

## THE GAP

*Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. <sup>2</sup>I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. <sup>3</sup>I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” <sup>4</sup>So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. <sup>5</sup>Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother’s son Lot, and all the possessions that they had gathered, and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran; and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan. When they had come to the land of Canaan, <sup>6</sup>Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. <sup>7</sup>Then the LORD appeared to Abram, and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.” So he built there an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him. <sup>8</sup>From there he moved on to the hill country on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and there he built an altar to the LORD and invoked the name of the LORD. <sup>9</sup>And Abram journeyed on by stages toward the Negeb.*

(Genesis 12:1-9, NRSV)

When pollsters call in the middle of dinner most of us are not inclined to answer their litany of questions. Usually when we receive a survey in the mail, we toss it in the circular file before even finishing the cover letter. I am

grateful that 130 members of our congregation made a different choice upon receiving the Church Planning Inventory in the mail last spring.

By now I hope you've had a chance to read the excellent summary piece written by our own Mitch Brickell and Regina Paul. It arrived in your mailbox with the September *Spire*. If you have any questions about the survey, please join us for our question and answer time downstairs in the North Lounge at 11:30. In the not too distant future we hope to bring in a representative from the Hartford Institute for Religion Research of Hartford Seminary, the creator of the survey, to speak at an All-Boards Meeting. After that we hope to formulate a new mission statement for our congregation and work on both short and long term goals.

I was pleased with the results of the survey. I knew things were going well in the life of our church, I just did not know how well. Recently I compared our data with that of 84 other churches who've taken one of the Hartford Institute's surveys. For the record, these statistics reflect 11,386 respondents. Among the other churches, only 77 percent agreed that their congregation's morale was high. Whereas 93 percent of our respondents believed that the current morale of our church members is high. Our congregation rated almost 10 percent higher than other churches (78%) in agreeing with the statement: There is a sense of excitement among members about our congregation's future (87%).

Regarding the tasks of the church, our congregation is more satisfied in 15 of 16 areas than the other congregations. What do we do best? According to the survey, you are most satisfied with the way our worship provides a meaningful experience of God and the Christian tradition, the way our worship expresses the Gospel in

contemporary language and forms, how our Family of Faith engages in acts of charity and service for persons in need, how we provide pastoral counseling to help members dealing with personal problems, and how we provide a caring ministry for the sick, shut-ins and the bereaved. Out of the 16 areas, the only one where we were slightly behind the other congregations, a difference of 4 percent, was in adult education. Specifically, 40 percent of our respondents want more adult education that deals with marriage and the family and 25 percent want more dealing with the Bible, theology, and contemporary issues.

The majority of our respondents are satisfied with our children's Sunday School and its emphasis on serving others. Most are satisfied with our youth programs, especially the focus on community service and the emphasis on helping youth clarify their values and beliefs. We could, however, do better in our teacher training.

On the subject of community and social involvement, the following were rated as top priorities: calling attention to social, community, and world issues from the pulpit and in study groups, providing or supporting social services for persons in need, and providing meeting rooms in the church for community groups working on various issues and problems. In reviewing the work of our Board of Missions and Outreach and the use of our building, it appears that we are doing all these things.

Regarding your expectations of the ministers, you want us to preach inspiring sermons, plan and lead worship sensitive to the needs of the congregation, counsel members with personal problems, visit the sick, the bereaved, and homebound members, and emphasize the spiritual development of members.

By and large our respondents are pleased with our church facilities including the sanctuary, parish hall, education wing, and parking lots. The survey indicated that additional focus should be placed on our building's exterior, grounds, and office space.

In terms of stewardship, our Church Administrator, Donna Marchese, could give us the most accurate data. However, the statistics on those who answered the survey were interesting. About 35 percent give less than \$1,000 per year, the same number gives \$2,500 per year or more, with 15% giving \$7,500 per year or more.

A primary concern for us is attracting new members, however, according to the survey results, we do not want to be *personally* involved. According to the survey, most of us have not invited a single person to church in the past year, while at the same time, church growth studies indicate that people often set foot in a church for the first time because a member personally invites them. If we want people to visit and join, we need to get over our timidity about encouraging them to give us a try.

In summary, we are generally pleased with our staff, programs, music, and relationships with each other. As Mitch and Regina put it, we're happy campers; we're satisfied church goers.

While we've got areas that need improvement, these challenges are not insurmountable. And yet I can't help believing that God has even more in store for us. There are unmet needs in our congregation, community, and world that *we can meet*. There are people who need a lifeline and *we can help*. There are families adrift who need stability that *we can provide*. I don't have specific suggestions at the moment, but I feel that the Spirit of God has inspiration to spare if we can only slow down and listen. Sometimes

though, God’s message gets through to us when we’re not listening, when we’re merely minding our own business living one day after another.

Such was the case with Abraham, who was living his life, getting along pretty well, except that he had no children and he longed for them. One day out of nowhere God tells him to pack his bags because the Divine Realtor had a piece of property with Abraham’s name on it. With that Abraham’s ears perked up and could hardly believe God’s stunning news—from Abraham, God would make a great nation, and add to that blessings upon blessings. The text doesn’t mention if Abraham and Sarah took time to check the Promised Land’s property values or the quality of its schools. As if it was no big deal, the scriptures tell us, “So Abram went, as the Lord had told him” (12:4a). I like the last verse in today’s scripture lesson, “And Abraham journeyed on by stages toward the Negeb” (12:9).

This famous passage is referred to as The Call of Abraham. The future of the world’s three great monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, hung in the balance. But Abraham didn’t know that. All he knew was that some unknown God offered him land and descendants if, by faith, he would up and move to the Land of Canaan. So he went and journeyed by stages.

While it sounds like it must have happened just like that, easy as pie, nothing could be farther from the truth. The decision to leave home was heart rending, especially because he had no idea where he was going, how long it would take, and what he might find upon his arrival. As Bruce Feiler, author of *Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths*, writes, “To be a descendant of Abraham is to live in that gap—to glance back at your native land, to peer ahead to your nameless destination,

and to wonder, ‘Do I have the courage to make the leap?’” (pp. 43-44).

Do we have the courage to make the leap as individuals and as a congregation? The leap of faith involves more than offering lip service to God. As Feiler puts it, “Abraham makes the leap and thus secures his reputation for all time...He does so silently, joining the covenant with his feet, not his words. The wandering man does what he does best, he walks. Only now he walks with God. And by doing so Abraham leaves an indelible set of footprints: He doesn’t believe in God; he believes God. He doesn’t ask for proof; he provides proof” (Ibid. p. 44).

Like Abraham, we live in the gap between where our congregation once was and what, with God’s help, it can become. While there’s nothing wrong with looking back and appreciating where we were at one point in our history, the future will not be a repeat of the past nor should the future be measured by the past. God has something different in store for us in the future and for our part, we must make the leap, believing that God will be there to catch us and carry us into a brighter tomorrow.

Our congregation is blessed to be at peace with no ugly controversies on the horizon. We’re in a great location, with a beautiful facility, abundant financial resources, and surrounded by people who care for us—our Family of Faith. Week by week, we’re experiencing God’s blessings. Can the Promised Land be far away? Let’s hold hands, leap over the gap, and see. AMEN.

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## **PASTORAL PRAYER**

Eternal God, you call us to leaps of faith, to leave the familiar for an unknown future. For those of us feeling anxious about this process, give us peace. For those feeling depressed, hope. For those feeling lost, direction. Others of us feel a sense of excitement about our tomorrows. Increase our sense of adventure and strengthen our faith for the journey. Through Jesus Christ we pray. AMEN.