

## ***Personal Testimony by David Dik and Jill Simmons***

### ***Consecration Sunday - November 15, 2009***

**David:** When Jill and I were first approached about doing something like we're about to do this morning, I have to admit that a great deal of hesitancy and procrastination set in. What could we possibly say that would meaningfully contribute to what has been said already? We've both grown up in the church and never really gave much thought to opting out of that tradition. To that point, we were both raised as Methodists, which I've come to learn has certain entertaining stereotypes much akin to any other subdivision of the protestant faith.

In my professional life, I work in a business where I am asking for money all the time. I ask from individuals, from foundations, from trusts – wherever I can match the mission of my chosen field to the desires and interests of a possible funder, I am there with a proposal in hand and a smile on my face.

In my arena of the not for profit world, there are three things one needs to do to successfully move the ball down the field and obtain the goal; know what a person can give, ask that person to give it, and provide something in reward for that gift. Naming opportunities, access to tickets, a special place to sit, a once in a lifetime memory, premium benefits, and the like – these are the tools used to secure the ask. Elaborate systems are in place to track this giving, research is conducted to know how you are doing financially, databases record names of spouses and children, favorite meals, what you like to drink, allergies, seating preferences, etc.

In the church, this strategy is turned on end. We are simply asked to do what you can and to pray about that decision. We are asked to consider the ministry and programs around us and to support the continuation of those vital elements through our gifts.

**Jill:** David and I moved to Glen Ridge over 10 years ago from Brooklyn. We were looking for a small community with good schools where our children could grow up safe and welcomed. We hoped that we might find a church where we would be comfortable, and looked forward to exploring the community in search of a good fit. We came with a history, David and I had just left our 10 year position at Old First Reformed church in Park Slope where we shared the position of organist/choir director. As you might guess, we had certain requirements that had to be met in regards to the music. We made our first visit to GRCC before we moved here (scoping out the joint, so to speak) and were thrilled to hear David Messineo at the organ. We decided this was certainly the church for us.

Church has been an integral part of my life for as long as I can remember. My most vivid memories involve two aspects of the church service: the music and the offering. I'll begin with the first and let you wonder for a while about the second.

In my childhood church, Sunday School followed the church service, so all the children were present in each service. We were Methodists from the Midwest, so everyone sang all the hymns, regardless of age or perceived ability. The Methodist hymnal to this day still includes John Wesley's directions for singing, written in 1761 - it instructs us to "sing lustily and with good courage" as well as to "sing all and see that you join with the congregation as frequently as you can. If it is a cross to you, take it up, and you will find it a blessing". I still remember the Sunday when I discovered how the verses work, skipping from line to line for verse one and so forth. I don't know what I was doing before that -

perhaps just yodeling along. I felt this knew knowledge allowed me to join the club. We had four choirs, 4<sup>th</sup> grade through adult, which alternated Sundays. The choir on for the week got to sit in the choir loft up front. Very exciting, especially when you are 10! To this day, the community of North Branch, which dates in my family to the mid 1850's, does not have a stop light.

We also had 4 organists in our congregation who each played one Sunday/month. One of the biggest gifts I was given in my years of musical training was to be given one of those Sundays when I was 12 years old. The congregation was very forgiving and allowed me to learn on the job. I continued to play regularly through high school, including weddings and funerals.

The second aspect of church of which I have vivid memories is the offering. My father was the church treasurer, so it was his job to count and record the offering each week. That means it came home with us and was spread out on the kitchen table. Sunday dinner was a light lunch, not the traditional Midwestern spread. (as a farm family, we had that every other day!) Most congregants used offering envelopes and each was carefully recorded each week. The concept of tithing was tangible from my earliest memories.

**David:** Over the past few weeks we've heard and have been moved by the eloquent and heart felt presentations of congregants in this very room and tried to find a way to add to their voice, but also say something different. What I would like to talk about with you is money.

We talk about money all the time in our personal and professional lives. What to buy, what not to buy. Where to go, where not to go. Do we invest, do we wait? Which credit card, what are the best interest rates, Eat in, eat out, will it go on sale?

But boy, we do not like to talk about money in church, and the minute we do, it is usually said that all we do is talk about money.

In Christian Smith and Michael Emerson's book, *Passing the Plate: Why American Christians Don't Give Away More Money*, I've learned that statistically, most ministers feel uncomfortable talking about money and most parishioners feel uncomfortable hearing about it.

The book concludes that "*American Christians are in a state of comfortable guilt – that is, living with the awareness and culpability for not giving money more generously, but maintaining a low enough level of discomfort that it is not too disturbing or motivating enough to actually increase giving*".

We seem to frame financial issues around a lack of clarity; people must simply not understand what we, as a church, need or do. It must be that we do not know the cost to heat the church, to pay a salary, rising insurance rates and ever present maintenance issues. We develop educational solutions to address an issue that is not educational at all. What this really comes down to is the mission and ministry of the global church.

**Jill:** Everyone comes to church for a reason. For some it is the sermon that challenges or comforts them. For others it is the opportunity to reinforce the values we struggle to teach our children at home. Others may hunger for the community that a home church provides. And still others are moved, challenged, comforted, and inspired by the music. Guess which category I fall into.

