

Gazing Toward Heaven
Presbytery Worship ~ January 21, 2006
Acts 1:6-11
Dr. Jeff H. McCrory Jr.

Synopsis:

The charge to the gathered disciples could not be clearer. The Holy Spirit of Jesus is to come upon the community in order to witness to the ends of the earth. The goal is witness; the means is community. Somehow we have reversed the two, making the goal community.

I.

Bottle Rockets on 4th of July:

- Tennessee River
- Watching them go up until we couldn't see them anymore
- We stood there, looking and looking, gazing toward heaven until finally we went home.

The gathered disciples heard Jesus, watched him go up into the sky, and stood there looking, gazing up toward heaven until two men in dazzling white outfits challenged them to go home. They did go home, to pray and await the coming of the Holy Spirit.

II.

The Book of Acts reports that all started well. The Holy Spirit comes, the community goes out to witness through and to Jesus. Peter and John show up at the temple; Stephen is martyred while praying to Jesus; Saul, now Paul, and Barnabus start off to Derbe and Lystra; then Paul and Silas travel to Thessalonica, to Philippi, to Corinth; Finally Paul reaches the ends of the earth, Rome. The community follows the charge of Jesus: "When the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you will be my witnesses to the ends of the earth." They get it.

But then something happened. People began to settle down, to build church buildings, where they used to meet in homes; they hired clergy, musicians, and caregivers. And somehow in the process of preparing the community for witness, the community began to prepare the community for, well

community. Whereas before, church was the means to witness, church became the goal.

Now here we are in the PCUSA talking about the *missional church*, a redundancy, and how the church in the West can regain its Kingdom mandate to witness.

III.

That's where we are at Geneva. Just like the disciples, we began well. The Holy Spirit fell upon Ed Caldwell and a group of people in 1963 to start a mission. They didn't have a building. They held one worship service in Leisure World (now Laguna Woods Village) reaching out to seniors and one in a bank building reaching out to families. The community served the goal of witness in Laguna Hills, Orange County, and beyond. Through witness we became what we are today:

- Intergenerational
- Worship and music centered
- Bible based
- Hands-on mission and caring

But then something happened. About 1984 the church began a slow decline. Three years ago I came to Geneva and began to fuel our genetic code. We know who we are. We've read *Good to Great*.

- We do intergenerational well.
 - Leisure World is there and Aliso Viejo is there.
- We do worship well:
 - choir, pipe organ, bells, band
- We care for each other.
 - Our highest score on the NCD is Loving Relationships.
- We have a highly trained theological staff.
- We give over 10% of our budget to missions.

But after three years, we are still on a gradual decline. Our lowest NCD score not surprisingly is Need Oriented Evangelism. This past fall I came to the session and said, "I don't know what else to do. I am doing church about as well as I can do church." It was then that we began to realize that we have fallen into the same ditch as the church in the West. We unwittingly have

made church our goal and let witness fall to the wayside. The community now serves the community instead of witness through and to Jesus.

IV.

Maybe I'm telling your story, or at least the story of the PCUSA. The church by and large now serves the church. Church has become the goal rather than the means to witness to Jesus. How do we get out of this tailspin and regain our missional mandate?

That's where we are as Geneva Presbyterian Church. We're spending the year under the theme "Called into Mission." We've signed up to work with Church Resources Ministries for the next year and a half to refocus Geneva upon its missional mandate. Embarrassingly the process starts with me. I have to confess I have been trained to do church rather than to do witness. I am not satisfied; we are not satisfied with doing church anymore, with gazing up toward heaven. We want the Holy Spirit fall upon us.

As we try to reclaim our missional identity we are watching and praying that the Holy Spirit will fall here once again. I would suggest that we in this Presbytery do the same.