

**Happy Birthday, Calvary: 69 Years and Growing!**  
**Deuteronomy 10:12-22 and Philippians 1:1-6, 9-11**  
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It seems as though there is no end to the bad news: half of all churches in the United States did not add any new members in the last two years. 83% of mainline churches have plateaued or are declining numerically. Every year 4000 churches are closing their doors, while only 1000 new churches are started. 70% of US adults were members of a church or synagogue in 1992. By 2014 that percentage had dropped to 59%--and it continues to spiral downward. For those of us who care about the Kingdom of God and about the church having an ongoing impact in our lives and in our world, these statistics are depressing. At this rate, we'll all be choking on our birthday cake after the service.

I bring up these depressing numbers because I had an epiphany not too long ago. It occurred, actually, in our Session meeting last month. We were talking, as we do each month, about some of the problems we are facing—which air conditioners are and are not working, the laborious permitting process in Fairfax County, financial issues, and a whole host of other challenges. As I listened to the conversation, I realized that too often churches get in the habit of talking about all that's wrong, about all that we lack, about all that isn't the way it used to be—and we forget to celebrate the remarkable things that God is doing in our midst every day. As Gene so eloquently reminded us last week, God is sometimes hidden in plain sight, and it is the worshiping community that is the primary context where we catch glimpses of God. It seemed to me, as I sat in that Session meeting, that Calvary's 69<sup>th</sup> birthday was the perfect time for us to reflect on the ways God is showing up in our midst and the many ways God is blessing us.

Since I started with the dour statistics about how badly the church universal is doing, let me put into context what is happening here at Calvary. In the past 5 years, 75 new people have become part of our faith family in one way or another. Of those 75, 50 are adults who officially joined Calvary. Some of them, like Stuart, Amber, and Robyn, Chris and family, and a whole host of others, were here for only a time, as their careers or family life moved them into the area, and then moved them out again, but while they were here, they made valuable and lasting contributions to the life of our church. When you take into account those who have moved and those we have lost by death, we have still shown a net growth of

about 33% over the past 5 years which puts us in that 17% minority that is growing rather than plateauing or declining.

I realize there is a danger of focusing too much of numbers. But, sometimes we don't focus on them enough—or at least, not on the right ones. Acts 16:5 says that, “So the churches were strengthened in the faith and increased in numbers daily.” For the church, our job #1 is to grow as Christians, to be strengthened in our faith, but when we do that growth is a natural outcome. It's a sign that God is present and at work. The mistake we make is in thinking that **we** are the reason for the growth. We're not. We can plant seeds, we can water, i.e., we can invite, we can tell, we can share and serve, but God alone causes growth, so when we celebrate the gift of our growing church, we are celebrating God's graciousness and generosity to us. Can I get an “Amen” to that?!

One of the fun parts of my job is having the opportunity to meet the new folks that come through our doors, and there is one question I always try to ask: what is it that drew you to this church? There are four answers that I hear over and over. The first one is **diversity**. We are a group of people who love the fact that we are not all the same: that we come from different places, have different life experiences and different perspectives, are in different ages and stages of life. Collectively, we count our diversity as a strength. We look at the world around us and witness the fact that in a lot of instances, people have forgotten to be civil and respectful to those who are not like them. There is mistrust and suspicion, if not outright hatred, towards those who are “other.” At Calvary, we see it differently. We respect and love each other, even if we don't see eye to eye on everything. We are grateful to learn from one another. Of course, we are going to have some misunderstandings along the way; that's inevitable. But, we understand that God has begun a good work in us, is chipping away at our blind spots and biases, is giving us insights into other ways to see or do things, is renewing and reforming us. God uses our diversity, I believe, to model something essential about the Kingdom of God to the world: that in getting to know each other, worshiping and working together, united by our common love of God and our desire to grow as followers of Jesus Christ, we demonstrate what God intends for us—to love one another, not because we're all alike, but because God first loved us. We don't always get it right, but God is doing a good work in us, and it's important to celebrate that.

And that brings me to the second reason folks name for coming to Calvary, and that is **hospitality**. Hospitality goes beyond friendliness, though we are a very friendly bunch. Hospitality is about opening up our lives to know one another.

Rev. Stan Ott, the director of the Acts 16:5 Initiative, says that friendliness says, “hi, how are you?” whereas hospitality says, “Would you come into my life?” Let’s face it, human nature being what it is, our tendency is to get comfortable, to take care of ourselves and let someone else do the hard work of welcoming the stranger, welcoming the “other.” But, as followers of Jesus Christ, our call is to continually reach out, to open our hearts and lives to welcome all people to the Body of Christ. Thankfully, hospitality is a good work God has started and is continuing in us, and we want to celebrate that. Amen? Amen.

The third characteristic of our church that speaks to people is our **mission** to our community. We have now completed three Be the Kingdom Sundays. We have learned a lot each time and we continue to “work out the kinks.” But, I want you to know that our original vision for Be the Kingdom was never that it would stop with completing these worthwhile projects for our neighbors a couple of times a year. My vision has, from the beginning, been that Be the Kingdom could expand to become an ecumenical event in which we labor together with other churches, and we made a small step towards that vision when Torre Fuerte partnered with us a couple of weeks ago. And, we have also hoped that longer-term relationships within our community would develop through what we do on Be the Kingdom Sundays. That, too, is beginning to bear fruit, as we explore how we might serve Good Shepherd affordable housing and their clients more often than twice a year. I believe we are still just scratching the surface of what God might do as we become the visible hands and feet of Christ in our neighborhood.

