

God gave me and Gayle an opportunity to invest seven years of our lives pastoring a newly planted church in Hickory, NC. Blackburn Baptist Church was the name of the congregation. When we arrived on the scene, the fine folk of Blackburn Baptist were meeting in two mobile homes situated on seven acres of beautiful land; the two mobile units were joined together like a "T" — the vertical building being the sanctuary and the horizontal being the small group rooms.

As I'm sure you can imagine, the sanctuary was small but it was plenty big for the 25 or so regular attenders of the church. But any church, by virtue of its Great Commission calling, should grow and God blessed Blackburn with significant growth. It wasn't long before the mobile sanctuary was quite crowded; there were Sundays when the children sat on the floor so as to provide seating for the grownups. At the same time, though the space was cramped, there was a certain liveliness and sense of community that surrounded us as we crammed into the small space. Definitely good times and good memories...but our growth slowed, not exactly plateauing but certainly a slower paced growth. The time had come to build a building. Which we did. And built it debt free. There was much anticipation of the day we would move into the new building, with its new and larger worship space. Move-in day finally arrived...followed fairly soon by builder's remorse.

Soon I was hearing about how the new worship area didn't have the same atmosphere as the mobile chapel; about how people felt isolated from one another in the bigger space; and about how the music lacked the vibrancy and volume of the singing in the mobile chapel. True story: God had provided a beautiful new worship space (did I mention debt-free?) and yet there existed a handful of church members who wanted to go back to what was instead of looking forward to where God was leading us. I was still a young pastor at the time and was a bit perplexed but God taught me a lot during that season of leading a church from the familiar into the unknown. One lesson God taught me is that people struggle with change...all of us, to some degree, struggle to move from comfort into unfamiliar conditions.

So I began to remind the people of Blackburn Baptist of our calling and commissioning as the people of God. I pointed to the slow down of our growth in the year before we completed the new building and encouraged folks to reaffirm our disciple-making mission...we had plenty of seats to fill with new disciples of Christ. I assured members that the day would come when the new worship space would be filled with the same atmosphere and vibrancy and volume and sense of community and memorable worship experiences as the mobile chapel had provided during our season of worshiping in it. And it did! Our growth rate increased, new people were coming through the doors and they actually had seats in which to sit! God led us through that bumpy season of change into a new season of fruitfulness for the Kingdom.

Paul Costner was one of my deacons. I'll never forget something he shared with me after walking together with God through that bit of turbulence at Blackburn Baptist. He said, "Pastor, speaking for myself but also for others in our church, I've been convicted of pride. I was proud of the fact that when we gathered in the old room it was packed with people; when we first transitioned to the new building I was initially embarrassed when people would visit for the first time and see a worship space that was only half-full. The fullness of the mobile chapel had become my idol...the thing I didn't want to surrender in order to follow God into His future plans for Blackburn Baptist. Now? I see how God has filled the new sanctuary and I'm humbled."

I think it is an ongoing challenge for any church to avoid defining "good worship" as dependent on a particular setting or a certain style of music or the tally of people attending. "Good worship" is simply defined as God worship - no matter the time, place, or protocol! Btw, Blackburn Baptist went on to build another building...which required the demolition of the old mobile chapel! Grace & peace, love you. PK

