Reflections on Highland’s
Centennial Anniversary
of the Sanctuary
August, 2015
Sensations of sight and sound flood my memory as I recall the wonderful worship opportunities I experienced at Highland Baptist Church. The sanctuary itself was such an acoustically satisfying edifice; hearing a congregation that could beautifully sing the great hymns of faith a cappella, or robustly sing with the addition of the pipe organ were incredible moments of corporate worship for me. The fact that I got to give direction to that singing made it personal as well. In the midst of all that sound I often heard God’s still small voice speak clearly and passionately.

Sound was not only enhanced but dramatically focused by the enclosure of the saints in the windows who “sang” with us. Those visions of inspiration brought an even more majestic and awesome sense to what we did week after week in that room. The fabulous organ playing of Jeff Lewis, the magnificent singing of the incredible choir and the inspiring preaching of Paul Duke tied up that package into the most satisfying position I have ever had as a congregational leader of worship. I remember it fondly and with thanksgiving.

~ Lloyd Mims
Minister of Music & Worship
1994-1996
I am aware that as I write this, I’m afraid of slipping into idolatry; I know I can be a victim of my own sentimentality. Over-celebrating this room could lead to missing the point of what we do in it. Without question, our sanctuary at HBC is remarkable – a showpiece of stone and wood and glass and fabric all evocative of deeper meaning; architecture and symbol that pull us out of ourselves to look inward and forward and heavenward. But surely it is the presence of the people in the room, and the presence of God whom we meet there, that make any experience in this sanctuary so sweet. My experiences in this room have been of grace and love. That is why I love this room.

I came to Highland Baptist in October of 2011. For just under five years I had the best seat in the house – on the pulpit right in front of the choir. As one who worships in different communities now, I can say with certainty, that music at HBC is a treasure; one that I miss every Sunday. Most Sunday’s I didn’t need Joe’s sermon, my experience of worship had already happened - closing my eyes, bowing my head, and letting the sound surround and lift and move me. Sitting there each Sunday as the choir rose to sing their anthem was akin to bathing in sound; from that seat the sound is tangible, you can feel move around you and vibrate in you. It’s been nine years since I last sat in that seat, yet those moments remain live and potent in my recollection of HBC. When I think about the sanctuary, I think about that.

I resigned my position on the ministerial staff in July of 2006 to pursue new education and a different kind of ministry but my family and I remained in Louisville and members of HBC. The first Sunday I came back to worship after several months away, the sanctuary was full and I ended up sitting in a single chair against the wall on the organ side. As the choir walked in from the Commons, it seemed as if every member greeted me, shook my hand, patted my back, smiled in greeting. To this day, that remains one of the clearest experiences of love I have ever known. When I think about the sanctuary, I think about that.
After I moved away, my parents joined HBC and made their church home there and were loved and care for by you good people. In May of 2014 we had the memorial service for my father in that room. When I think about the sanctuary, I think about that. I used to love performing weddings in this sanctuary. And now I find that it is my turn to get married here! When I think about the sanctuary, I think about that.

When I think about the sanctuary of Highland Baptist Church, I think about home, and belonging, and love, and healing, and hope. I have tears and smiles when I think about this sanctuary. I think about the reflection of the Kingdom Community that has sprung up and rooted and grown here. It all points to God. And I am glad.

~ Lyle Edwards
Minister to Youth
What a joy it is to write you and share in this day celebrating 100 years of your wonderful sanctuary. I have so many wonderful memories of that beautiful space and the beautiful people who inhabited it, and the moments of God’s grace we were blessed to share in that space.

I remember sitting in those pews with fellow seminary couples and others who had nothing to do with the seminary, in a time when everyone who was affiliated with the seminary desperately needed such a family of faith. Bill Leonard told us, “After all of the controversy blows over, there will still be churches that need ministers like you,” but it was the welcome and community and worship I found in that space that enabled me to believe him.

I remember joining the church and the hands and hugs that were extended for the first of many times.

I remember the dedication of our first child, Hannah. I remember Phil Christopher’s prayer and Terri Connolly and Bob Belcher holding her after the service. She was probably wearing a stunning Carol Collier hand me down, the first of many.

I remember my first Sunday on staff and how proud I was to walk out in my new robe, still wrinkled, bought just the day before at Cokesbury with Anne Smith’s credit card, straight off the rack. How that sanctuary and its beauty awed me yet again as I sat on the podium for the first time.

I remember John Echols and I doing our best to write and act in sketches each and every Sunday morning at 8:30 for what was Highland’s first experiment with a contemporary service. God bless those 15 or so church members and 10 or so night shift nurses and docs who would stumble in.

