

**First Presbyterian Church of Natchez**  
Sermon, March 1, 2009  
Bazile Lanneau, Jr., Bobby Meason & Jay Fitch

## **The Vision Celebration**

### **PART I – BAZILE LANNEAU, JR.**

**First Presbyterian of Natchez is a community in Jesus Christ that is discovering and sharing God’s love.**

**We seek:**

- **To be a community that discovers God’s love for us**
- **To be a community that shares the love that God has given us**
- **To be a welcoming community that is open to all and nurtures each person’s faith and service**

Two years ago our church embarked on a journey to discover what it means to be and to do church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Perhaps we were initially motivated by fear—

- Fear that our church would not or could not grow
- Fear that as older members died our revenue base would dwindle
- Fear that we would no longer be able support the church home that has meant so much to us

Whatever the motivation, a process was begun to plan for the future. This process originated in discussions within the Session and the designation of Lane Feltus and Larry Brown to “come up with something”. I do not know whether at the time it was to be a plan or a process. Lane and Larry were introduced to church consultant, Ed Brenegar, and invited him to be our guide on this journey.

After several work sessions with the congregation and church leadership, the “Lane and Larry” team expanded to include Bobby and Bazile and work was

begun to craft a PLAN. We started out with our “business hats” on, assuming that if we just did A, B and C all would be fine. While our list of As, Bs and Cs wasn’t bad, we realized that it was not transformational and that God wanted us, not just as a committee, but as a congregation, to dig deeper. It became apparent that implementation of a mere PLAN would be difficult without a compelling vision. Without a vision or rationale it would be difficult if not impossible to prioritize and rally support for competing ideas. We didn’t have a way to say that our church should not be a “Museum of Memories” without stepping on the toes of friends.

Thus began the third phase of our process to find

- A Vision for the future that would be liberating and ring true;
- A Vision that would allow us to shed our feelings of fear, anxiety and inadequacy; and
- A Vision that would allow us to have confidence in the faith that God has uniquely given to each of us, and to share it with others.

We doubled the size and diversity of the planning group, adding Jay Fitch, Judy Kempinska, Cara Moody, Connie Moreland and Hannah Smith. We prayed and shared our faith stories with one another. We read books and articles on church transformation. We listened to you, the congregation.

Although our thoughts about a Future Church gelled pretty quickly, it was difficult to put a label on a common theme. Bobby Meason is going to tell you the story of our “Ah-Ha Moment”, when he and Lane shared with the rest of us the impact that reading “The Shack” had on their faith. From that point on the model became clear and the Vision you have before you is the end result.

While our model uses a Love metaphor, at the most basic level it is this:

- God speaks directly to us, sharing his love and building our faith in the way he knows is best. Our task is to listen and discover.
- God speaks to us through others, and to others through us. Our task is to share and be God’s hands.
- God wishes us to grow his communion. Our task is to welcome and nurture.

I know this may sound simplistic, but wouldn't God have it that way. Jesus' parables are not stories of individuals jumping through hoops to achieve greatness, much less eternal life. If our personal faith comes from God, then we need not be ashamed or tentative in stating openly what we have discovered.

In February, the Session met with the planning group and Ed Brenegar to review the Vision Plan document. With several typographic modifications, the Session approved the Vision which we celebrate today.

**First Presbyterian of Natchez is a community in Jesus Christ that is discovering and sharing God's love.**

Bobby, Jay and I share with you today three goals that can guide our actions for the future:

**Goal #1 is "To be a community that discovers God's love for us"**

**We discover God's love through the Holy Spirit's reaching out to us as we worship, study the Scriptures and reflect upon God's love privately and together. God's love reaches us as we discover gifts and talents for caring and ministry. We discover God's love through our relationships with one another in the church. Our faith is strengthened by discovering God's love in one another. These discoveries bring us together and propel us to mission and action.**

Let's join together in this exciting journey of discovery!

## **PART II – BOBBY MEASON**

I have been a Christian for as long as I can remember. I was born into it. My father was raised Methodist, my mother was raised Baptist. We went to the Baptist church.

46% of you that responded to the Congregational Survey were raised Presbyterian. I graduated from State; I can do the math on that. Almost 54% of you were raised in a different church also.

My Dad was never really happy in the Baptist church and in 1963 after visiting several churches, my parents decided to join this church. I'm glad they did. I was a junior in high school. I didn't realize it at the time, but my faith journey had taken one of its first twists.

