



Publisher's Note

Twenty-five years ago, I could very easily have been the person Greg Cootsona mentions in the first paragraph of his essay. While working in my first job as a full-time publishing professional in Chico, California, after finishing graduate school, I would enter the nearly empty sanctuary of Bidwell Presbyterian Church to hear my children sing in the children's choir. Imagine my surprise when a couple years ago I returned for a visit to discover that multiple Sunday worship services were packed to overflowing. The moribund Presbyterian church I had attended had been transformed into a dynamic congregation that palpably exuded a sense of Spirit-filled dynamism.

So at a time when the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) as a whole is in decline quantitatively, I thought it might be interesting to chronicle the saga of one mainline, downtown church that has undergone a radical renaissance. This is not to say that Bidwell Presbyterian has it right and all the other Presbyterian churches that are not growing have it wrong. But I do believe the story Greg Cootsona tells in these pages is inherently interesting and contains some instructive wisdom about what it means to be the church under the aegis of the Reformed tradition.

This is the ninth installment in this series of essays intended to illumine an important facet of church leadership and honor the service of Price Gwynn to the PC(USA) and specifically to Presbyterian Publishing Corporation (PPC).

As a point of clarification, Price Gwynn is not involved in the selection of writers or in reviewing the content of these essays prior to publication. Nor does he underwrite the series financially. Presbyterian Publishing bears the cost of publication and sends copies of these essays free of charge to some thirty thousand church leaders in the denomination. And even so, PPC still has a long way to go in repaying the debt of gratitude we owe Founding Board Chair Price Gwynn for his church leadership in establishing PPC as a viable ministry arm of the PC(USA).

Davis Perkins
President and Publisher



Price H. Gwynn III, Moderator of the 202nd General Assembly (1990) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), is the son and grandson of Presbyterian ministers and became a successful businessman as well as an extremely effective elder of the Presbyterian Church. Prior to his election as moderator, this North Carolina native

was vice president and director of Lance, Inc., having previously served as president of two other major companies. After being elected, Gwynn became the only moderator of our denomination to be featured in *The Saturday Evening Post* for his extensive business experience. Such experience prepared him to serve as chairman of the board of Presbyterian Publishing Corporation during an important time of transition. Gwynn served on the board from 1993 to 2001.

His experience and leadership at all levels of the Presbyterian Church are equally impressive. Gwynn has served as deacon, elder, Sunday school teacher, and synod representative and has held extensive presbytery committee assignments, as well as acting as moderator of his presbytery. He was awarded five honorary degrees from Presbyterian colleges, including Davidson, where he also served on the board of trustees. During his distinguished career, he chaired the board of Presbyterian Hospital in Charlotte, and he was an active member of the board of trustees of Union Theological Seminary in Richmond.

Further national church leadership roles include former membership on the General Assembly Council, the Committee on the Spiritual Welfare of the Church, and the Special Committee for Review of the General Assembly. Gwynn has combined all of these activities with a distinguished military career, outstanding civic service, and, with his wife, Katherine, strong family ties with their three sons and their grandchildren.

“The Church of the Last Stop”

The Story of Bidwell Presbyterian Church

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Geneva Press
Louisville, Kentucky





If you entered the doors of the historic Bidwell Memorial Presbyterian Church sanctuary in 1997 to hear your kids sing in the children's choir, you could locate a seat without significant effort. Walk to the Christian Education building, and a couple dozen or so children would be seated in the various K-6 Sunday school rooms, with plenty of space left. If, however, you missed the one worship service, you would have to come back the next Sunday. Fast forward ten years. Arriving in spring 2007, you could barely find a seat. You might even hear plans about a proposed second, "satellite" site in the next five years for the growing numbers of worshipers. If you were late for the 8:00 a.m. worship service, you would have three more opportunities that very day. Taking your daughter or son to the children's ministry of Kidwell Park, you would meet a sizeable team of volunteers and staff buzzing around the recently renovated Christian Education building, which still strains to make enough space for its children's programs. Or the kids might be in the sanctuary leading worship. And you could definitely forget about finding a parking place in the church lot that barely holds forty cars.

What has changed? If you were so motivated, you could investigate and discover several quantitative markers: Worship attendance has more than doubled from 295 in 1997 to an average of 800 today (and Easter and Christmas peaks of



Children in worship at Bidwell Presbyterian Church
(PHOTO COURTESY OF KELLY HOCK)



1,500). Bidwell's membership has gone from an official count of 498 in 1997 to 1,183 (and growing) today. Similarly, the budget in the previous nine years quadrupled, moving from just over \$300,000 to about \$1.56 million today, while the congregation is also currently funding a four-year \$4 million capital renovation.