Next week we will complete our 28<sup>th</sup> year of Eagles’ Wings. There is no way to estimate the real impact we have had on the hundreds of young students who have come through our doors to receive one-on-one tutoring on Wednesday nights. Eagles’ Wings is an investment in the lives of children and their families. We have long valued and celebrated the relationship between Calvary and Mt. Eagle Elementary and beginning in the fall, we will be embarking on a new program to deepen our relationship with the school, it’s students and teachers and our neighborhood. For 10 weeks in the fall and another 10 weeks in the spring Calvary’s kitchen will host a program called “Cooking Around the World,” which is a cooking program designed specifically for underserved populations of children to teach nutrition, hands-on cooking skills, build confidence in the kitchen and give children tools to live longer, healthier lives, and influence their families to do the same.

We are so excited about this new initiative because it accomplishes several desires of this church: first, it will be an energetic, exhilarating use of our kitchen.

Three years ago when we raised the \$50,000 to refurbish our derelict 50-year old kitchen, part of the vision for that renovation was that we'd have opportunities to share that new space in ways that would make a difference in our community. Cooking Around the World does that. On Wednesday afternoons from 3:45-5:45, 20 students from Mt. Eagle, students who will likely be different from those participating in the tutoring program, will be working in our kitchen under the guidance of a trained chef. Five adult volunteers will rotate in and out each week to supervise and assist. Jean Consolla, the principal at Mt. Eagle believes teachers, parents, and community volunteers will be jumping at the chance to be part of this, but if you'd like to be a volunteer for one of the weeks, we'd love to have you. Heidi Christensen is serving as the coordinator for the cooking program and she can't wait to talk to you. In addition, you'll soon be seeing a list of kitchen tools and equipment that we need in order to properly outfit the kitchen for the program, so even if you're unable to volunteer, everyone can have a part in this new ministry to our neighborhood.

Before I leave the subject of mission, I want to mention a couple of ways in which God may well be hiding in plain sight here at Calvary. Every May the Presbyterian Women commemorate their birthday by collecting a special offering. The 2017 Birthday Offering will be used to support three specific projects: a rural health clinic development initiative in Cuba; a safe haven for domestic violence victims in South Carolina; and the Navajo Water Project which installs water systems for households without running water in New Mexico. Our budget includes a \$1000 gift to the PW Birthday Offering, so when you give your weekly offering to the church, part of that specifically supports our hurting neighbors in Cuba, South Carolina and New Mexico.

In addition, every three years a small group of Presbyterian Women travel internationally as part of a global exchange program. This year the group will go to Indonesia to support Christian sisters in faith as well as learn how Christians live respectfully in a country where they comprise only about 10% of the population. Our own Barbara Allen was selected to be the PW representative to Indonesia from the Mid-Atlantic synod. We included 10% of the money she needs to go as our ambassador, with the rest of the money being raised at the synod level with support from various PW chapters. God has reignited a fire in us to live out our faith in service. It's another good work that has been started and is worth celebrating. Amen?

Finally, there's **worship**. I could give an entire sermon just on worship, but for now, let me list briefly some of the many reasons we can and should celebrate

the work God is doing in us. First, we are blessed out of our socks by musicians who share their gifts so selflessly. I want to publicly thank Judy, Jane, Linda and David for what they do week in, week out. The choir, the instrumentalists, SSR, and individuals who share their passions for the building up of the body—friends, it's a good, good work that God has started in us, and it's something to celebrate.

We are thrilled that Gene Kendall officially became Calvary's Parish Associate this spring. A parish associate is not the same as an assistant minister—it is a voluntary position that gives us all peace of mind that when I am away, we have a minister to turn to. And, I have the added blessing of having a colleague whom I trust to talk to and bounce ideas off of. I might have to “super-size” my piece of cake, just in thanksgiving for Gene's commitment to our church.

Lastly, let me mention the organ and the capital campaign. At the rate the permitting process is going with Fairfax County, we may have to rename this the “eternal organ” by the time we get the pipes in. And, unfortunately, all the delays have required us to spend not only more time but also more money to get additional work done by the electrician, electrical engineer, the architect, etc, etc. Here's the important thing: I want you to remember that we celebrate our 69<sup>th</sup> birthday today because of the hundreds of saints who have come before us. They didn't know us. They didn't know our names. A lot of us weren't even born yet when a group of faithful Christians planted the church we now call home. But they believed that God had a plan for this church, that God had a purpose for Calvary being on this corner. Everything we do in this building—the kitchen, the new air conditioner, the electrical upgrades, the new organ—this is not about bricks and mortar and wires and pipes. It's about the life of a worshiping congregation. It's about us believing that we have been called to make sure there's another 69 years of mission and ministry that takes place here, about us practicing our faith to love God, to walk in God's ways, to serve the Lord with all our hearts—and that if we keep on doing that, as God's Spirit enables us to—that like Israel about to cross into the Promised Land, like our ancestors in the faith—God will glorify himself by making of this church something extraordinary, not for our sakes but for the sake of the Kingdom of God. That's the vision we're living in to. So, let's celebrate! Happy Birthday, Calvary!