

PREACHING AT THE GARDEN™

Tom Ehrich

On that day, when evening had come, Jesus said to his disciples, “Let us go across to the other side.” (Mark 4:35)

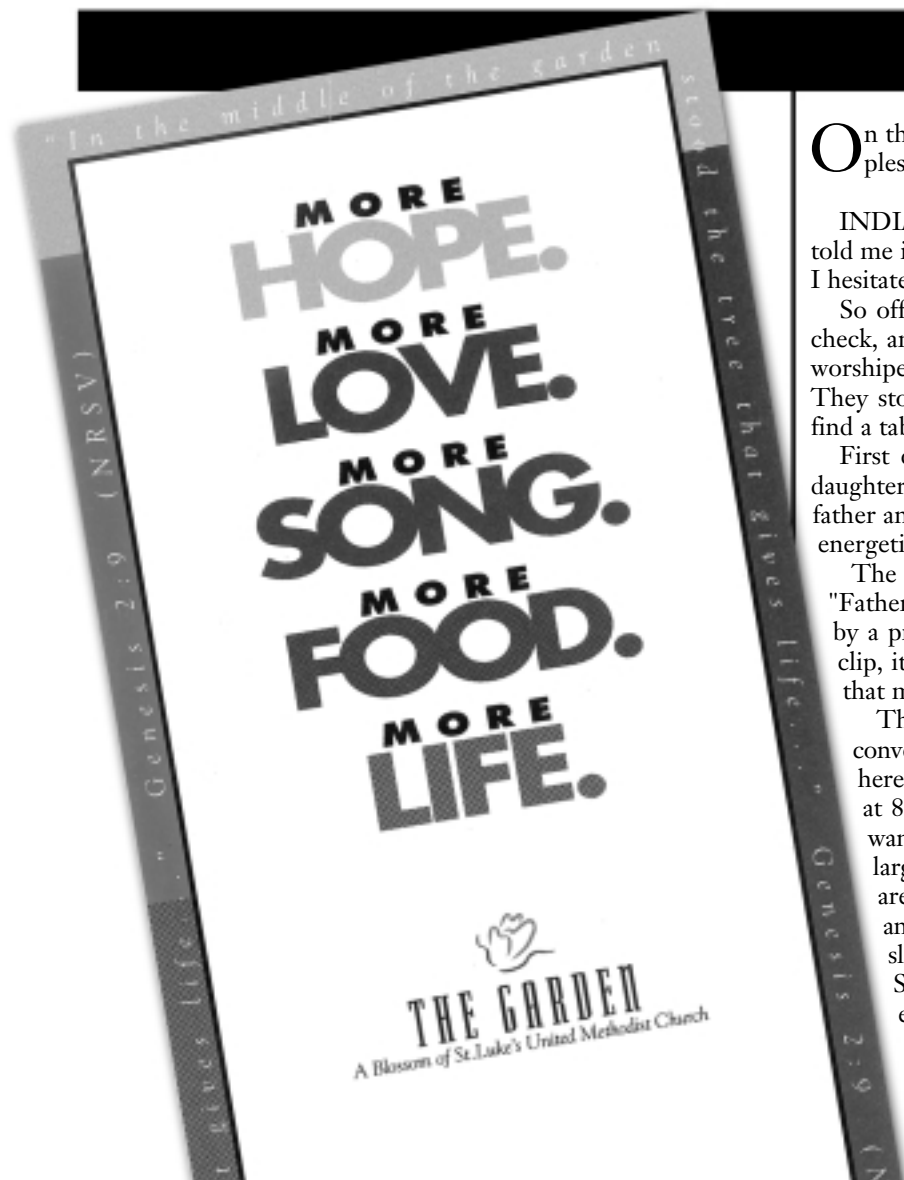
INDIANAPOLIS: I am overdressed in jacket and tie. They told me it was casual, and I wanted to wear jeans and boots, but I hesitated.

So off with jacket and tie, on with microphone, do a sound check, and gather in prayer with musicians and hosts. In come worshipers for the first service—all ages, all forms of casual. They stop by refreshment stations for coffee and bagels, then find a table in this five-tiered dinner theater.

First comes a video clip from “The Simpsons,” showing a daughter’s love for her father. Then a Paul Simon song about father and child, performed by a well-rehearsed ensemble to an energetic beat.

The Fathers Day theme continues to build with a clip from “Father of the Bride,” then a duet about parenting, performed by a pregnant woman and her husband. After another video clip, it is my time to preach. I stand in a spotlight and sense that my well-honed manuscript requires deviation.