Swelling numbers certainly do not mean a healthy church, and there are many negative reasons for numerical growth. Still, they might lead you to scratch deeper. You would hear about mission projects to serve an orphanage in Haiti; another one in Swaziland (this time children orphaned by AIDS); youth having served in the areas struck by Hurricane Katrina; a team (which I was on) that served poor farmers in Honduras in partnership with Agros International; a sandwich ministry on Sunday mornings to homeless in Chico; and a partnership with Chico's homeless ministry, the Jesus Center. You might catch a baptism of an adult who had entered the doors of a church for the first time. Perhaps you would feel expectancy at the worship service that God is alive and that something will happen in those pews.

Same denomination. Same location. Same church building. Even the same pews. Just one decade later. What made the change?



The team serving with Agros International in Honduras

(PHOTO COURTESY OF GREG COOTSONA)



I have been asked to reflect on the story of Bidwell Presbyterian Church in Chico, California, for the Price H. Gwynn III Church Leadership Series. I am prepared for this task, not least because my own story interweaves with Bidwell's recent history. I was called to serve as associate pastor of adult discipleship in 2002, in the midst of its current revival under the leadership of head-of-staff Steve Schibsted. I have also witnessed similar renewal at First Presbyterian Church of Berkeley and Fifth Avenue Presbyterian in Manhattan, where I have served on the staff. Imbedded in my reflections—but emerging only occasionally—lies my comparative analysis of my experience with these three congregations and their ministries. Consequently, I am convinced that a mainline, downtown church can maintain a vibrant presence, even in the midst of a fading denomination. On the other hand, there is no formula. I cannot offer “Thirty-One Days of Church Growth” with DVDs, prefab sermons, and a four-color brochure. Instead I can present the ways that this particular church has sought to live out Reformed theology and practice (if I can even speak of those separately). That, indeed, is the focus of my reflections. Most of all, I believe in the faithfulness of Jesus Christ, the head of the church.

Just one note on nomenclature: Our church has undergone three name changes over its years. In 1868, we began as Chico Presbyterian Church. It became Bidwell Memorial Presbyterian Church and is now, more simply, Bidwell Presbyterian Church. I will usually refer to it as the latter—or in the briefest form, Bidwell. And then one caveat: it is reasonably clear that we will not fully understand what has happened in our midst until it is over. Søren Kierkegaard has stated, “Life is understood backwards, but must be lived forwards.” So this report is necessarily tentative. It is also most certainly perspectival: I am trained as a theologian, and so I have emphasized theology and its practice. A whole other essay could have been written on the personal and relational aspects. If it sounds like Bidwell is all about theology, then remember that is simply my bias. (The church is certainly more balanced than I am.)

Finally, in presenting this story, I have organized my reflections into four major sections: The first is my path to Bidwell Presbyterian Church and how my life narrative fits into that of the church. The second offers some detail on Bidwell's life, especially in the twentieth century, and the way it has mirrored the typical experience of a downtown, mainline



church until its past decade or so. I then move to the heart of my essay on the persistent importance of Reformed theology, which highlights four key elements of the Reformation. I conclude with the challenges we face and the immense promise of God, who accompanies us on this journey.

I

Steve Schibsted and I really began to know each other in August 1988 on a cross-country drive. With our wives, we alternated between driving in the Schibsteds' Jeep and in the cab of a forty-five-foot Hertz-Penske truck, which contained my cats, Gazoot and Pesto, up front and our earthly belongings behind. The trip started in the San Francisco Bay Area and lasted about three thousand miles until we reached Princeton, New Jersey, as we made our way to begin our master of divinity programs.

Over the next three years, we and our fellow classmates journeyed through Introduction to Theology, Church History, Theology of Karl Barth, and Exegesis of Romans, all intermixed with internships at various congregations in New Jersey and Pennsylvania and decisively punctuated by our ordination exam study group. At the end of those three years, Steve and his wife, Leslie, moved back to Burlingame, California, to begin his first call, at First Presbyterian. Laura and I spent a year of study in Tübingen, Germany, on an exchange fellowship. The next stage for me was studying for my PhD at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, where I kept in contact with Steve and even taught classes at his church. Then in 1996, I started my ordained call in New York City, and our ministries took place on separate coasts.

Nevertheless, we kept in touch. Since we were classmates at Princeton and had both been transplants from California, I was undeniably intrigued to hear about Steve's experience at Bidwell as soon as he arrived in 1998. He talked about being part of a revival of a historic church in Chico, California. He enthusiastically described a gradual shift toward moving out in mission. Most of all, he told me that God was doing something powerful. I was intrigued.

