

New Feast, New Worship Experience

BY RENEE BROWN HARMON

With many thanks to Bobby and Susan Riggs, Hal and Anne Cain, Bill and Hanna Schock, and Melissa and Bentley Patrick for reminiscing and sharing your memories.

TWENTY YEARS AGO, on World Communion Sunday, 2002, New Feast was launched as a praise and worship service at First Church. The idea was to offer a contemporary worship service for four consecutive Sundays and see if anyone showed up. The first service was at 9:00am in the newly remodeled multi-purpose room, now The Loft space. A banner proclaiming “New Feast” greeted the curious worshipers as they entered the room. Set in the far left corner upon entering, four movable altar rails and an altar table draped with fabric from around the world were arranged in front of the band. Folding metal chairs were arrayed in semi-circular rows, spreading outwards. A large photo poster of the earth hung above the band and fabric streamers of yellow, rust, and green festooned the walls. Children processed the communion elements to the altar table as the band sang the opening song.



So just how did an historic downtown church with deeply rooted traditions come to start a contemporary worship service?

It all started when the indomitable Ethel Gibson charged Hal Cain with creating a new praise and worship service in the early summer of 2002. There had been many informal conversations about this possibility for the prior three or four years but the ministerial staff at the time, Reverend David Wallace and Reverend Lonna Lynn Euler Higgs, had no experience with contemporary worship and felt ill equipped to take on this project, but supported the idea in theory. Hal initially declined Ethel's charge, stating that we had no one at First Church with musical experience in contemporary worship who was willing to take on that task.



Enter Bobby Riggs. Bobby was in the same Metro-Methodism class with Hal and during a field trip to Discovery United Methodist that summer, Hal learned that Bobby had played worship music and that his family was looking for a new church. When Hal asked Bobby if he would like to help create a brand new worship service and to lead the band, Bobby accepted readily.

Ethel Gibson asked Hal again, and this time he said, "Yes!"



The next step was to gather a group of church members who had been having those informal conversations about wanting the opportunity to experience worship in a different fashion. Beginning in late July 2002 and meeting weekly in Hal and Anne Cain's living room, the group brainstormed about the overall

idea—what did we want the experience to be? Who were we aiming to serve? And more to the point, why were we doing this?

Personally, I had been yearning for a different way to experience worship ever since I attended a Walk to Emmaus retreat in 1997. There, I was free to sing and dance and express myself with abandon, something that just didn't happen in the beautifully crafted traditional worship services at First Church of the time. When I voiced my desire for a worship opportunity that incorporated some of these aspects, I was met with puzzlement by the ministerial staff. To be honest, I really didn't know what I wanted or felt the need of, but I knew it was out there. I had tasted it at Emmaus. And I wanted my young children to experience worship instead of placing them in the nursery or shushing them throughout the formal service in the sanctuary.

Different members of this ad hoc planning committee expressed a desire to create something new, to invest themselves in something that would excite them and keep them engaged in the work of the church. Others craved the creativity, freedom, and flexibility of crafting a new form of worship. Others in the core planning group voiced a desire to have a worship space amenable to children and youth and to even have them serve in some capacity. We felt that this new service would help to grow the membership of the church, especially wishing to attract young couples. There was a desire to offer communion more often, as it was actually not occurring in the traditional service with any regularity at the time. These worship planning meetings themselves felt as if they were an embodiment of the Holy Spirit and we were eager to share that with the larger community.

Eventually, the group made decisions on a multitude of items that were to be necessary in order to pull this off—the set-up, the sound system, the projector, coffee and refreshments, the band, the music, the speaker, and the order of worship. With money from the Louise Branscomb fund, essential equipment was purchased.

The entire planning and execution were done by laity. The ministers were supportive of our efforts and once the first service was deemed a success, Reverend Wallace asked, “Why aren’t you guys planning on doing this every week?” When the results of a survey given to worshipers after the planned four weeks indicated only very positive responses, First Church had a weekly contemporary worship service.

So what made our contemporary worship service different from the traditional worship service? At first glance, most people would say that it was the music. The music that was initially offered was all fairly tame and rather eclectic—praise and worship choruses of the time, gospel, blues, and contemporary Christian rock. Because we wanted to include anyone who was interested, that first Sunday’s band, and all subsequent bands until 2008, were comprised of many members. It was essentially a small choir with guitars, drums, and keyboard.





Another aspect of this fledgling worship service was that the preaching/teaching was offered by lay speakers as well as clergy. The planning team asked the different speakers to present, and even developed the theme and chose the scripture. Hal Cain, a newly minted certified lay speaker, was the speaker on that very first World Communion Sunday. Clergy preached about once a month for the first eight months.

The third aspect of what we wanted this new offering to have was experiential worship. With the freedom to craft the entire service, the team wanted to engage all of the senses, as much as possible. Using the treasure trove of crosses, candles, and cloths in our worship closet, beautifully crafted altar settings supported the week's theme, and backdrops became part of the set-up. We would periodically change the layout of the room, even holding two services on the roof of the Education Building. Videos and drama were incorporated. Communion was served relatively frequently, when the scripture and sermon topic dictated. Often, an activity that physically engaged the congregation was offered.

The energy that the planning team had for the new service spilled into the service itself.

When Reverend Billy Curtis was appointed in 2003, he was given charge of New Feast, preached weekly, and continued to have planning sessions with the laity. He was also instrumental in bringing Sara Groves and Bebo Norman to the church for concerts. Reverend Nancy Hornsby, appointed in 2006, moved the service to 11:00am. Blake Hobbs was hired in 2008 as the worship leader and the band format changed to the leaner group we have now. Reverend Griff Pemberton's contribution during his short tenure at First Church was to rename the service The Loft in 2009.

When we look back, it is with a sense of pride that this group of lay leaders decided to take on the challenge of creating something fresh and different. We relished the freedom and creativity that came in crafting this worship experience, completely from scratch. We may have been amateurs but our whole hearts and souls went into molding New Feast. And to see where the contemporary service is now, as The Loft, is exhilarating. The space is filled today with the young couples we hoped would come, but also many, many new worshipers who have entered First Church through this new doorway, desiring an informal, relaxed, engaging, and accepting space in which to encounter the holy.

We did that!

STORIES FROM
15 
YEARS