAH 3:1-31**—We won't read this account of the rebuilding, section by section, naming those who were in charge of each section. Then we pick up the story in...

<p><b>NEHEMIAH 4:1-6 (NRSV)</b> <i>Now when Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, he was angry and greatly enraged, and he mocked the Jews. <sup>2</sup> e said in the presence of his associates and of the army of Samaria, "What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they restore things? Will they sacrifice? Will they finish it in a day? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish—and burned ones at that?" <sup>3</sup>Tobiah the Ammonite was beside him, and he said,</i></p>	<p><i>"That stone wall they are building—any fox going up on it would break it down!" <sup>4</sup>Hear, O our God, for we are despised; turn their taunt back on their own heads, and give them over as plunder in a land of captivity. <sup>5</sup> o not cover their guilt, and do not let their sin be blotted out from your sight; for they have hurled insults in the face of the builders. <sup>6</sup>So we rebuilt the wall, and all the wall was joined together to half its height; for the people had a mind to work.</i></p>
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One English version says "*for the people put their hearts in their work.*"

The secret of that last verse is in chapter three—the one we *didn't* read. The work was shared by all; therefore, nobody was unfairly burdened; the work went quickly and efficiently and the workers found joy in their work.

Now move ahead 500 years: Paul, writing to the church in Ephesus on the western coast of what is now Turkey.

<p><b>EPHESIANS 4:11-16 (NLT)</b> <i>Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and</i></p>	<p><i>teachers. <sup>12</sup>Their responsibility is to equip God's people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ. <sup>13</sup>This will continue</i></p>
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*until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ. <sup>14</sup>Then we will no longer be immature like children. We won't be tossed and blown about by every wind of new teaching. We will not be influenced when people try to trick us with lies so clever they sound like the truth. <sup>15</sup>Instead, we will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church. <sup>16</sup>He makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love.*

It begins when each Christian finds and accepts his/her gift of service. If you attend one of the Spiritual Gifts worships we'll offer in the near future, you'll hear this statement: "When we understand what it means to be 'Gifted to Serve'...

"...we begin to feel value in how we serve God;

"...we have confidence when we use what God has given us because we are comfortable in that role and know we can do it well;

"...we begin to understand that while God calls us to do ministry, God also provides the "how to" for us to do these ministries (like a father giving his child money so the child can buy a Father's Day present for him);

"...we experience a sense of fulfillment and joy when we participate and serve according to our gifts, because we know we are doing what God intends us to be doing and serving where God intends us to be serving;

"...our motivation to serve increases;

"...we are empowered to serve where God has chosen for us to serve; and therefore...

"...we begin to understand that we don't have to do everything;

"...we have permission to say "No" to some things because we know others are gifted to do them."

How does that sound?

I don't recall where I heard it; but there's a phrase that's been stuck in my mind—like, sometimes, when we get a tune in our head and can't get rid of it. It's a phrase; but it's accompanied by a mental picture. The church is my mother; and she's old and crippled. I remember Momma when she was younger—light on her feet. She was a dancer—graceful and beautiful. But now she sits all day in her chair, drawing her shawl tighter around her neck, remembering brighter days.

But in my dreams I still see her: dancing, whirling, up on her toes...

My mother, The Church. What I wouldn't give to see Momma dance again.

*Conclusion: The work of the church goes smoothly and productively when God's people work side-by-side and put their hearts into their work. Then 'Momma can dance again!'*