And, yes, four years later I heard about an open position of adult discipleship. So I applied, received a call, and arrived in Chico in December 2002. At Bidwell, I saw a congregation that seemed to be growing well. I found a pastoral team that was deeply committed to relationships, in fact, one that based its leadership as senior staff on being a small group. Steve was



also committed to “getting the right people on the bus” (to quote Jim Collins in *Good to Great*), and indeed I met colleagues who were gifted and passionate. Their excellence challenged me, and their commitment to friendship in ministry strengthened me.

Most of all, the story of Bidwell Presbyterian Church attracted me because it contained the narrative of God “doing a new thing.” And I wanted to be part of it.

II

Many—at least in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)—know the depressing account of downtown mainline churches. They peaked in the '50s, during the Eisenhower Revival, the era of the president who is reported to have proposed, “I only trust a man who has a firm religious faith, and I don’t care what that faith is.” Whether or not that is accurate, it summarizes an era when going to any church and being American signified pretty much the same thing. During those years, Presbyterian Eugene Carson Blake, stated clerk for the General Assembly from 1951 to 1958, regularly picked up the phone to counsel President Dwight D. Eisenhower on assorted government policies. It was a time when the first step a Presbyterian took on arriving in a new town was to find out where the Presbyterian Church was located . . . and then go there to stay. In fact, I am told that many came to Bidwell simply to be connected with the connected of Chico: the university profs, the doctors, the bankers, and the government leaders. Meeting Jesus was not high on everyone’s list.

Those days are not here anymore. People do not move to town and begin with the particular form of Protestantism in which they were nurtured. If a president seeks advice from a Christian leader, it is most likely from an evangelical and not a mainline (or, maybe better, an “old-line”) denomination. The '60s arrived and changed religious life in our country. Our denomination boomed, hit its peak in 1965, and steadily declined since then. In that light, we needed to alter that little nursery rhyme just a bit:

Here’s the church.
Here’s the steeple.
Open the doors—
where are all the people?

At this point, many congregations simply folded. It could have happened to Bidwell Presbyterian. The church hit its



peak membership of 1,396 in 1959. It slowly hemorrhaged, and in 1967 membership stood at 848. During the next two decades, the congregation continued to dwindle until the rolls numbered 413 in 1995. As a point of comparison, that figure is not very different from 1909, when the congregation numbered 404. Then, however, the urban area held approximately ten thousand people; in 1995, there were at least seven times that many.

To set the context, I will add a few words about the city of Chico. Located about ninety miles north of the state's capital in Sacramento, Chico finds itself nestled between almond groves and rice fields to the west and the foothills of Mount Lassen to the east. With a population of seventy thousand—and a wider metro area of one hundred thousand—Chico is the largest city in Butte County and contains almost half of its inhabitants. With the second-oldest state university, Cal State Chico, as well as the trauma center for the north state, Chico is the cultural, economic, and educational hub for the region. It is a laid-back place, symbolized by its most noteworthy export, Sierra Nevada Pale Ale.

I also need to underline that during the two decades before the current chapter at Bidwell, the story is not entirely negative. In fact, as in all good stories, one chapter builds on the next. During the tenure of the previous pastor, Lynn Boliek, the congregation grew in its self-understanding with a strong core of Reformed teaching. The members studied the Bible. They grew closer as a community around Jesus Christ and his gospel. They knew their distinctiveness as Christians. They had solidified a base after a period of numerical decline. In a way, this faithful congregation stood poised for growth.

Reading historic session minutes from the years 1868–1919, I realized that earlier chapters in the history of Bidwell Presbyterian also contained seasons of heavy weather. Consider the first sixty-some years. Begun in 1868, the church struggled in the 1880s in a presbytery (Sacramento) where over a third of the churches had failed. The congregation had raced through five different pastors from 1868 to 1882. The third was even rumored to have consorted with a prostitute almost two hundred miles south in San Francisco; although the charge was never substantiated, he resigned. In 1910, the congregation was growing and decided to move, somewhere downtown and within five blocks of the old building. The leaders decided to construct a sanctuary that, with overflow seating, could hold seven hundred. Given the population of the city of Chico at



11,500, that would represent 6 percent of the population. In today's terms, the equivalent-size sanctuary would hold six thousand. (Incidentally, since Chico is essentially an island surrounded by almond orchards and the foothills of Mount Lassen, there are not many other towns from which to draw members.) On February 13, 1931, the church burned down. And yet, during the height of the Depression, the congregation rebuilt its sanctuary in "a year and a day" and dedicated it on February 14 of the next year.

