We understand who we are by understanding who we’ve been. Our present is informed by our past whether we understand that or not. So I want us to consider that the sum total of everything The Church of the Covenant is today may be found in the ministry over the past 60 years, from its founding as The Church of the Covenant in 1960, as the merger of Third Presbyterian Church and Second Presbyterian Church. Many years ago I preached a sermon entitled, “Where Shall We Hang Morgan Roberts?” and Morgan was the Senior Pastor of the first church I served in ministry up in Birmingham, Michigan and remains a dear friend to this day. The church had commissioned a portrait of him when he left and then was stuck with the conundrum, where shall we hang this portrait? For some it was placed in a too prominent spot; for others, it was in a too out of the way location. Ah, church world in all its glory! The one place I remember it hanging before it was moved yet again was in the little narthex area where one would greet after you preached. It was as if Morgan’s visage were hanging right behind you, staring at you over your shoulder. You had the sense that everyone who shook your hand and said “Nice sermon, Pastor” was secretly thinking to themselves, “But Morgan would have preached it better!” So Morgan’s portrait wound up behind a door in the Parlor. When I first came to The Church of the Covenant in 2008 we chose to meet in the Dining Room not the Heritage Room up on the third floor. The Heritage Room has portraits of ALL of my predecessors looking over my shoulder, both from Third Presbyterian AND Second. If you want to feel like a ministerial midget just have the best and brightest looking over your shoulder in EVERY Session Meeting!

Every church has one pastor who is the Pastor who is God’s gift to ministry. The Pastor above every other Pastor; the one to whom all other pastors shall be compared. The Rev. Dr. Bill Rusch, who came in 1954 and left in 1968, is that Pastor for The Church of the Covenant. And he deserves all that credit because indeed he was phenomenal in ministry. The Pastor who succeeds God’s gift to ministry Pastor will have an impossible time of it; they are always invidiously compared to this most gifted Pastor. I know I always do not want to succeed such a pastor in a church because you’ll be there just a couple of years and need to leave, having felt you never quite measured up not matter what you did. I had the blessing of knowing Dr. Rusch through his son Paul who is a friend from seminary.

He is one of the best preachers you could ever hear or read. He was a pulpiteer, orator, and a great writer. There is a spiritual forcefulness to his messages. You can read some of his sermons from our Archives and they are amazing. My favorite is one he preached on the Sunday of the merger of Third and Second Presbyterian Churches to form the Church of the Covenant in 1960. It is entitled, “A Church Big enough for God”. It is extraordinary and powerful, brilliant in biblical exposition and prescient in its view of the future. Do great preachers create great congregations or do great congregations create great preachers? YES! It is both/ and. You are a great preaching congregation. You expect great messages. You expect well crafted exposition. There is the powerful moment in a sermon where you all are
listening with such intensity that you could hear a pin drop and not so much as a fly buzzes in
the sanctuary. I think this identity issue of our church comes from Bill Rusch and that period of
time. Who we are today is because of who we have been.

He had a heart for mission and community involvement. He was into everything. He was the
original “energizer bunny”. There is a picture of Bill Rusch in the Observer Reporter marching
up Main Street in Washington with others including people like Lou Waller by his side. They are
marching for civil rights, likely not a universally popular matter in the early 60’s. But there was
Bill Rusch on the front line for something good in his community. Representing the church and
the Lord Jesus and the Kingdom of God. He is a great one. On my best day I wish I could be
that kind of Pastor. I keep that picture in my desk and open it up and look at it to remind me of
what pastors can be. He was about mission and the Kingdom of God. To this day, The Church
of the Covenant has a heart for mission and a desire for community involvement and may I say
in my opinion that comes from Bill Rusch and that period of time. Who we are today is because
of who we have been.

He was a pastoral Pastor; he visited and was involved in people’s lives, their joys and their
sorrows, their victories and their defeats. How could he get away with marching on Main
Street? Because people loved him and people knew he loved them. He was an amazing visitor.
Every new person who moved to Washington the existing members would target and tell him
about and he would go visit them and invite them to attend. Dr. Nat Roe, then the General
Presbyter of Washington Presbytery, told me a story of when he and his family moved to
Washington and Bill Rusch showed up and invited him to come to The Church of the Covenant.
The Roes had only one car so it was impossible for them to come as a family, so Dr. Rusch
offered to come, pick up the kids and bring them to Sunday School every Sunday. Guess which
church the family joined? There’s a reason why the church reached its highpoint under his
pastorate of 2,200 members. The size and strength of the church, that we function like a large
church still, that we have the programs and the staff to muster a ministry of a large, program
style church largely comes from Bill Rusch and that period of time. Who we are today is
because of who we have been.

we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses...” (Hebrews 12: 1) In the same way that we
are surrounded by the portraits of previous pastors in the Heritage Room, we are surrounded
by them spiritually each Sunday and every day of ministry. Its not only Bill Rusch; its each
pastor who came according to a call of God, who faithfully served and pastored and preached
the unshakable Word of God. Each one of them provided parts of our identity; who we are;
who we can become. In a very real way each Sunday when I mount the pulpit to preach the
Word of God I feel I am standing on the shoulders of giants. It is not I, but also them. It is not I,
but Christ who lives in me. And Christ who lived in them. It is why as Hebrews attests, “we may
run with perseverance the race that is set before us” (v. 1) We may run the race of ministry
with strength and power with the clear goal in sight. For the goal is our Lord and Savior, Jesus
Christ. It is He who is “the pioneer and perfecter of our faith”. We are looking to HIM! Not to
the pastors of the past. WE are looking to JESUS. He who lived in them and HE who lives in US!
Dr. Rusch in a brilliant series of statements declared what the One Church powered by the One Spirit seeking its One Lord, Jesus Christ, is to be about. He declares...

“If the church is big enough for God, we must let the church be the church and not a poor substitute for the country club. There is no substitute for saving souls, the developing of mature Christian personality and the demonstration of Christian love and service to the world...The church is not to gather its robes about it and stand aloof to human need, but rather is to reach out to those who have lost the way, to those who have been driven to their knees, to those whose lives must be changed and can be changed by the cross of Jesus Christ...We must reach out in Christian love and compassion, and gather others in, just as Jesus Christ has reached out with hands outstretched upon a cross to gather us into God's love and care.” (A Church Big Enough for God, W. Rusch, p. 4)

Hebrews goes on to demand –“Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God” (Hebrews 13: 7) Remember and harken to those leaders who proclaim the unchanging, inspired and Holy Spirit-filled, whole counsel of God, powerful, transformational and life-changing Words of Life which is exactly what the Bible is. Follow no one who will not follow Jesus. Follow no one who compromises the Word of God in Christ Jesus, the Word in the flesh or the written Word. For Pastors come and Pastors go, but Jesus Christ, as it says, “is the same yesterday and today and forever.” (v. 8) When you see Jesus in us, then follow us. When you do not see Jesus in us, do not follow us. When we proclaim the Word of God, listen to us. When we do not proclaim the Word of God do not listen to us.

I end with a quote from Dr. Rusch. He writes, “This new church has a tremendous promise for God’s future. There has been put into our hands great opportunities and great challenges. Yet it does not depend upon our size or our strength. It depends on whether or not, in everything we do and pray, we seek to be a church –BIG ENOUGH FOR GOD…”

In the name of Jesus Christ, He who is the same yesterday, today and forever, may it be always so! Amen and Amen.

By: The Reverend Dr. Stuart D. Broberg, The Church of the Covenant, Washington, Pennsylvania

IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU, PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!