

“Well-Loved Church Set to Explode”

Acts 4:5-12; 1 John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18

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April 21, 2024

From the Pulpit

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A baptismal meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Easter 4, April 21, 2024, dedicated to Benton Myles Ahrens on this First Communion weekend, to Adaline (Ada) Jane Swartz on her baptismal day, to Jill, Sheri, Bob, Shawn, Bradford, Lucy, David, Madeline (Jack and Lilly), Beverly and always to the glory of God!

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*Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock, and our salvation.
Amen.*

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Bosak’s Dairy on the westside of Cleveland was an anchor of our neighborhood. On Fulton Road, near Blessed Sacrament, Loddie and Marilyn Bosak and their family served people in retail and wholesale distribution of Dairy Products for generations. Plus, they were two of my favorite neighbors. One day, I went in Bosaks to pick up a gallon of milk and was greeted by a huge poster which read in all caps – WELL-LOVED CHURCH SET TO EXPLODE!

On the poster was picture was of the St. Catherine’s Church at East 93rd and Catherine Avenue on Cleveland’s East Side. The small print went on to say how the Catholic Diocese of Cleveland was going to blow up the church with an implosion in a few weeks. There was a call for a protest. All the baptized

would surround the church and stop the demolition. We did and the well-loved church did not explode. Although it closed finally and was demolished around 2009 when the bishop closed 50 parishes in a couple of years – mostly ethnic communities whose congregations had dwindled and for whom no priests could and would be provided.

I have never forgotten that poster “well-loved church set to explode” and its multiple meanings for us all the time. As fragile and hopeful organisms – any church can explode for positive and negative reasons. On the negative side, some churches implode internally. These fragile organisms can turn on themselves like a cancer spreading that can’t seem to be stopped. It takes specialists to bring an inoculation to stop the spread. And like with any cancer, it sometimes takes more radical action to remove the elements that poison the system.

Also on the negative side of explosive decline, others simply dwindle down to nothing – like St. Catherines and others. I have seen the effects of dwindling decline. Since I have been here, seven of our 11 downtown churches have closed and sold their buildings. In two weeks, I will return to my old neighborhood in Cleveland to close the first church I served there – Bethany UCC which is closing after 133 years of life in the city.

Our mother church – Central Presbyterian – located at 132 S. Third which is the fourth oldest building in Columbus closed 13 years ago. It was purchased by CAPA and has sat dormant as the downtown growth happened all around it. Soon it will become a bar, restaurant, and dance/music venue. As the developers have said, “just like a church, it will be a new community in the center of the city.” Really? Just like a church? I don’t think so...not JUST like a church.

On the positive side, a well-loved church exploding can also look like the early First Church of Acts – exploding in exponential growth. In Acts 1, there are 11 disciples, who add Mathias – after the death by suicide for Judas – plus 120 believers. On Pentecost they add 3000 – which is only 50 days after the

resurrection. We see frightened and bewildered disciples become fearless and bold witnesses. By Acts 4, the 3,000 grow to 5,000 when Peter speaks to the Sanhedrin. They take their story and their care for others to the streets, and they continue to explode. In fact, Acts tells us that “each day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47). In every chapter of Acts, we see that the church is growing. But it really took off when the gospel jumped the cultural barrier, as Peter and then Paul began telling non-Jews, and the Christian faith began to spread far beyond Jerusalem and Judea. The best estimates are that by 350 AD, 33 million of the 60 million in the Western world were followers of Jesus. Talk about an exploding church!

One of the lessons of the Book of Acts is that the church is a living, dynamic and hope-filled organism and all organisms are wired for growth. The explosive growth of the early church is testimony to the nature of the church to grow. Growth is inbred in the very genes of the church and is critical, and thus every part of the church’s life and mission is meant to lead to growth. Even when it reaches maturity, growth still occurs. For example, the human body in adulthood, completely replaces itself with new cells every seven years, renewing it for the work ahead. If growth is inherent in the life of the body of Christ, then renewal is central to that growth as the body reaches adulthood.