The stories could be multiplied, but the bottom line is this: As I read the history, Bidwell Presbyterian Church has gone through as many tough times as good times. It has survived them well and often emerged stronger. Today is not much different. I would even expand this to the PC(USA) as a whole: we are in a drought, but congregations of varying sizes are thriving. (In fact—though I cannot pursue this here—smaller congregations actually have some significant advantages.) I do not believe the problems are primarily about ordination standards and statements on divestment from Israel. One looking for another rant on those themes will be disappointed here. My experience strongly argues that our health depends on returning to our mission, to our core theology and practice, and thus to a dependence on the reality of the living God we know in Jesus Christ.



Bidwell Memorial Presbyterian Church in the 1930s



Earlier I noted the numbers as a sign of growth. As a focus for assessing a congregation, these metrics always seem a bit inconsistent with Jesus, who defines the Great Commandment—and thus the bottom line for his followers—as loving God with all we are and loving our neighbors as ourselves (Matt. 22:37–40 and parallels). As a diagnostic, Jesus’ bottom line is entirely more relational and qualitative than a quantitative bottom line. So we also apply qualitative metrics. For example, we find that most of our newcomers have entered our doors because someone from the congregation invited them. That is a significant vote of confidence, especially when I recall a particular joke about our denomination’s unwillingness to evangelize: “What happens when you cross a Jehovah’s Witness with a Presbyterian?” “You get someone who comes to the door and doesn’t have anything to say.” I wish it were more than a joke because it describes many Presbyterians’ uneasiness at inviting friends to church—or more directly to faith in Christ. So maybe our congregation’s willingness to bring their friends stems from the fact that many of our members are not “cradle Presbyterian.” In any event, our congregation invites those outside the church to come in. And that means we hear great stories of changed lives. I am thinking of the woman who never previously came to church because she had been paralyzed in faith by the death of her child, but who now worships with us because a group of moms who had also lost children formed a Care Ministry support group that nurtured her. The high school student whose father died and who became lost in binge drinking, but who was invited to a youth retreat and there found Christ and thus meaning in his life, now serves our fifth- and sixth-grade ministry. The college student whom I met in the Western Religions course that I teach was then baptized at our evening university outreach service. Actually, bringing in those from outside the church walls relates to a figure to which we do pay attention: the number of adult baptisms. Why? This statistic represents people who have no church background—or so little that no one brought them to the sacrament as an infant. From 1999 to date, our pastoral staff has baptized eighty-seven adults.

Those qualitative measures really narrate the story of Bidwell Presbyterian. So, since I was trained to reflect theologically, my mind moves next to what this means about our theological heritage.



I believe in the persistent importance of Reformed theology and its practice. Our confessions are tested by what we actually do. I propose that our path toward health has occurred by going more deeply into our tradition. We seek to be rooted in our Reformed heritage and, most of all, in the God revealed in Jesus Christ, who is the deepest source for Presbyterians.

I am somewhat enamored by the idea of *theologia viatorum*, or “theology on the way,” because I believe we do our best theological reflection as we follow in the way of Jesus Christ. Our theology is always incomplete. That fact certainly fits the experience at Bidwell. Here then are five theological notes along the way.

Sola Christi

Bidwell Presbyterian’s theological core is relatively uneventful and, in a way, boringly ecumenical: We are centered on Jesus Christ and seek to stay grounded in Scripture. This, of course, is the standard Reformation slogan of “Christ alone” (*sola Christi*), which is repeated throughout the PC(USA) *Book of Confessions*. To cite the 1562 Heidelberg Catechism (4.001) and the 1934 Theological Declaration of Barmen (8.11) in that order:

- Q. 1. What is your only comfort, in life and in death?
- A. That I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. . . . Jesus Christ, as he is attested to us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death.

These citations should warm every Presbyterian’s heart. Though familiar, these commitments are not dull but stirring. I take our loyalty to Christ and to his gospel of grace as critical elements of Bidwell’s revival. These commitments have been replicated at two other downtown churches I have served. The degree that we remain faithful to Christ is the degree to which these congregations have experienced fruit. John 15:5 puts it this way: “I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.”

If *evangelical* means a commitment to the evangel, or the gospel, and an emphasis on the personal transformation, then



Bidwell is evangelical in this sense. Sadly, in aligning with conservative politics and a concomitant Americanism, the word *evangelical* has become severely tarnished of late. I, and many of our staff, actually emphasize Richard Baxter's phrase (which the twentieth-century apologist C. S. Lewis made famous), "mere Christianity." We seek to draw people into what has been believed by the Christian church "at all times, in all places." It is in this sense that we are a *Book of Order* church as giving "witness to the faith of the Church catholic" (G-2.0300). I suppose that means that we are first a *Christian* congregation and then a Presbyterian one. I would journey one more step: few enter church doors because of their denominational affiliation. At most, 30 or so of our 125 new members each year have ever been part of a PC(USA) church. When they join, we seek to bring them into a relationship with Christ first—which really is the only qualification for membership in our denomination. Subsequently, they are educated in Presbyterian distinctives.