From there it twisted a lot. I twisted through college. Some think I was all SEC, but that's not true. I spread it around 3 or 4 conferences. Uncle Sam called me in 1970 and I defended my country in N. Dakota and S. Korea. I came home in 1974, met Frances, got married and lived fairly happily ever after.

I finally finished college in 1976, moved back to Natchez and went to work in our family business.

Some time after moving back, I was asked to be a Deacon. I accepted, but really didn't feel the responsibility and the importance of the job. As I was going through the training process, we were asked to relate our faith journey to the Session. I'd never done anything like that before. I stumbled through it and felt pretty awkward. I really didn't think much of what I was saying. I had always taken my faith for granted. However, as I sat there afterward and listened to the others it started to sink in. **Listening to others sharing their faith helped me to better understand my own faith.**

A lot has happened since then, some real low points, but mostly really high points. So I'll fast forward to a few months ago.

Ed Breneger was here one Saturday morning and the Long Range Planning Committee was meeting back here in the Parlor. We were kind of stuck. We just couldn't find that common link for the Vision Plan that we were searching and praying for.

Something that was said led me to talk about a book that Lane and I had recently finished reading, called The Shack by William P. Young. This is fictional story about a man named Mack Phillips and his relationship with God. Mack's daughter Missy had been abducted on a family vacation and evidence was found that she may have been brutally murdered in an abandoned shack deep in the Oregon wilderness. Four years later Mack received, in his mail box, a note from God inviting him to meet him at the Shack for a weekend. Against his better judgment he did and what he found changed his world forever.

This book had a tremendous impact on me.

I told them that the thing that struck me the most about the book was the incredible, amazing love of God. God loves us more than we can imagine. We love our children, our spouses, our parents and on and on, but God loves us more than that. We cannot understand how deep His love is. He loves all of us. Every single person on this planet is his child and he loves every single one of us.

That was it. God loves us. It is so easy and so hard. From that grew this Vision Plan that our committee has recommended and the Session has approved.

Who can object to this statement? **First Presbyterian of Natchez is a community in Jesus Christ that is discovering and sharing God's love. One of the goals: To be a community that shares the love that God has given to us.** How simple is that? Share God's love with each other, with family, with friends, with co-workers. Share God's love in Deacon Meetings, Session meetings, Circle meetings, Men's Prayer Breakfast, Sunday School. It is contagious. Do this in tangible ways.....ways that help those in need, inspire others to discover and share God's love, and make our community a healthy one. Have the courage to speak openly with one another about your personal faith and how God's love is revealed to us.

In Matthew, Jesus said **"For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."** Small groups, one on one discussions. Let it grow from there. The more you do it the easier it becomes!

### **PART III – JAY FITCH**

The third Goal for our future is – “To be a welcoming community that is open to **all** and a community that nurtures each person’s faith and service.”

Sounds easy – but it’s a big job!

This particular goal is rooted in numerous biblical accounts of Jesus welcoming all kinds of people to become faithful – - children, tax collectors, harlots and even sinners like each of us here this morning. Christ’s message was not just one of welcome but also a message of nurture and challenge to live a more Godly life.

On a very personal level, Kathy and I have both experienced that warm sense of welcome you’ve provided during the almost two years that we’ve lived in Natchez. Bobby Meason and Albert Metcalfe greeted us warmly the very first Sunday we attended. Becky and the choir helped us feel at home with uplifting music. And I particularly remember that Jeanie’s prelude and postlude were powerful musical highlights of that service.

John and Judy Larson invited us to share a meal that same week and after a few weeks of attending this and several other churches in Natchez, we came to understand that First Presbyterian was where we were supposed to be... But Church life is not limited to coming to Worship. We were graciously and persistently invited into other parts of fellowship. Jim Dent & John Williams invited me to the ecumenical Men’s Prayer Breakfast we host which has now become a meaningful part of my weekly routine. Kathy was asked to serve as a deacon and as I began participating in the planning task force -- our relationships with others in the congregation, and with God, deepened.

One of the stalwart members of the Prayer Breakfast gang is Reverend Cliff Marvel, Associate Pastor of Rose Hill Baptist Church. Cliff asked me to go with him one day to Robert Lewis Middle School. Before I knew it, I became First Presbyterian’s unofficial representative in the Junior High Mentoring Program. That has become a richly rewarding service project for me. You just never know how, or by whom, your faith is going to be strengthened -- or how you will experience the call of the Holy Spirit. The key is that we continue to create an environment where that can happen...

The planning task group was intentional in phrasing the description of this 3<sup>rd</sup> goal -- that we will create an “intellectually supportive environment” where we listen respectfully to each other and encourage the honest expression of faith. The group believed that creating a supportive environment is consistent with the best part of the Presbyterian denominational history and -- that encouraging people to think about the Word and how it is lived out, rather than to be told in a rote, prescriptive way how to think or act -- serves us well on our journey towards the future.

