

Excerpts from the sermon preached at the Festival of Faith worship service - August 24, 2008 by Pastor Knight W. Wells . . .

So let me ask you a question this morning . . . Are we the church? We're not exactly in a church building this morning! We're in the Bloomington Center for the Performing Arts! But the question is . . . are we the church? We all know that Biblically and theologically and experientially – the church is “the body of Christ.” And that body is not confined to a building. “The body of Christ” – you and I – are gathered together here in this place, but we are just as much the church as when we are gathered together in the building at the corner of Emerson and Towanda! But here's an even more important question . . . Are we **a church alive**?

I prefer to think of our congregation as “A Church Alive” because the alternative is not particularly attractive . . . I have no interest in being senior pastor of “A Dead Church.” And I'd have to say that I've seen a few of those over my years of ministry. When I worked for the Bishop's Office in Nebraska as an assistant, one of my jobs was to work with congregations in the areas of stewardship and evangelism. Those two areas of ministry are probably the best indicators of how alive or how dead a congregation is!

A loved it when our communications people, Vickie and Sandi, along with Shari and others on the Facility Planning Leadership Team, came up with that theme . . . **A Church Alive!** On the one hand, the idea sounds simplistic! It sounds obvious! We certainly are a congregation of “living people.” But on the basis of experience, I can say that there are a number of the other kinds of congregations out there that are just the opposite. They may be going through the motions of religion and faith, but they are not A Church Alive!

It reminds me of an office executive who was interviewing a young woman for an administrative assistant position. He wanted to find out a little about her personality and her values, so he asked one of those open-ended interview questions that would provide some interest and insight. And he asked her,

“If you could have a conversation with anyone, alive or dead, who would it be?”
And she stopped for a moment and then said, *“I'd have to say the living one.”*

No one wants to be part of a dying organization! Who wants to be part of a dying church? We are and we want to continue to be **“A Church Alive!”** One of the things that can energize a congregation, that can show its vitality and strength, that can invigorate the very spirit of a church . . . is a building project. You say . . . How can that be! Building projects are just about raising money. Building projects in congregations are faith-stretchers. They are moments in time when congregations have the opportunity to move ahead in mission or to be burdened with dissension. Building projects in congregations typically begin with visions and dreams and then they move to floorplans, designs and drawings. But in the process of developing these ideas and visions, congregations quickly come to realize that it's not just brick and mortar that is involved. It's not just a building that is being built or remodeled or changed. What is at stake, is the spirit of the people who choose to become a part of this mission enterprise. A building project is not just about raising money or remodeling or building a structure. A building project, is faith-based and faith-inspired. It is God's spirit moving over the people. It is God's spirit dwelling in and encouraging and motivating people to become involved in something greater than themselves . . . for the sake of mission and ministry in the future.

This gathering today . . . this annual Festival of Faith worship is also about unity. It's about who we are and what we are about. But it's about being **“A Church Alive.”**

- Dead churches don't launch into initiatives to build and expand ministry.
- Dead churches don't look into the future and see the spirit of God leading and directing them in new ways.
- Dead churches don't take the steps of faith to push them beyond their comfort zone, in order to grow their ministry.

- Dead and dying churches continue to do the same thing they've always done, but gradually they do less and less of it . . .and they begin to “go through the motions of church” but soon their heart and spirit are far away!
- Dead churches never believe they can do anything – there's not enough money . . there's not enough support . . . there's not enough time . . . the economy is bad . .