Sola Gratia

Mentioning the name of Jesus Christ immediately infers the next doctrine of the Reformation, *sola gratia*. We confess salvation by his "grace alone" through faith, for it is by the grace of God in Jesus Christ that we seek to be "mere Christians." We cannot perform this task by our own strength, and we are also "prone to wander" as the hymn "Come Thou Fount" expresses so well. So, when we teach the heart of what it is to be a Christian, the key text is Luke 15: the God who seeks us out and who takes the initiative, the shepherd seeking his sheep, the woman searching for a lost coin, the father receiving home his son. We are all lost and in need of salvation, whether we can understand that lostness (the later, younger son) or are lost in our self-satisfaction (the older son). Most important, God continues to invite us home and celebrate with us. "Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate" (Luke 15:22–23). The Christian life is joy filled. It is good news.

All that means that Bidwell emphasizes the *relationship* to Jesus Christ over *religion* as a set of moral and pious rules for life. According to people who come to Bidwell, our city has a number of churches that teach a legalistic list of dos and don'ts for the Christian life. We sometimes call ourselves "the



Church of the Last Stop.” Burned out by these experiences, people often enter our doors before they leave church and its religious burdens altogether. Our ministry reflects what the Barth-influenced Confession of 1967 emphasizes, “But the reconciling word of the gospel is God’s judgment upon all forms of religion, including the Christian” (9.42). One form of that judgment is the degree to which we have often become frozen in forms of church, emphasizing the rigidity of the *Book of Order* and Robert’s Rules above the relational and organic nature of the body of Christ. And once we are related to Christ, we are related to one another in Christ. So Bidwell seeks to express warmth in worship and in church life. We desperately want people to connect to one another because we realize the truth of the statistic that if people do not come to know at least six people in the congregation, they will leave.

Related to this commitment is a form of *semper reformanda*: we seek to reform the church in its structures, to move from bureaucratic to organic and relational. To use Christian Schwarz’s phrase (from his *Natural Church Development*), we seek to achieve “functional structures,” which means that we are also reworking the key structure of the PC(USA), committees, urging them to become small covenant groups. This shift represents a realization of Roberta Hestenes’s *Turning Committees into Communities*—that we already have a small-group structure in our denomination.

The problem is that the standard *modus operandi* for a committee is to meet in order to meet, to keep the committee going. Instead we believe committees may be better formed as ministry teams or task forces—committed to a task and perhaps serving only for the time that the task takes. And this change is now in process. An easy example is the recent Capital Campaign Team, which met for a time and had a terminal date. Similarly, our Bidwell at the Crossroads Team has formed for the purpose of finding land for a second site and considering a partnership with a local “new urbanism” development in which another, satellite church would be located. In a similar vein, our Youth Ministry Support Team and Adult Discipleship Support Team engage directly in the ministries they seek to serve. Their work is not limited to a monthly committee meeting and a subsequent session report and managing budgets—although they certainly do this work. Instead, these teams, headed by the senior staff member alongside the key elder, actively engage in concrete ministries: teaching adult education classes, strategizing the best means



for adult spiritual formation, leading small groups of high schoolers, and planning mission trips and retreats. They are not a committee of consultants but a small group of ministry partners.

Sadly, committees often do not mean community. But it certainly can happen. I first saw this transformation in action at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian, where my wife, Laura, chaired the Kindership Committee (which cared for our preschoolers). She knew that many of the members desired spiritual development, and she figured that they were together anyway, so why not build a spiritual life as a team? She encouraged the committee to attend the church meal beforehand so they could spend time together around the table. At the start of the actual committee meeting, she led them in centering prayer or a meditative reading of Scripture (*lectio divina*). Gradually they found themselves “growing together in grace,” which is actually Bidwell Presbyterian’s slogan and represents the kind of transformation we seek today. And so we are thankful that small covenant communities are forming among our children, in youth and college ministry, and at session. At the level of senior staff—in which it is all too easy to act like one more boring committee at times—Steve Schibsted has sought to form us as a covenant group, in which we pursue trust, honest agreement and disagreement, and commitment to one another’s personal and spiritual growth. That, he believes, forms the DNA of Bidwell.

