

View from a Bench

The privilege of celebrating 25 years of working in your midst has led me down various paths of recollection and reflection in recent weeks. These years represent 43% of my own life spent as your musician and, since I was four years old when Trinity was founded, nearly the same portion of the life of this congregation that has both sheltered and challenged me. I am certain that, at its best, the leadership you have experienced from me is a reflection of the profound ways that you as a people have formed and led me. In addition to your passion for hearing the gospel proclaimed in spoken word and in music, your appreciation for worship as we experience it in such a glorious space - coupled with your energy in embracing each other in the many other aspects of your lives - makes Trinity simply the richest place I can envision for a musician to work.

As congregations go, Trinity, at 58 years, is still quite young. And I have come to realize that versions of Trinity's history differ among those who have lived it, just as the Trinity of the present day is different for each person who participates in its current active life. Because I have witnessed so much of the life of the congregation from a perch that has the perspective of a bit of altitude (the organ bench), I would like to offer some observations from where I sit that might give you food for thought as Trinity approaches her 60th birthday.

If you are old enough to remember Trinity at the time I came here (or before), it is obvious that you are no longer young! If you are 65-ish or older now, in 1984 you were part of a group of middle aged members whose vigor sustained the life of an active and activist congregation. The truth is, I came to Trinity expecting my time here to be a "time out" from full-time music ministry to last perhaps two years, until the baby I was expecting was no longer an infant. But the dynamic congregation you were shaping by the energy of your commitment to it proved irresistible to me, and now 25 years have somehow melted into 25!

In 1984, there was little need for attention to the needs of those with physical limitations from age or disability. Most adults descended the stairs to the Undercroft to attend one of several adult classes on Sunday mornings. Many of them also took turns caring for infants and young children in the large rooms (now conference and meeting rooms) on the ground floor of the Administration Building. My infant son usually was returned to me after worship bearing faint evidence of having been held and loved by a variety of elegantly perfumed women, who were known to me only by name and scent as they gave me the gift of peace of mind while cementing his sense of secure place in a loving church family. I will always think of them not just as dear friends - but as angels!

If you are an adult of middle age or younger who was a child or youth in the Trinity family in 1984, you were the lucky beneficiary of that same commitment as it was invested in your nurture. You have your own fond memories of those now-older adults who then were your Sunday School teachers, your square-dance partners at Montreat, your youth advisors, and the parents of your church friends. You had your turn receiving get-well cards, notes of congratulations for your accomplishments, enthusiastic and *convincing* comments on how wonderful you looked when you came home from college, advice and best wishes for career choices and marriage plans, and gifts of welcome to your own newborn children. If you have arrived at Trinity more recently than 1984, no matter what your age, I hope your arrival was a step into a church family that offered you some of the blessings I have been describing. You are vital to the Trinity I now see when I gaze down from my bench on our congregation at worship.

While it is not realistic for me to hope for another 25 years on my bench, I cherish fervent hopes that the vitality that held me at Trinity until now will continue to hold its members to each other. It would be not only unrealistic but dishonest of me to uphold in my memory only the joyous moments of my time here. In fact, there have been several long moments in our history that were characterized by grave difficulties: disagreement that escalated to distrust, anxiety that spiraled downward into malaise. In its mysterious way, the Holy Spirit enabled reorientation and restoration at critical moments. Bonds of friendship and affection in Christ held strong and our church family remained intact and thrived.

The view from my bench now gives me much confidence and hopeful expectation for the future. But it does take in some realities that are different from those of 1984. The most obvious difference is one of demographics. Without citing statistics, I can tell you from personal observation and experience that we are now a congregation that must be deliberate about maintaining unity. This is not because we disagree, but because we are comprised of two populations with very different needs and expectations.

Those vital and committed middle-agers of the 1980's have suffered a loss of physical vigor because of aging. Some whose entire experience has been in giving support to others have found themselves rather abruptly in need of receiving the support of others. Our leadership must find ways of enabling them to continue to enjoy the richness of the congregation they gave so much to build, while offering spiritual and practical support for the hard decisions they and their families will eventually have to make. At the same time, our youngest members and their parents experience life in ways that are more exciting, but also more demanding and sometimes more threatening than our older members can

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fathom. As families, they need the presence and prayerful support of their elders as they navigate life in this uncertain world. The vows we made at the baptisms of our children have taken on an urgency that we cannot ignore!

Over the years, various facts of life, sometimes external to the church, have resulted in the loss of members who would now be like those middle-aged dynamos I once knew. Our church population shows a significant lack of persons who are 45-60 years of age. The absence of large numbers in this segment of our congregation means that we must be imaginative in finding alternative ways to supply, for our youngest *and* oldest members, the kind of caring support that was simply taken for granted 25 years ago.

While we all have taken the same vows of membership (with promises to uphold Trinity with our time, talent, and gifts), the ways we live out those vows will be shaped - as they always have been - by the varying circumstances of our lives. Patterns of participation that have been taken for granted through several generations of most congregations now are changing as culture and technology give new shapes to the challenges and priorities of work and family life. As a church family, we must frame our common life in ways that recognize the vital leadership role our younger members play as we move into the future so that we might encourage and support their participation. For members my age and older, passing the torch of leadership to a new generation must embody the gracious trust that the essential values that have shaped Trinity all along will continue to do so.

I believe with all my heart that the exciting community that embraced me when I came here 25 years ago is not the accomplishment of any individual or group, but is the manifestation of a congregation's spirit nourished by the Holy Spirit. That Spirit will be a fountain of creativity, courage, and energy that will enable Trinity to continue to be a rich and inviting place for all who enter into its life.

Celebrating 25 years — Jane Arant