I remember the youth plays we would do on that stage with nothing more than black boxes for props.

I remember the beauty of the evening light streaming through those windows. The windows are beautiful no matter what the time ... but the
evening light is special. At times, if I worked late into the afternoon, I’d end my day with just 15 minutes in that space, in silence, allowing my soul to be filled.

I remember that birds occasionally got trapped in the sanctuary. And one time, a bat joined us as well. The staff knew about it, but really didn’t want others to know for fear of panic. Extraction was expensive. As with the birds, we just hoped he’d find his way out as he found his way in. One night after youth play rehearsal, he followed John Echols and me out of the sanctuary into the hall. We then strategically opened and closed doors down the hall until we got him to fly into the educational wing entrance toward Cherokee, there where the stairs are. He kept circling and circling though, never going out the doors which we had so invitingly opened for him. I finally took a brownie pan and bumped him out the door when he flew by, and he flew away. I accomplished this after missing him 50 or more times. John found all of this quite amusing.

I remember crying the first time John Dixon had us turn around and end the service, holding hands, singing the Lord’s Prayer while facing the resurrection window, a photograph of which remains in my office to this day.

I remember the Lessons and Carols Christmas Eve service, and one year when Hannah yelled out “Daddy” as I came to the pulpit for the first reading.

I remember my ordination in that space. I still have the Bible and the names of all who laid hands on me. I treasure it. I use it most every Sunday. As I was kneeling, my legs fell asleep from the knees down. I prayed, “Dear God, if you get me to the first pew when I stand up, I really will serve you all of my days.”

All of these memories enhanced, aided by that beautiful space, the surrounding cloud of witnesses, the resurrection window at the back. One time a friend visited church with me. We entered from the back. He said, “These windows are beautiful, but I don’t see Jesus in any of them.” I said, “Turn around. He gets the big one.”
Some of you know I played a small part in connecting Highland and Joe Phelps. As with most legends the role I played has, I fear, grown far larger than the kernel of truth which birthed it. But a part of the story that is true is that one day as I sat at my desk in Austin, TX, I received two calls. The first was from Tracy Holladay, chair of the search committee. He said, “David, we have this dark horse candidate. We keep moving him out of the pile, but he keeps finding his way back in. His name is Joe Phelps. What do you know about him?” Five minutes after hang up with Tracy, my phone rings again. “David, this is Joe Phelps. I’ve been talking with Highland Baptist in Louisville. I can’t tell if they are really interested or not. I’m not sure if I’m interested or not. But you served there, tell me about them.” Well, needless to say, I praised Joe to Tracy, and praised Highland to Joe, and if I said anything else, it obviously was not enough to mess things up. But I do remember my concluding words to Joe. “And Joe, if you can’t preach in that sanctuary…hang it up. Because if you can’t preach there…you can’t preach anywhere.” And Joe said, “What do you mean?” “It’s just so beautiful, Joe. The stone, the wood supports, the cloud of witnesses surrounding you, the resurrection window facing you…It’s just amazing. You'll see, Joe. You’ll see.”

And he did see, as we all have seen. This space has shaped us and the worship that has taken place here, even as we vivified this space with our presence, our prayers, our songs, our silence, our hugs, our laughter, our words. And as we have been faithful to do this, God has been faithful to meet us here, to inspire, to console, to challenge, to save.

Thanks be to God for this sanctuary—all who built it, improved it, and maintained it through the years. Thanks be to God for all who have found God here and will find God here. Thanks be to God for all who have gone forth from this place to change the world.

~ David Breckenridge
Minister to Youth 1992-1994
October of 1985 – “Upon our first entrance in,” our eyes were instantly captivated by the beautiful windows and wooden truss; our ears attentive to sound on stone; but the worship – too formal – a *Gloria Patri* in a Baptist church, and Lloyd didn’t conduct the hymns!

Yet something about Highland drew us back, “sweetly questioning if we lacked anything?” “A guest,” I answered, “worthy to be here;” and LOVE said, “You shall be he;” and 15 years later, we left those sacred walls with great weeping and thanksgiving for a people and a place that forever changed us.

Highland taught me a liturgy of worship, but no aspect of worship is burned more deeply into my consciousness than that of Song. Inspired in part by a people and in part by a space, it was the hymn singing that rattled the wood, resonated from the stones, and almost shattered the windows! Never before or since have I heard hymn singing like Highland’s congregation. They inspired my worship, touched my soul, voiced my praise, and healed my broken spirit.