Do we always accomplish this goal of reinvigorating our senior staff and our church committees? Of course not. Honestly, it is often more of a preferred future than a present reality. Our desire to have small-group communities throughout the church is woefully inadequate. Gathering as intentional covenant groups often feels labored. We are plagued by a rugged individualism that marks the far west and the north state (not to be confused with Northern California, which describes Sacramento and the Bay Area). With growth of staff and increasing specialization comes also creeping bureaucracy. As the sociologist Max Weber pointed out, bureaucracy flourishes as it depersonalizes. To be personal and individual is to slow down the process. And so, where sticking one’s head inside an office door might once have accomplished the task, we now have multipage memos and forms. Sometimes petty humanness prevents us from following relentlessly the path that Christ sets out. We are sinfully slow at relinquishing our spheres of influence when



someone more gifted is right in front of us. Our committees and programs sometimes persist without good reason.

I suppose that the best remedy is to reform all we do by the standard of God's Word in Jesus Christ. We have seen the stream of God's Spirit flowing in our church's life. That is so good that increasingly we want nothing that would block it. The commitment to *sola gratia* and to relationships with God and with one another remains forefront. Thankfully, we are told by new and long-term members alike that these marks remain characteristic of our congregation.

Translation into the Vernacular

Bidwell has realized it needs to speak in a meaningful language to be understood and not in arcane theological jargon. Naturally, we did not invent this concept but learned it from the great reformer Martin Luther, who was convinced that the Bible should not be encoded in Latin, a language understood only by the scholarly. Instead, using his skills as a master linguist, Luther canvassed sixteenth-century Germany to study the idioms that people actually spoke. That way people could hear the message of Scripture in words they understood. And so he became fluent in the vernacular.

This commitment has massive and broad implications but bears its largest imprint on the worship services. Stated in absolute brevity, we believe that the form of expression in worship is variable, but the commitment to seeking God's transforming Presence through worship is constant.

Our worship services seek fluency in three different idioms. Bidwell has four worship service times because we cannot fit everyone into fewer, primarily because of the sanctuary size (which seats comfortably around 320 when our average Sunday attendance currently runs around 800). This limitation has provided the opportunity to speak in various vernaculars. The 8 a.m. worship service reflects our heritage, with robes and hymns and the organ. We have designed the identical 9:30 a.m. and 11:00 a.m. services to speak the language of contemporary music (though we never fully abandon hymns) sans vestments, while our 5:45 p.m. service is set to reach college-age and young adults with a more aggressive electric guitar-driven "indie" sound accompanied by weekly Communion.

Significant theological convictions undergird these decisions: Put negatively, there are no good theological reasons against innovations in worship. Even more strongly, if



there is resistance to these contemporary elements in worship, the complaints are generally nontheological in character and should be considered as such.

This leads naturally to a few other convictions: Worship at its best is always contemporary and traditional. So both the contemporary-worship people and the traditionalists have it right. (Or, both have it wrong.) The “worship wars” are largely unnecessary—people talking past one another because they are too stubborn to consider the necessary elements of each pole. The contemporary side often expresses all the smug confidence of the winners—gaining more members and followers every week—while the traditional side has all the elements of elitism—“we’re maintaining intellectual content and solid aesthetic value.” This bickering is unnecessary for those who worship the one Lord Jesus Christ. The 1647 Westminster Catechism says it about as well as it can be said: “Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever” (7.001). Thus, worship is essentially a response to the First Commandment: that we give ourselves in life first and foremost to God. Our staff and elders believe that God does not care a great deal about whether we use traditional or contemporary worship—and certainly not how we label our worship services—but cares about how these practices bring us closer to our Creator. In fact, from Scripture, it would be hard to make a case for either of these modes.

As I reflected on the nature of speaking in the vernacular, I remembered a nearly throwaway sentence by Robert Kingdon, the historian who has worked extensively with the sixteenth-century records of the Geneva Consistory. He contrasts the Protestant Reformers with their Catholic counterparts:

The worship leader looked very different. Instead of a priest in colorful vestments changing with each part of the liturgical year, he was a preacher dressed for every service in a plain black robe with a starched white collar, the so-called bands of Geneva. *To contemporaries he did not look like a clergyman. He looked like a lawyer* [emphasis added].¹

Kingdon opened my eyes to the degree to which Calvin worked to express himself contemporarily. The robe in contemporary terms would be a business suit.

1. Robert M. Kingdon, “The Genevan Revolution in Public Worship,” *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 20, no. 3 (1999): 272.



I will not comment about the particulars of ecclesiastical garb, except as it raises larger questions about visual vernacular. What about the importance of images in our culture, where “icons” range far and wide on computers and where YouTube videos dominate Internet traffic? How does this vernacular relate to our Reformed disdain for images?

