**Our Future Story**

**Bedford First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)**

 The music was amazing that morning! The Bedford Community Children’s Chorus had been formed five years earlier. Now, 100 voices strong, they made a joyful noise to the Lord. I was moved to tears!

The occasion was the rededication service for Bedford Christian Camp. The camp was in dire need of modernization in 2019. The congregation of Bedford-First Christian Church (BFCC) loved their camp and took great pride in it. But they recognized that they had to do something about this special place: revitalize it, sell it or run it into the ground, but *something* had to be done!

Now, in 2023, the camp is absolutely beautiful! It is used 52 weeks of the year. Warm weather activities include an annual Choral Music Camp, the Indiana Region’s church camps for children and youth, and camps for children and families in the Bedford community, especially those who would not otherwise be able to afford to go to camp. And both Outlook Lodge and the cabins have been made ADA compliant.

The Ropes Course, an interactive team building activity, has particularly proven to be a life-changer, especially for kids living in poverty. Children who had been told that they would never amount to anything, with few successful adults to serve as role models, found that they could take on the challenge of the Ropes Course and *succeed*! Now, three years later, several young men who seemed to be headed for a life of drugs and crime have started to apply to colleges.

In the colder months, the Camp is used by a variety of business, church and family groups for meetings, conferences and retreats. This expanded usage was made possible by placing bathrooms in the cabins, putting residential wings on each side of the Overlook Lodge, and opening-up new areas of cabins and camp sites so that multiple groups could use the Camp at the same time.

Oh yes; and Bedford Christian Camp has become the number one wedding venue in Lawrence County!

Of course, all of this expansion did not come cheaply. The Friends of Camp Bedford work hard throughout the year to raise funds from a variety of sources. This group of former campers, church members, parents and current older campers developed a network of both small and large donors. Online funding, appeals to families and business groups who use the Camp, sponsorships from area businesses, grants and income from the Camp’s endowment all helped to revitalize the Camp. Income from these same sources now finance both the maintenance of the Camp and the salary of the full-time Camp Manager.

It has been a long journey. And it was not always easy. One long time member recounted her experience. “It was hard to think about changing. We spent more time meeting and talking than some folks liked, but we realized later how important this was. As we worked through the process, two key phrases kept coming up: “giving ourselves permission to pause” and “reaching outward to connect people with God’s abundance.” The idea of pausing some of our ministries was tough. We knew that we had lots of activities that were draining our energy rather than enlivening our spirits, but it was hard to let go of things that we had done for years, or even decades. But once we let go of some things, we realized how liberating it was. Take the monthly Fellowship Luncheons, for example. When they became a quarterly event, we had much more energy for ministries with an outward focus like helping the parents of the children in the Community Chorus. Some of those families were really struggling!”

“You got that one right,” said one of the parents. “We were so blessed by the way in which the congregation reached out to us. Our son had not been a member of the chorus for very long, but my husband had lost his job and we needed help! We soon realized that helping struggling families is a big part of why First Christian Church exists. It is what God has called us to do. And I do mean *us*, since we joined the church a year ago. This is such a supportive church community. They reached out to a struggling, isolated family and connected us with all the good things that they had to offer.”

That family’s experience reflects the second phrase that kept resonating with us: “reaching outward to connect people with God’s abundance.” We realized that there were many people in the Bedford community who were lonely, isolated and in need of connections both social and spiritual. They needed what First Christian Church had: community; an integrated, multi-generational community of faith, where people were pulling in the same direction, connecting folks with each other and with God in the process.

One big step was the transformation of the Coat Bank into a year-round Clothing Ministry. We still provide winter coats during the fall, but we also provide back to school clothes and business attire. We call the latter program “Dress for Success.” Folks who are getting back into the workforce can pick-out exactly what they need to make the right impression at a job interview; not to mention the right outfits to get them started on a new job. We have even recruited Clothing Ministry clients to become volunteers. In fact, most of our volunteers are current and former clients. The work helps them connect with each other, and the volunteer service sure looks good on the resumes that we help them put together. It is especially great to see the youth volunteering in the Clothing Ministry; youth from both the congregation and the wider community.

As long as I am discussing the youth, I must share how the Holy Spirit lit a spark here. At first, the congregation struggled to define what “youth” meant. Rather than be paralyzed with indecision, the congregation chose to begin with what we had – a core group of young people in grade school and high school. Having been nurtured by the whole congregation for years, they were ready to take off. By the time I arrived in 2019, these two groups, with support from several committed adults, were practically running the place, as they say. One of the high school youth bubbled with enthusiasm when she told me, “It’s amazing the difference just a few years has made. Kids found out about the church through the Children’s Chorus or the Camp.

