Trading Pews

by Cathy Tamsberg

They say retirement expands choices. My experience over the last nine-plus months has affirmed this truth. Since we Baptists don’t have rules about such things, it was my choice to step away from Pullen Memorial Baptist Church for a while when I retired last spring. I wanted to make space for the talented person who is now Pullen’s Associate Pastor and to use my absence to nudge church members to rely on others for things they brought to me for 17 years.

One of the choices I made during this early retirement period was to visit other congregations. Felicia, my partner, and I have shared the pews in multiple United Methodist, Presbyterian, Episcopal, United Church of Christ, Mennonite, Lutheran and Baptist churches and at Duke Chapel. Sometimes we’ve selected a church based on whether we have the energy to figure out yet another communion ritual or travel to the other side of town. On other Sundays we’ve attached lunch or time for conversations with long-time friends. Ironically, on many occasions we connected with former Pullenites who have meandered elsewhere over the years as our folks sometimes do.

Among the many gifts of being a guest in worship, I’ve learned two things. First, I have a renewed faith in the Church and the followers of Jesus who gather each week to worship and work at building God’s commonwealth. Each Sunday we have been in the company of committed, loving people who are working out their faith with fear and trembling as we all are. I may not agree with all of their theology or practice or priorities. But being in a different church every Sunday has reminded me that there are many faithful people sitting in pews across the globe each week. This gives me hope for humanity and the planet.

We have watched as a Presbyterian pastor called all the children forward to be sure they could see a sweet baby girl’s baptism. She reminded them that the baby would not remember the event, so it will be their job to tell her the story of her baptism when she gets older. We have seen elderly parishioners quote an Episcopal communion liturgy that obviously connects them in a soul-full way to the historic Anglican tradition. We have heard UCC’ers and Mennonites share announcements about their engagement in justice and peacemaking work in our city and around the globe.

We have witnessed hands being laid on a Lutheran pastor on her last Sunday with her congregation and even took communion from a former Pullen member who was drawn by the liturgy of his childhood to return to his Lutheran roots. Although not our preferred style, we have treasured contemporary worship that deeply consoled a long-time friend who recently lost her beloved partner to cancer. Each service was different, meaningful and challenging in its own way. Our lives were enriched by each visit.

A second important learning from this journey has been how much work we still must do to make inclusive language the norm in Christian churches. I have been stunned at how much male
language for God and even for people I have heard in these months. In the liturgies of some denominations God was always male, even if there was some tweaking of words for humans. Sometimes the pastor’s language was inclusive but there seemed to have been little attention to the words used by other worship leaders or in printed litanies or music.

I don’t know exactly when the conversations about inclusive language began. I do know the United Methodists and some Alliance churches were studying the importance of using inclusive language in the church in the late 1980’s. Yet today congregations from all denominations are still talking about God and even people in ways that foster male dominance and convey a narrow, impoverished understanding of the amazing fullness of God.

As this wandering season draws to a close and we reclaim our place in the Pullen pews, I return with valuable insights from my time away. I take heart that we are not alone in our quest to care deeply for one another and bring God’s love and justice to our broken world. I also hope to use my disappointment about the faith language I have heard to re-energize my commitment to expanding the use of inclusive language. I believe justice requires that we speak of God and all God’s creation in ways that expand our understanding of the vastness of the Holy. Justice demands that we encourage all sweet babies, especially the girls, to see in themselves the fullest image of God we humans can imagine.

*Cathy Tamsberg serves as vice president of the Alliance of Baptists’ board of directors. She retired as associate pastor of Alliance congregational partner Pullen Memorial Baptist Church in Raleigh, N.C., in April 2018 after 17 years of service.*