I turned to an old friend, Gary Hansen, now assistant professor of church history at the University of Dubuque Seminary—and Calvin scholar. I asked him about the Reformed tradition and images, the Reformed tradition and the pipe organ, the Reformed tradition and . . . Well, you get the picture. He provided me with the following insights: The sixteenth century followed a time of religious devotion, which used images a great deal and which had become idolatrous. The behavioral response against images is clear: they are not allowed. The deeper material standard of the Reformation, however, is the Word of God in the Bible. And there, in Scripture, images are specifically commanded on the priests’ garments, for example, the Ark. Second, the pipe organ was specifically prohibited in early Reformed worship. I am told that Calvin called the organ “the devil’s bagpipes.” Minimally, it is well known that Calvin’s Psalter singing had no instrumentation, certainly no organ or piano. This should give us just a little pause when we condemn the electric guitar or the drum set and forget to condemn the organ.

Why do I write this? Because we are committed to the Reformed tradition, yes, but our tradition has a deep grammar of Scripture. We do not follow Calvin in every particular because to do so is neither profoundly biblical nor consistent with our vernacular. I suppose I am returning to *semper reformanda*. At the same time, I cannot be content with all (perhaps most) of what passes for contemporary worship. I frankly feel that Calvin would be appalled by the low esteem of the sacraments under this banner. To support contemporary worship does not imply a low-church, two-part service: one huge block of singing followed by one long sermon. We continue to celebrate the rich drama of Reformed worship.

Naturally, the issue between the two camps continues in our church. The traditionalists want content, quality, and respect for what has been honored through time. The contemporary folks want communicability and joy. We have tried to find a way to begin moving beyond the impasse by affirming that both groups realize the difficulty of discussing



this subject at all and then affirming what each group is after.

Maybe in the end we can all learn that we are on the same side. The enemy that Bidwell is fighting is not traditionalist versus nontraditionalist but the foes of materialism, worldliness, and just plain apathy. As long as we are struggling against each other, the real battle will never be won. As long as we are in internal ecclesiastical struggles, we will lose our mission, our *missio dei*, God's sending us into the world. And this brings me to the next point.

The Church for the World

If the first three sections sound reasonable and reasonably placid, we now come to the crux that has transformed all aspects of the life at Bidwell Presbyterian Church: pursuing mission, that is, becoming the church for the world. Reformed theology is great, but a major component is still underdeveloped in the history of our theological tradition: the church as a "missional" body. Karl Barth, in his magisterial *Doctrine of Reconciliation*, found ample Reformed theological support for Christ the Priest—the One who descends to save us—and Christ the King—the One who ascends to demonstrate what it means to be fully human—but found wanting a fully elaborated Reformed doctrine of Christ the Prophet—the One sent out into the world. I have been reading *Church Dogmatics* IV/3 with two other stalwart church members, and we have been astounded at the power with which Barth unfolds this theme of the mission of Christ and his community. Among his effusive prose, there is this pithy, pregnant sentence that summarizes his commitment for the church in light of Jesus' life: "A Christianity with no mission to all the world would not be Christianity."²

Steve Schibsted posed this as a question in his candidating sermon before the congregation of Bidwell Presbyterian: "Who are we here for?" From that decision flow many others. In fact, Steve challenged the congregation *not* to vote for him if they did not want to be a church for others. Because that meant change. And yet the congregation of Bidwell has responded by seeking to make room for, and seeking out, the new person, one who is not *yet* in the pews. Because few people—at least from my experiences in California and New York City—come to church because it is culturally "the thing to do."

2. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3.1, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961), 304.



So we continually work to keep the church from looking inward and using churchy words. For example, the pastors interrogate their language: Do people understand *harmatology*? *benediction*? *Incarnation*? Are these words necessary? (The first, definitely not—my computer’s spell-checker does not even recognize it—the second is not as critical as the third, and the latter two have to be defined to be comprehended.) In addition, what narrative do we place around the Prayer of Confession? Can people who are new keep up with the pace of service by using the bulletin? Does it refer to texts and hymnals that are unknown to them? Do we use insider language, replete with *us* and *them*, disparaging those outside the church walls?

Bidwell Presbyterian’s commitment to Reformed theology, especially in its development in the past century or so, means that we are a church in the world and for the world. “To be reconciled to God is to be sent into the world as his reconciling community” (9.31). Put another way—and to use H. Richard Niebuhr’s well-known and well-worn typology—we are not “Christ against culture” but “Christ transforming culture.” I would change this slightly by asserting that Christ *fulfills culture*—that in the gospel the deepest longings and needs of our human communities find their satisfaction. The gospel also provides challenge and rebuke to the distortions of culture. This position contrasts with other free-church congregations in Chico that tend to be more interested in creating a separate Christian culture—“Christ against culture”—or whose churches literally are standing outside the city limits. Though we have grown, our leaders have long decided that we will stay as a witness to Christ downtown, even if that means we struggle with a parking lot that holds too few cars. We are in the midst of the city.

