

WHO PUTS THE ROOF ON IN 20 YEARS?
Endowment Sunday –Communion –May 6, 2012 –Nehemiah 1: 1-10
The Church of the Covenant

According to the non-profit organization Partners for Sacred Spaces we are about to enter one of the challenging times in America for Christian churches. Our church buildings, mostly built 50, 60, 70, 80, 90, 100 years ago are about to enter a time where they are wearing out. Slate roofs last perhaps 100 years; stained glass windows need to be taken down and restored every one hundred years; pipe organs need to be extensively and expensively maintained. In one church I served to replace just the slate roof over the chapel cost \$250,000; one stained glass window at First Presbyterian Church in downtown Pittsburgh costs \$200,000 to take down, place new lead in the leaded glass windows and to restore; they have 16 major windows and a total of 257 stained and leaded glass windows; a pipe organ wears out in 80 years and requires to be retrofitted, re-leathered and extensively cleaned to the tune (small pun!) of \$25,000 to \$50,000. It's a challenging time for churches. Smaller and smaller congregations needing to provide larger and larger amounts of money in order to maintain their facilities. Is the day far off when congregations such as this one will have to make hard choices between funding its ministry and mission or maintaining its building? Do we let the roof leak or do we help Habitat for Humanity? Do we restore a stained glass window or do we have a Youth Director? Lord, help us, please. Lord, help us. According to Partners for Sacred Spaces the impending crisis has just begun to unfold and will reach its height in about 20 years. **So on this Endowment Sunday I ask the question –WHO PUTS THE ROOF ON IN 20 YEARS?**

This is compounded by another factor. If you've ever read articles or books on generational giving patterns as I have, it suggests that different generations of people like to give differently and to different things. My Father's generation likes to make a pledge and will support things like building campaigns. Baby Boomers like me like to designate our gifts, tend to give to things other than churches, but still will support things like building campaigns. Unfortunately, when you start to look at younger and younger generations these are generations who are not institutionalists, they tend not to be members of congregations though they may attend from time to time and believe in God; they may be in a small group Bible study but not in a church; they may give for causes they like but they probably do not pledge to a church; they may not see the relevance of a church; they tend not to see the value of a church building and see little reason to give financially to support to maintain them; they give to support causes and mission but not to maintain buildings, institutions and programs. In 20 years these will be the leaders in charge of the church. People who may or may not care about the beautiful 1929 sanctuary, or the sacrifice it took to build the Covenant Center, or the history of the stained glass windows, or even see the need for any type of building (Hey, let's just meet at Paneras!) will be in charge. In 20 years will that generation give and sacrifice to maintain what their forebears have built? **So on this Endowment Sunday I ask the question –WHO PUTS THE ROOF ON IN 20 YEARS?**

I don't have to be an Old Testament prophet to see what is on the horizon. At the time when all our church buildings begin to wear out there are people stepping into leadership who do not necessarily value them or understand why they have been built, or the sacrifices made over all the years. The scripture I just read from Nehemiah is of a time when the Holy City of Jerusalem has fallen into disrepair; the Temple is no more; the city walls are broken and torn down. The Holy places are emptied of the people of God; they have been hauled away by another culture into captivity, just as our culture has hauled the Church away into a secular captivity all its own. Nehemiah learns of how the buildings of God and the Holy City are neglected and broken down. It says then, *"When I heard these words I sat down and wept, and mourned for days..."* (Nehemiah 1: 4) It is how I feel when I think about church

buildings in disrepair and people who care not for the great sacrifices of the past, for a disregard for their inheritance and their birthright. I love the line in the old hymn, "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing", that is so obscure. —"*Here I raise my Ebenezer, hither by Thy help I'm come.*" I mean, what is an Ebenezer? It is a stone pile; it is stone pile that commemorates some great act of God in the lives of the people of God. God does a mighty work and the people of God raise up a great stone pile. Here I raise my great stone pile, my Ebenezer, because by this way and through God's help I have already come. A church building is an Ebenezer. It is a great stone pile commemorating the mighty acts of God in the midst of a people. It reminds us of the faith and strength and character and sacrifice of the people who have preceded us. It reminds us of the faithfulness and mercy and goodness of God who is indeed the "Fount of every blessing". All these churches are the Ebenezers, are the reminders of a nation who once loved the Lord God with all their heart, mind and strength. All these stone piles are the tangible evidence of the faith and sacrifice of the people who built them. All these church buildings are the physical evidence of a people who once loved God and a nation that once was "One Nation Under God". Beloved, disregard, discard and demean these "ebenezers" at your own spiritual peril. When they are broken down and the stones are no more they are then signs that we have disregarded not only them but the faith that built them and the Lord God whom they commemorate. They aren't "just a building" as someone once said to me; they are sacred ebenezers built by faithful people to the God they worshipped and served. **So on this Endowment Sunday I am bold to ask again —WHO PUTS THE ROOF ON IN 20 YEARS?**

If this stone pile ever became a parking lot I would weep, as Nehemiah wept. If this Ebenezer ever were transformed into condos I would weep. If this church building were ever turned into a restaurant brew pub I would weep. No, Washington and Jefferson College, you cannot have this church building as your chapel. This pile of stones has been raised up to the One, True and Living God by a people who believed with all their heart and sacrificed with all their might. Churches that have successful endowments will be able to put a roof on in 20 years. Churches that do not have successful endowments will be turned into parking lots and brew pubs and condominiums. **WHO PUTS THE ROOF ON IN 20 YEARS?????** We do. And that's why we need to remember the church in our will. Where there's a WILL there's a WAY.

But there is one thing more. The Bible is clear now that we are the "*Temple of the Holy Spirit*". We are the place where God dwells. Our heart is the throne where God lives. A Christian filled to overflow with the Spirit of the Living God; a heart filled to overflow with the Living Presence of our Lord Jesus Christ is the sanctuary of the Living God. A people filled with God raise up Ebenezers. A people filled to overflow with Jesus and grateful for what Christ has done for them raises up piles of stones to commemorate the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. In the scripture I just read from Nehemiah God declares: "*If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you...but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them...I will gather them thence and bring them to the place I have chosen, to make my name dwell there.*" (*Nehemiah 1: 8-9*) God chooses the place to bless. God chooses the place where His name dwells.

The greatest guarantor of this building being here in 20, 30, 40, 50, 100, 200, 250 years is a people who know "*They are Thy servants and Thy people, whom Thou, O Lord, hast redeemed by Thy great power and by Thy strong hand.*" (v. 10) May The Church of the Covenant always be a sign and a commemoration and an Ebenezer raised up by God's great power and by God's strong hand. **WHO PUTS THE ROOF ON IN 20 YEARS?** The Lord God Almighty does. And we do. And Amen.

*By: The Reverend D. Stuart D. Broberg, The Church of the Covenant, Washington, PA
IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU, PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!*