Essential to renewal is that the church must reclaim its purpose to grow. God’s hope and dream is that every church would grow because its ministry and mission is reaching people everywhere with the Gospel of love.

A well-loved church exploding can also look like First Congregational Church of Columbus. During this millennium, our membership has more than doubled. Today as we add 11 men, women and two beautiful girls to our family of faith, we grow some more. For those of you sitting on the fence – jump in – the water is warm! We can’t wait for you to join with us on our journey of faith!

But, church growth can never just be in numbers. It is always about people. It is about individual persons who find grace and love and a home in our

fellowship. It is about spirit as well. The Holy Spirit must be moving in the growth of any church – any where and any time.

And here in Columbus it is about reaching our city. With 30,000 people in our neighborhood growing every day and over a million in the Columbus area – also growing every day – we need to reach people all around us and be the church with the city in our heart in the heart of the city.

We have all the ingredients of a well-loved church set to explode. But, ingredients don't make a great meal. A great cook makes a great meal with the ingredients at hand. So, how will we blend, music, justice, ministry, mission to the city and the world, love, care and community into a great meal for the spiritually hungry and physically hungry of our neighborhood and this moment?

You need to look at yourself in the mirror of faith and ask – how will you step up? How will you give to the future of this church – with my limited time, my tremendous talents, and my treasure? If you are sitting on a little piece of contentment in service, ask how you can do more. Churches don't grow when people just show up and expect other people to do the work. Churches grow when all hands are on deck, and everyone finds a place – as in the book of Nehemiah – where the people rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem in 52 days! Each one of you here and all who listen to this and read this – you are the people who will explode this well-loved church. So – how and where will you join the building of the church at 444 East Broad St?

And what is your vision for this church? What are your dreams for this church? Growth starts in the dreams and visions of people – also a lesson learned from our First Church in Acts. If your dream and vision is small, you will achieve only small things – if anything at all. That will show over time – when down the road we become an annex of the Art Museum or classroom space for CCAD – or bulldozed for new High Rise High Rent condominium.

Or the opposite could happen, and you take what you have right now and double it again – like you have for the past 25 years – with people of all ages,

racess, nationalities, orientations, and beliefs together under the one tent we call First Church. Growth is in our DNA – so don't deny who you are.

How big is your vision for the future? Will you be tinkers with little things or will you be transformers in the heart of Columbus. We didn't get this far by tinkering. First Church has been a transformational agent in this city. Don't be myopic as you step into the future. Use a wide-angle lens – so you have a wide field of vision.

And the explosion that could happen will not happen alone. No truly great church grows in isolation. There is a power in our coming together with others to face the challenges we know in our city in our times.

Last Monday night I saw this happen. As we gathered for the BREAD Rally at Congregation Tifereth Israel at 1354 East Broad Street – close to 500 people, under the leadership of our own co-President, Rev. Joanna Samuelson, charted a courageous vision for tackling the low income housing crisis in Columbus. It is a vision to take on predatory landlords. It would require a rental registry which would mean that folks would have to have names, numbers and addresses of the owners before rentals can happen. There would need to be certificates of occupancy to guarantee that the building is following building codes and other laws. There would also be a Tenant Advocate who would identify all rental property owners to ensure rental registry is up-to-date and to allow for early warning systems on problem properties. These checks and balances are already in place in Akron, Youngstown, Athens, Sandusky and Bowling Green. I invite you all to join us one month from today – Tuesday, May 21st at 6:40pm SHARP as we meet at Celeste Center at the Ohio – State Fairgrounds – to come up with solutions to address the growing crisis in our region for fair housing places and prices. All means All! No excuses this year! Let's all join with our Jewish and Christian Brothers and Sisters in 42 congregations across Central Ohio to do justice for all in Columbus Ohio! BREAD! Rises!

I believe there is a Well-Loved Church Set to Explode! I believe it is First Congregational UCC, Columbus, Ohio. With God's help, you can make this happen – together! Amen.