

What I love about Central Baptist Church – why I joined 30 years ago last month and why I’ve stayed – is that I believe this congregation understands and lives out the Gospel – that God loves us and that we are, in turn, to love each other as Jesus exemplified. That love, experienced and shared, transforms us.

I believe we live out that love in three ways: accepting, nurturing and serving – inside and outside of our Central family.

We accept – and I don’t mean bumper sticker co-existence or politically correct tolerance. I mean at the deep core of our feelings and actions.

- This is a place where Jason Colliver can get married with a Mohawk and tennis shoes and no one is surprised or disturbed.
- This is a place where Bazz Childress, Don Waggener, Herb Campbell, John Burke, Dan Corman and Mark Johnson will not only listen to one another but love each other.
- This is a place where Renee Simpson's family could visit and be welcomed by our youth at dinner and one of our congregation ensuring they were included in worship – and when the story was told there was little or no buzz or curiosity about who the welcoming individuals were. It could have been any one of us, because that is who we are.
- This is a place where the addict, the doubter, the gay couple, the naysayer, the over confident, the poor, the rich, the successful, the zealot and the rest of the alphabet are embraced and loved.

We nurture -- we provide a safe haven for learning, asking questions without fear, testing and using our gifts -- knowing all the while the *acceptance* is holding firm.

- This is a place where the Biblical stories are learned in Children's Sunday School and are questioned in youth group forward.
- This is a place where we are taught how to live out the gospel by watching those around us and experiencing it.
- This is a place where traditional calls to ministry are supported -- how many of our folks have we encouraged to Seminary and how many have we accepted from Seminary and cared for while they found their places. Where else could Rachel Childress, David Hatch, Kathleen Malane, Brenda Bartella, Jeremy Colliver, and Karen Rector to name only a few who have been given the opportunity to find and test their voices? As Gerard shared, even our pastor could be nurtured a new form of ministry.

In the midst of the acceptance and on the foundation of our nurture, we have learned to serve -- those among our Central family and those outside of us.

- This is a place where those nurtured for traditional ministry have served in countless capacities, in countless places.
- This is a place where we work to provide those in need of the basic necessities of life: food, clothing, housing -- in our congregation, our community and around the world.
- This is a place where non-traditional calls to ministry are recognized and celebrated -- whether it be in the operating room, the court room, the class room, the conference room. What other congregation would recognize Martha Burke, David Marye, Rebecca Wallace, Don Colliver, Raleigh Kincaid, and Judy Hatch as missionaries.

- This is a place where on many Wednesday nights, including this past one, you could walk in and see waves of pink to show support for Trisha's chemo treatments.
- This is a place where, as Gerard shared, he could be across the ocean and know there was someone in the family room; where those in service to our country know their names stay constantly on our lips in prayer; where no one need sit alone in a funeral home or a hospital waiting room. Where comfort and celebration are only a text message, e-mail, phone call or arm's reach away.

Wednesday night at the table Cynthia Campbell asked me what I was going to talk about this morning. I responded, "What I love about Central Baptist Church." Amber Inscore Essick chimed in, very astutely and accurately, "In other words, she is going to talk about us."

YOU, those whose pictures are in my heart -- you are what I love about Central Baptist Church, a place where God's love shared transforms our lives and the world.