The flow of superb music and cleverly chosen video clips conveys a clear message—“We are trying something new here”—so I venture into the swing of things. A little deviation at 8:15, more at 9:15 and, at 10:15, I finally preach what I wanted to say all along. At The Garden, an offshoot of a large and well-established United Methodist church, they are “going across to the other side.” It isn’t for everyone, and the truly strait-laced would recoil at amplified music, slides and video. But they are drawing 700 to 800 every Sunday, and are doing so without the we-are-superior edge of so many non-denominational congregations.



The Garden

A Blossom of St. Luke's United Methodist Church



The Garden launched its first worship service on September 10, 1995 with 202 in attendance at the Beef and Boards Dinner Theatre. With the support of a core of persons from St. Luke's United Methodist Church in Indianapolis, Indiana, a dream became a reality. Linda McCoy, then associate pastor at St. Luke's, fell asleep on a plane and dreamed about a new kind of congregation that would reach out in non-threatening ways to people who have never heard the unconditional love of God. With careful planning and financial and moral support from St. Luke's (which continues today), the satellite congregation was born. The attendance at three Sunday morning services is now between 700 and 800 people.

Each service focuses on a single theme, and all the music, video clips, mini-dramas, comedy routines and other special features carry that theme. The 16-member Good Earth Band is led by Suzanne Stark, a professional actress and director. Although The Good Earth Band frequently performs what is known as Christian Contemporary, the music is more likely to be pop-rock heard on the radio than praise music heard in other contemporary churches.

The band rehearses one evening a week for three hours. On Sunday morning they set up their equipment by 7 a.m. so they are ready for a 7:30 a.m. sound and light cue rehearsal. The entire "set up" for the worship services is done early Sunday morning, and then must be taken down Sunday afternoon, in order for the dinner theatre to resume its regular schedule through the rest of the week.

The Garden's small groups meet during the week for study, fellowship, and service. Ten percent of the offerings contributed each month is given to a charitable organization in the community.

According to Garden minister Linda McCoy, "It is possible that a part of the model for the future assumes a 'facility-less' church, using rented or borrowed space, and not being consumed with bricks and mortar. The Garden can focus its energy and resources on being ministry in the world, not on maintaining a building." In January 2003, St. Luke's UMC launched its second satellite congregation at The Mansion at Oak Hill.

For more information about The Garden at Beef and Boards or The Garden at Oak Hill, see their website at www.the-garden.org

I note the absence of audience participation. Maybe that reflects the theater setting, but I also think worship-as-performance speaks to their target audience: the unchurched, formerly-churched and those looking for new ways. **It is like Jesus speaking to the 5,000, rather than Jesus drawing his inner circle into dialog.**

I note the congregation's hasty departures. A worship leader terms it a desire for "anonymity." Many at The Garden aren't ready for the intimacy of a close-knit Christian community. Having seen the heavy-handed ways that many church "families" enforce conformity, I can imagine why.

Is this "other side" the future of mainline worship? Not for everyone, but for many. In seven years, The Garden has outgrown all but a handful of Episcopal, Lutheran, Presbyterian and Methodist congregations, and has done so without any of the supposedly normal accou-

trements, like sanctuary, pews, pulpit, pipe organ, choir, vested clergy, hymn singing, sacraments and three readings from Scripture.

Can it be "church" without those accoutrements? That is a good question. When you cut through superficials like musical style and seating, what makes a church? It is more than numbers, for as crowded as these tables are, the aisles at Wal-Mart are even more crowded on a Sunday morning. It is more than production values, although these well-rehearsed musicians and worship leaders are a refreshing change from the half-hearted fare offered in some venues.

There is here, I think, an air of adventure. They are trying something new. They are crossing to the other side. And that, I think, is the heart of church as *ecclesia*, "those called out."

Musicians who once sang in vested choirs are trying electric guitar and close harmonies. Worshipers are looking up at

large screens, rather than down at programs and hymnals, and they are allowing otherwise distinct worlds like the Gospel of John and comedian Steve Martin to meld.

Faith, you see, is an adventure, not an act of repetition. It is people allowing themselves to change. It is God bending near the earth, nearer and nearer, until all creation catches the beat. □

Reprinted from "On a Journey" with permission of the author, Tom Ehrich. "On a Journey" meditations are e-mailed six days a week to interested readers. To receive the meditations, send your e-mail address to oaj2000@earthlink.net.

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