But what are the signs of “A *Church Alive!*”

- *Diversity of thought, lively discussion, positive results in the end that everyone can support.*
- *Excitement about the future*
- *Unity in purpose and mission, as we come together to move forward on a project that will impact our future together.*
- *Involving new people in the mission who may not have been previously involved.*
- *Enlivened worship and spirit among the people.*
- *Anticipation for the prospects that lie ahead.*
- *Intense commitment , not just with words, but with our money, to say that this project is one that God is calling us to do!*

I wish our whole congregation could have been at Vacation Bible School a few weeks ago! What an exciting and inspirational week with our children, as they learned about the awesome power of Jesus in their lives. I wish the whole congregation could have experienced Workcamp up in Wheaton, MN this year . . . experienced the spiritual growth in the lives of young people and adults, who focused on a ministry that was about the needs of others. I wish our whole congregation could have experienced the excitement and enthusiasm of a new church in Auypud, Ecuador, made possible by gifts and support from St. John's and its members, but also another expression of “A *Church Alive.*” The point is that all of these experiences are part of what it means to be “A *Church Alive.*” And “A *Church Alive*” is always about mission within as well as mission outside the church building . . . because “A *Church Alive*” is ultimately about people committed to the mission of Jesus Christ. I have heard some of these ministry stories from children and young people as wells as adults . . . where their lives have been changed, where their minds have been transformed, where their spirit has been renewed. And “A *Church Alive*” is about changed lives, growing faith, and renewed spirit.

In our lesson from Romans 12, the Apostle Paul takes a position that is based on a simple but profound principle of faith. In this lesson, Paul elevates **quality above power**. He elevates **humility above personal recognition**. He begins by telling his fellow Christians, that they are a special people of God and they should not let the world squeeze them into its mold. Instead, Paul says that they are to be transformed by the renewal of their minds so that they can demonstrate what is the good and perfect will of God! Then Paul says, “*For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.*”

So what this means for our congregation is simply this.

- It's not about our own personal ideas or opinions of what our building is going to look like, as important and convincing as they may be to you.
- It's not about doing what other congregations are doing to their facilities.
- It's not about doing something that meets only the present needs, but does not look to the long-term needs of our future.

God has given St. John's Lutheran Church a unique ministry position, unlike any other congregation in this community. God has provided us with a tremendous tradition of faith, with a wonderful ministry staff,

outstanding leadership, and committed members whose focus is on mission and ministry . . .so that this congregation will continue to be **“A Church Alive.”** And now God is calling us to do this new thing. But now is also the time when unity of purpose is absolutely critical! Now is the time when personal agendas must be set aside, when personal opinions must be placed on the back burner, when we come together as one. As St. Paul says, *“So we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.”* We are at the point now where this process has moved us into a **kairos moment** . . . a moment in time when our personal decision to support or not to support **“A Church Alive”** initiative is at hand.

I’ve had a few people, thankfully not very many, who have said to me, *“I don’t support this project.”* And they’ve said, *“We need a gym . . . we need to tear it all down and start over . . . we need to build a new worship space first . . . we need to relocate the church . . . or whatever.”* The only thing I can say is this . . . if you believe that God’s spirit is a part of this process . . . if you believe that God is leading this congregation in everything that we do . . . if you believe and trust that God has provided that kind of leadership and direction that is needed at this time, then you have only one choice . . . for the sake of unity . . . and that is to support what this congregation is about . . . and to be **“A Church Alive.”** And to say, *“I still support the church, but I don’t support this project,”* is like a member of a football team who says, *“I support the defense, but I don’t agree with the offensive game plan.”* When that happens, you don’t have a team any more. You have divisions and separations. And how much chance do you think that a team divided, has in winning the football game!

To not allow God’s spirit to transform you and to renew your mind is to say that *“I know what is best for this congregation.”* But if we trust God’s spirit and if we trust the leadership that God has called to this initiative, and if we trust the process, then there is only one appropriate response. St. Paul says it so well . . . Being used as God’s instrument involves a transformation of the mind. Like a butterfly that emerges from a cocoon, the mind changes from being centered on itself and the world, to a mind that is centered on Christ and His mission. Finally, Paul says . . . in this process . . . *“do not think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but think with sober judgment, each according to the measure that God has assigned.”* This is **proper thinking about ourselves**. Whereas personal opinions are valid and they need to be expressed, that time is passed. Now, for the sake of unity, our call is the same as the one Paul gave to the church at Rome . . . be transformed by the renewing of your minds and get your thinking straight. Amen.