Well, some of you may be thinking – this is “all well and good as far as it goes – but where’s the beef?” Where’s the checklist we can tick off items as they are completed? If that’s your expectation, I’m afraid that I have some good news and *more news*...

The good news is that there are while there are a number of very specific strategies that have been approved by the Session in four primary focus areas including Personal Growth, Community Building, Missional Service, and Congregational Leadership.

The “*more news*” is that -- the level of detail of setting the tangible tasks -- requires the input and work of everyone in the congregation. Stay tuned and get involved as we begin to ramp up and move forward with the implementation of this incredibly positive vision for future for First Presbyterian. Amen.

Would you please stand as we sing our second hymn this morning # 281 – *Guide me o Thou Great Jehovah*.

As indicated earlier, the Session has approved the vision statement, goals and initial strategies. We now ask that, as a congregation, you affirm the future of our church by joining in a responsive litany affirming that commitment...

## LITANY OF COMMITMENT TO THE FUTURE

Jay Fitch

*Leader:* We come from different families and traditions, different places, and with different expectations of what church should be.

*People:* **We come together as a Community in Jesus Christ, discovering and sharing God's Love.**

*Leader:* We study and worship and seek to understand the gifts we have for ministry through First Presbyterian Church. We strengthen our relationships with each other and with God.

*People:* **We are a community that discovers God's love for us.**

*Leader:* We share God's love in tangible and courageous ways, helping those in need and inspiring others to share God's love.

*People:* **We are a community that shares the love God has given to us.**

*Leader:* We know that we can't do these things alone; we enthusiastically welcome people into our fellowship and help them grow and be nurtured by the spirit.

*People:* **We are a welcoming community that is open to all and nurtures each person's faith and service.**

*Unison:* **Amen.**

# OUR VISION

**First Presbyterian of Natchez is a community in Jesus Christ that is discovering and sharing God's love. We seek:**

## **To be a community that discovers God's love for us**

We discover God's love through the Holy Spirit's reaching out to us as we worship, study the Scriptures and reflect upon God's love privately and together. God's love reaches us as we discover gifts and talents for caring and ministry. We discover God's love through our relationships with one another in the church. Our faith is strengthened by discovering God's love in one another. These discoveries bring us together and propel us to mission and action.

## **To be a community that shares the love that God has given to us**

We share God's love with one another, our families, friends and our community. We do this in tangible ways... ways that help those in need, inspire others to discover and share God's love, and make our community a healthy one. We have the courage to speak openly with one another about our personal faith and how God's love is revealed to us.

## **To be a welcoming community that is open to all and nurtures each person's faith and service**

We are building a faith community with those who seek to discover and share God's love. We enthusiastically welcome them into our fellowship.

We are open to all and seek to expand the diversity of our fellowship. We provide an intellectually supportive environment to experience the call of the Holy Spirit. We listen respectfully to each other and encourage the honest expression of faith.

We seek fellowship with one another beyond the worship hour. We enjoy fellowship through our acts of service and learning. We are confident that our community will grow as we are nurtured by Jesus Christ in faith and service to others.

## CHILDREN'S SERMON

Jay Fitch

How many of you remember last year when it snowed? Did you build a snowman? (There were a number of snowmen that were built). That was a lot of fun. What happened after the sun came out? (They melted)

Throughout history, people have built great structures in hopes of being remembered. Does anybody remember what the Egyptians built? (pyramids) In Natchez, we built big plantation homes. And even now, we remember those Plantations by naming them for the people that built them. It seems that *everybody* wants to be remembered...

This church is the same way and yet it's different too. Our church was built a long time ago, but it was built not just to be a monument to remember the past -- but the folks that built our church did so to share something really special.

Does anybody know what that is? (Jesus/Love of Jesus) That's right!

What we do at church can be boiled down to about 3 things – (1) We learn about Jesus' Love (Sunday School). (2) We share that love with others (like with the food train), and (3) We make everybody feel welcome so they learn and grow – too (you do that by giving away that big smile you have to everybody you see at church). If we do those three simple things – People will remember our church. And those memories won't melt like last year's snowmen. They'll last for a long, long time...

Let's close with a prayer this morning...

Dear God, (\_\_\_) Help us remember (\_\_\_) to learn about Jesus, (\_\_\_). To share God's Love (\_\_\_) and make people welcome by giving them our best smile.

Amen.