Once they (and their parents) realized we were not going to put a hard sell on them, they started coming to Holy Moly. Then they started helping serve cookies and hot chocolate during the annual Christmas parade. Next thing we knew they were coming to the Sunday evening contemporary service. We sing contemporary and traditional songs, read the Bible, and talk about things that matter to us. It is cool that the young adults are there to keep us focused. The casual atmosphere of that gathering makes everyone feel welcome. I guess sitting on cushions and singing with guitars will do that. That is what we do. The pulpit and communion table are on rollers, so we can easily move them aside and sit together in the Chancel. I think the difference maker was our commitment to inclusion: making sure that we were not divided into ‘the church kids’ and ‘the non-church kids.’ While we are worshipping in the sanctuary, the older adults (aka, our parents) can attend a group that helps them understand the Faith Journey the youth must travel and how they can foster and support this journey.”

 There are other things happening as well with Sunday School and the Young Adults Social Hour. Sunday School for the younger children uses Children Worship and Wonder. This model of faith formation includes a small core of adults who interact with the children while reading Bible stories and asking the children very engaging questions. I recruited the adults and together we attended a training event. There are a few young adults among this core. They were attracted to our congregation because it offered them an opportunity to ask challenging questions of their own; questions about God, the Bible and the world that might not have been welcomed in other churches. For all of these different age groups, this place has become a second home. The energy here is awesome!

All of this exciting ministry is fueled by the Holy Spirit and supported by prayer. A dedicated group of prayer warriors began a Prayer Ministry in 2018, which then expanded into a Healing Ministry. I have to tell you; miracles are happening in this place! That is what you get when you turn in prayer to the One in whom all things are possible.

Having partners in the community helps as well. We realized that we did not have to do it all ourselves. So we reached out to other churches and community organizations, and together we are seeking the greater good of the Bedford community. It was yet another example of God’s abundance. Now programs like the Community Breakfast, before and after school care with the Boys and Girls Club, and mentoring adults who are trying to get back into the workforce operate out of our building, but with many different volunteers and staff from multiple agencies. We realized that while First Christian did not have enough members to do all the things that we heard God calling us to do, we had enough space in which it could all happen. So we invited in our partners and we said, “Here’s the space; do what you have been gifted to do.”

And, of course, there are the financial resources that help to make all of this ministry possible. The Trustees have done a great job of building-up the church’s endowment. Through the estate gifts of many of our members who have passed on, these departed saints continue to support God’s work in this place. The annual revenue stream from these permanent funds, the fact that so many of our members have become tithers, grants that fund our several social service ministries, and revenue from Hoovers’ Candy Shoppe has helped as well. Hoovers’ also provides needed work experience for folks who have made it through addiction recovery and are getting back on their feet.

The Disciples Women were renewed after they too were liberated from activities that neither enlivened the spirit nor enabled the sharing of God’s abundance. And the Disciples Men were reborn. Both groups are engaged in community activities that feed the hungry, house the homeless, equip the impoverished and protect the vulnerable. With their help, Matthew 25:31-40 has really come alive in this town. We no longer wonder if First Christian Church makes a difference in this community. The answer is a resounding “Yes!”

There have been other changes. A new sound system makes it so much easier for folks to hear what is going on in the Sanctuary. And Church members who are no longer able to attend worship physically are still connected with us electronically. A state-of-the-art digital camera records the worship services and they are uploaded to the website and Facebook page for all to view, live or later. Other connections were made when we ran the Rainbow Flag up the flag pole at the 15th Street entrance. It lets all know that we are an open and affirming congregation and that ALL ARE WELCOME.

And all means ALL. Long time members, new members, folks who come into the building for the services that are offered here, ALL! What a joy it was to see everyone mingling together at our 175th Anniversary, including old friends who came back for the Homecoming Weekend. The history of the church was celebrated, good food served, the Children’s Chorus sang, and they were lots of pictures and videos celebrating our ministry, past and present.

As I sit here at Camp Bedford surrounded by God’s glory and all the trees, I cannot help but marvel at the journey this congregation of Christ’s church has made. I have worked hard as the BFCC Program Coordinator these past four years, helping the process along as best I could, but really it was the Holy Spirit guiding the whole thing. Talk about connecting people with abundance! I feel the Spirit now in this sacred space. There is an energy in this stillness, a certainty of purpose that with God’s guidance, we will continue to share the Lord’s abundance with all God’s children.