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Methodist congregation welcomes all

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I mentally rewrite the start of my sermon after hearing a cellist play Bach's "Air on a G String." I am touched too deeply to proceed as if nothing has happened.

"It takes a brave preacher to speak after a cellist plays Bach," I say. "Music is our stairway to God. We workers in words follow along behind, hoping that we have something worthwhile to add. If the violin is the sound of the human voice singing, then the cello is the sound of weeping"

As I scan the crowded pews at Broadway United Methodist Church in Indianapolis, I do more revising. For here are two dozen children sitting on the floor around a young pastor, as she talks of tears. .

Here are gay and lesbian couples, in a denomination that still can't handle such things officially. Here are multiple races, in a city that still struggles with race. Here are the elderly, not the least fazed by the diversity surrounding them. Here are visitors, greeted warmly.

Here is an urban church continually reinventing itself by remaining a "neighborhood church" and daring to change as its neighborhood changes.

Founded in the early 1870s on Fall Creek Parkway, then the eastern edge of Indianapolis (just two miles out from the center), the church prospered with its neighbors - building in 1925 a handsome campus that mirrored handsome homes along Fall Creek, eventually reaching 3,400 members in 1957. Then it saw its fortunes change as "white flight" took onetime residents out to the suburbs, moving city boundaries far to the perimeter and spawning glossy suburbs in adjacent counties.

Even as Sunday attendance plummeted from 2,000 in 1957 to 100 in 1995, Broadway added a food pantry, a summer program for children, economic development grants for small businesses, and community development work such as housing.

Now, as suburban sprawl and costly, time-consuming commutes make inner-city housing more attractive to Downtown workers, Broadway changes again: more families with children, more. gay and lesbian members, a Korean-language sub-congregation, and musicians eager to serve

Attendance is 250 and rising. The commitment remains: Serve the neighborhood. Be willing to weep with those who struggle; be willing to sing of hope.

One longtime member told senior pastor Mike Mather, "This is a future worthy of Broadway's great past."

When the church works, it is a thing of extraordinary grace and beauty. Lives merge, hearts soften, exiles from a shallow culture look deep inside.

God-given diversity is taken as a gift, and the genius of Bach and Beethoven finds a home. In such sunlight, people smile,

People cry. People hold hands. . People rise from the graves of this troubled world and breathe freely.

At a deep level, I think this is what we seek. It is why we hang in with a flawed and frustrating institution. It is why we show up on Sunday and give sacrificially. We sense' that God's grace is out there, ours for the asking, and we just wal;It to see a glimpse, taste a taste, see the adult bend to the child, see lovers bring their love to God, see sufferers bring their suffering, see the fist unclench, see everyone --' everyone! treated with dignity and respect.

This is what God has to give us. Our arguments and holy wars are stones covering graves. Our smug in-crowds, change-resistant leadership, frightened pastors and unwelcoming bigots are just dry bones that don't know they are dead.

God wants better for us. And, whether God weeps through a' cello, smiles through creased eyes, sits on the floor with children or holds with us the hand we love, God will breathe life into us and lead us home.

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