Nearly all my memories of church involve music. The advent hymns, the Christmas carols, the Easter hymns. I still know the actual numbers in the Methodist hymnal for many of my favorites. We were a singing congregation - everyone had their hymnal out and joined in whether they thought of themselves as singers or not. Since Sunday School took place after church, the children all participated in the service. A great learning ground for congregational singing and sitting still during a long sermon.

Music has continued to be the thing that pulls me into the sanctuary every week. Even when I have not been singing in the choir, to join in the congregational singing on a weekly basis is renewing. I look forward to advent all year and hope my favorites will be sung. So many beautiful hymns and carols and just a short time - how can we ever sing all of them!

Our new Music Minister, Tom has breathed new life into the music of this church, and therefore into the service itself. Music acts as a worship facilitator - allowing all of us a more complete experience. Many will not notice the impact, a talented organist is subtle - understanding that music is not just the hymns, responses, and anthems. Music also creates the atmosphere and prepares us emotionally for the words spoken and the presence of God. I believe the music is a vital component of the worship experience if we are to connect with our spirits.

**David:** As an investment, even in the current economy, supporting the local community is smart. It immediately returns to us in ways that are tangible and direct. However, we are not asked to fund and support what comes back to us, we are asked to freely give without thought of our own benefit for those gifts.

Do my family and I give to this church what we should? Absolutely not. Have we tried to do more than we have before? Absolutely. Is it enough? We really don't know. Are we in complete agreement with everything the church says or does? Not by a long shot. Our pledge this morning is dependent very much on your pledge – as we thought of that number, we put our trust not just in God but in you as well. We hoped that if we did what we thought we could, you would do the same. As we thought about what we might be able to go without, we hoped that you would do the same. Yes, we have a son entering college next year, summer camp, trumpet lessons, a full house for Thanksgiving who like to eat, living with the reality of our property tax revaluation. But really, as we have all learned listening to NPR or PBS pledge drives, over a year, an extra \$1000 dollars comes out to \$19 a week. I checked this number on my calculator twice – can that really be true? 52 weeks time 19 = 1000? Actually, it is \$19.23, but I rounded down to make the dramatic point that it wasn't even \$20. In the stewardship vernacular, imagine 150 pledge units asking themselves, could we swing an extra \$19 a week? Imagine this morning our pledges exceeding our needs.

It's not for me to say if an additional \$19 a week is too much, not enough or just right. And it's certainly not for me to tell you what you should think or do. I suppose that the benefit of standing at the podium is the ability to say, to a point, what is on your mind. But it does seem sometimes that the level of giving to a church in general is ranked as the last priority in a long list of financial transactions; I don't think we're collectively asked to give to the church what we have remaining at the end of bill paying time.

**Jill:** I chose to join the chancel choir and bell choir shortly after we joined GRCC. Little did I know the gifts I would receive. The most important of those gifts was the gift of community. At a time when I was new to Glen Ridge, a full-time mom, and feeling defined by my children and their schools, GRCC's music programs offered me friendships that crossed those child imposed barriers. I made friends based on our love of music and commitment to our community church. Those friendships have continued to grow, enriching my life continually.

Our coming together every Thursday night and Sunday morning is not just a musical or social experience. It is a way to connect spiritually with ourselves and others through an important program that is an integral part of GRCC. We are coming together as members of this church offering our gifts of time and talent.

**David:** Working in the arts and in arts in education as a participant, teacher or administrator for my entire adult life, I've noticed that we tend to justify the arts for what it can do for other things. We stress the arts' ability to improve test scores, achieve higher levels of critical thinking skills, produce research that show correlations to math performance, English learning proficiency, and the notion that it may provide the competitive edge needed to get into the right college. I think the modern day church has a parallel.

We've been trying to see our support of the church by what we get out of it and what the church has to give to us - rummage sales, concerts, Sunday school, youth activities, benefits, food drives - and see these events as the worthwhile and tangible assets of our reason to come together and support this institution. These are extremely vital aspects of our work, but ancillary to the need for a church and congregation to sustain itself, grow and move forward. Reaching to my earlier analogy, Yo Yo Ma did not decide to play the cello in hopes of achieving a better cumulative score on his SAT's - he did it because of the opportunity to make music, in such a way that his life would be significantly diminished without that opportunity.

We come this morning to support this church because the institution and the act of coming together to worship indeed significantly contributes to our lives in such a way that our lives would otherwise be diminished. Yes, all the other things are vitally and critically important, but we do it because it informs and supports our meaning for coming together, not the other way around.

**Jill:** Reaching back to John Wesley and the Methodists for a moment, I would like to conclude with his final directive for singing written over 200 years ago:

*Above all sing spiritually. Have an eye to God in every word you sing. Aim at pleasing God more than yourself, or any other creature. In order to do this attend strictly to the sense of what you sing, and see that your heart is not carried away with the sound, but offered to God continually; so shall your singing be such as the Lord will approve here, and reward you when God cometh in the clouds of heaven.*

**David:** Singing is worship as is giving. And should we come to rethink our collective giving and support this morning as an act of worship rather than a mere financial agreement, John Wesley could be rephrased to say, "*Above all give spiritually. Have an eye to God in everything you give. In order to do this attend strictly to the sense of what you give, and see that your heart is not carried away with the sound, but offered to God continually; so shall your giving be such as the Lord will approve here, and reward you when God cometh in the clouds of heaven*".

On behalf of Jill and my entire family, thank you for listening to us this morning.