And on this centennial celebration of Highland’s sanctuary it must be clearly stated that ALL SONG is in search of resonance – whether within the heart or of the acoustic. Inspired singing must be in sympathy with the elements, as surely as Highland’s founders understood the necessity of – Wood, Stone, and Glass. Which came first, the sanctuary for or the worship by the people? Either way, one has inspired the other for 100 years, and for a brief 15, it transformed a young church musician and his family.

~ John Dickson  
*Minister of Music & Worship*  
1983-2000
Worship at Highland Baptist Church

In all my years in ministry, I have never experienced consistently the inspiring music presented in a space where the acoustics of the building and the quality of the music met to resonate deep within my soul. To hear the congregants sing “Jesus Loves Me” with their eyes filled with tears touched my soul. To hear the organ play great pieces of music touched my soul. To hear the choir sing various styles of music each week touched my soul. To experience the beauty of the worship space and the stained glass windows touched my soul. Add to that the thoughtful, powerful and inspiring preaching, and you have a worship service that can never be duplicated. I give thanks for my time at Highland Baptist Church and for the worship I experienced there.

~ Joe Aldrich
Associate Pastor
Worship at Highland Baptist Church was, and continues to be, one of my great life experiences. There is something about that stone and wood building with its beautiful stained glass windows that inspires deep conversations with the Creator.

Add to those things the amazing congregational and choir singing, led by the mighty Schantz organ, and the thin place between earth and heaven becomes much, much thinner.

My favorite worship moments were the congregational singing moments. As the organist in the early 1990’s, and then as the Organist/Choirmaster in the early 2000’s, those moments when the congregation sang without accompaniment were holy moments. I never have experienced another congregation that could, and wanted to, sing in four-part harmony like Highland’s congregation. Those holy moments continue to remind me of the wonderful people at Highland Baptist Church. May they continue to sing their “Alleluias” in that special place of worship.

~ Jonathan Crutchfield  
Organist, Minister of Music & Worship  
(2003-2006)
The “Jewel Box” of a Sanctuary

I knew you, Highland, before I ever knew you. I knew you through the description by our mutual friend, Bill Leonard, whose first words to me about Highland were about our most sacred space, “that jewel box of a Sanctuary.”

I remember what the space looked like and smelled like and sounded like when I first stepped into it. It was during Lent, and the dissonance between the ever-vibrant windows and the burlap and ashes on the communion table felt to me to embody the great mystery of Jesus, Christ our King and Christ our Suffering Servant all in one.

I remember my first communion Sunday at Highland, when the call-and-response Doxology lifted sound and praise until it filled the wooden rafters. It remains one of my most treasured memories in song.

I remember the moment when I first stood on the chancel, looking so very new and impossibly overwhelmed at faces that filled the pews whose names I did not yet know. Renee leaned over to me and said, “someday you’ll realize that you know more names than you don’t, and that will be a moment worth marking.” I remember it too, and marked it with celebration.

I remember nights of Friday Church, when the Sanctuary smelled of cigarettes and cheap perfume and grace upon grace.

I remember walking down that center aisle to meet my beloved, surrounded by so many of my beloved community that I thought my heart might just explode into thousands of pieces with the love that space couldn’t even contain.

I remember squeezing the chunky thighs of my son while sharing in worship the promise with you to sing for him the songs of faith and tell him the stories of Jesus. The same room where I made that promise became the room that captivated his creative mind and held his running feet week after week.
I remember quiet weekday afternoons, when in the midst of a busy day with all the demands it entailed, I would slip silently into that space. Light streaming in through the windows, color dancing down the center aisle, and creaks and thuds echoing randomly throughout the room as the space seemed to settle in for the day became for me the refuge I needed.

I remember baptisms of friends, endless choruses of “Silent Night” alongside the crinkle of grocery bags heavy-laden with canned goods, children waving at their parents in the midst of a choir performance, a paper dove in flight that welcomed the Spirit in our midst, funerals of saints gone before us, testimonies of God’s transforming Love at work, and the Easter where the only place to find a seat was on the air conditioning register!

And I remember Ash Wednesday this year, hours before I was to travel to Winston-Salem to see if God might be beckoning me there. Our nighttime service already snowed out, Highland’s ministry staff circled round each other in that jewel box of a Sanctuary. Ashes smudged on our heads and tears fresh on our cheeks, these soul friends and so great a cloud of witnesses that surrounded us gave me the strength to know and trust that I was not alone, that God was not done with me yet, and that resurrection does, must come in the morning. It was the most sacred of all the holy moments in that place.

These things I remember are the jewels, the treasures I have stored up to strengthen me in these unfamiliar days of a new place, new space, and new faces. I give thanks to God for the gift of that jewel box and its abundant riches, uniting thousands of us scattered all across the world to the God alive and doing the transforming work of Love on the corner of Grinstead and Cherokee.

~ Emily Hull McGee
Minister to Young Adults 2009-2015
Our English Gothic Meeting House found itself by 1970 in critical disrepair. After World War II, the Highland community was run down at the heels. Lovely one family homes on Cherokee Road had been turned into apartments. In 1970, there was a sense that the Cherokee Triangle was beginning to gentrify.

The Holy Spirit led the Highland Baptist family to honor their Lord by renewing the sanctuary which was badly needed. The stained stone walls needed painting. All of the windows were a dull amber color and were leaking and otherwise in disrepair. The linoleum floors were worn as was the carpet in the aisles. The beautiful chestnut pews were in desperate shape. The small, vintage pipe organ was very sick. The lighting and sound systems were obsolete. The choir loft was too small. The baptistery was a sink hole covered by a trap door in the floor where the piano now stands. There were no baptismal changing rooms.

By the faithfulness of God’s people, what Bill Leonard came to call *The Baptist Jewel Box* came into being! The sanctuary was born again. It was all done and paid for in a few years. This was the Lord’s doing and it is marvelous in our eyes.

~ Don Burke
Pastor 1970-1981
O God, our help in ages past
Stained glass windows stir stories of saints from generations past and intersect with today’s real-life, in-the-moment stories of people in the pews, shedding light, shadow, and colorful wisdom through these past 10 decades

Our hope for years to come
Generations after generations pledge faith, hope and love at this altar, for their futures ahead Imagine the deep hopes and vast scope of Highland Baptist’s many …
  - Seminary students who honed out new truth and grace, hearing profound sermons here
  - Couples who wed, committing themselves to love through unknown joys and challenges
  - Babies who were held and blessed
  - Baptisms of belief and recommitment
  - Ordinations for thinking, feeling, and healing ministries throughout our world
  - Welcomes and farewells of beloved congregational members and staff
  - Profound moments of grief, tragedy, crisis and finding God’s Emmanuel hope with us

Be thou our guide while life shall last
Seasonal Advent and Lent banners proclaim “it’s time” ---again--- to prepare, to experience God’s grace and guidance ---as proclaimed through Jesus Christ--- through life’s birth and death and resurrection and everything in between Highland Baptist’s prayers voice praise, sorrow, fear, hope, seeking, searching and celebration Her music calls forth sounds from the soul, re-sounds reverberations that bounce between these stone walls back and forth, and resonates here on earth as it does in heaven
Amazing grace, how sweet the sound
Praise God from whom all blessings flow
Look ye saints, the sight is glorious
O come, all ye faithful
Silent night, holy night
It is well with my soul

And our eternal home
When we’ve been there 10,000 years (these 10 decades times another 10 times another 10?!) For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever Amen.

~ Joy Berger
Organist 1989-1991
Some of the warmest memories of my life were formed in that sanctuary. There is no better space I know for a congregation to sing in, especially when it’s a congregation like that one. When Jeff Lewis played full throttle and we sang great hymns with all our hearts, it seemed to me that the walls and the wood and the saints in the windows all joined in, and it was all so soulful and joyous. I’ve also known no better space to preach in, with those particular, beautiful faces listening, and the windows making their own witness, and the play of that colorful light, and the commandment in stone over the door to be Doers of the Word and not Hearers Only. Mostly, though, what moves me is recalling the people who were in that room, many of them long gone now, and many of them still happily there. The saints in the windows and the saints in the pews (and choir loft!) made one great seamless family of ardent worship and loving service. As much as any space I’ve ever been in, that sanctuary is a room of pure blessing.

~ Paul Duke
Pastor 1982-1986
My remembrances include Advent worship services, the introduction of banners to the holy space, and the beautiful sounds of the congregation bouncing off the walls as they sang. How can anyone forget Widor’s *Toccata* begin played on the organ?

When some modern churches look like movie theaters, how we give thanks for that sanctuary that gives people a holy place in this broken world.

“*The sanctity of the Lord rests in the stone salt shaker and container from which the people of Highland scatter out in the world*”, to quote Bruce Miller at my installation. More importantly, Natalie was baptized there. Natalie and Jeremy learned to worship there and developed an understanding of true church.

~ Phil Christopher
*Pastor 1987-1995*