And the decision to stay planted in the concrete needs of Chico often leads church members to unique and inspiring initiatives. Just last November I witnessed this happening. Two energetic Bidwell members envisioned a Thanksgiving Day 5K run that would benefit Chico’s homeless. They patterned it after similar, successful events in other cities. Immediately partnering with our local homeless ministry, the Jesus Center, a leadership team was formed that soon engaged local business to sponsor the event and dozens of volunteers (many from Bidwell) to staff it. The momentum began to build, and the team planned for three hundred runners. But the sign-ups quickly outpaced expectations, and on Thanksgiving 2006, T-



shirts, racing numbers, and even entry forms ran out. But no one seemed to mind. With local TV and print media covering the event, over a thousand runners showed up, blanketing the city's Bidwell Park. And after the race ended and the leadership team finished its work, over \$40,000 had been raised for the benefit of our homeless in Chico. It was a "win" for all sides, a sign of how our church members are engaged in mission to those outside our church. Most important, it was a blessing to our city.

This commitment to Chico and to our broader culture is embodied in John and Annie Bidwell. To know Chico is to know the name Bidwell. Several Chico landmarks carry their legacy: naturally our congregation, which (despite Annie's wishes) bears their name, and most prominently, Bidwell Park, largely a land grant from them, which is the third-largest municipal park in the nation. Their former house, Bidwell Mansion, is a California state park, and it lies a few hundred yards from the church, just across Big Chico Creek (and on Rancho Arroyo Chico, from which the town derives its name). The Bidwells were instrumental in the beginnings of Chico Normal School, which eventually became California State University at Chico. In addition, Annie Bidwell had major influence in the temperance movement—which, of course, was a flawed campaign for social justice (men were spending time in bars instead of supporting their families)—as well as in



Annie and John Bidwell



outreach to Native Americans, who were hired to work on the Bidwells' farm and who (according to our state park) received unusually high wages, equivalent to their Caucasian counterparts. Annie began her role as educator with the Mechoopda Indians of Bidwell Rancheria, driven by the need to bring these "savages" (Annie was still a product of her day) to Christ and to help prepare them to survive in the white man's world. Finally, she had major influence in the Christian life of converted Mechoopda Maidu Indians, even performing weddings and possibly baptisms. (This historical record is not entirely clear to me here, but it is possible that she was even ordained in the late nineteenth century!)

Annie and John were people involved in the civic life of city and country. Annie at four feet eight and John at six feet two made an unusual pair some ways, but they were matched in vision and cast an equivalent shadow over their times. John rode the first wagon train from St. Louis to California in 1841. He served in the California senate in 1849 and supervised the state censuses of 1850 and 1860. He was a delegate to both the 1860 Democratic national convention and the 1864 Republican convention. He also served as a Republican member of Congress from 1865 to 1867. The Bidwells entertained academic lights such as Asa Gray, the famous Harvard biologist, which especially interests me because of Gray's work in reconciling faith with the budding Darwinian evolution. While taking a tour through their home, I was inspired to find books on their shelves that pointed to an engagement with science, such as Joseph Leconte's *Evolution: Its Nature, its Evidence, and its Relation to Religious Thought*. Annie was a friend and correspondent of Susan B. Anthony, Frances Willard, and John Muir. Guests at the wedding of Annie and John included then president Andrew Johnson and future president Ulysses S. Grant. I record all this because their legacy of outreach to the world is still part of our makeup. We stand in their lineage.

Admittedly, Bidwell Presbyterian often fails at this mandate to care for the world around us. We can slip into the consumeristic, narcissistic, "it's all about me" ways of America. That is certainly the natural drift of our culture. I mentioned our church renovations. I realize that it costs a great deal of money to be posted downtown and to maintain sufficient space for newcomers. I know many thousands in our city have never heard the reconciling word of the gospel. Hundreds of thousands of dollars were needed to create wheelchair



accessibility; to clear rooms for children, youth, and adults; and simply to catch up on deferred maintenance. But I am troubled when I consider that expense in light of our mission to a world where billions do not know the name of Christ, where a billion people live on less than a dollar a day, and where 2 percent of our planet possess half of all wealth and 50 percent of the world have just 1 percent of it. We have not yet arrived at being sent out in mission. We have not fully realized our goal of reaching beyond our borders. So there is more to do. We continue to encourage our members (and they exhort us) in ministries to neighbors, college classmates, and students. (Our congregation is home to numerous teachers.) We seek to engage the concrete needs of a twenty-first-century downtown, both its growing secularism and its countervailing search for an unmoored spirituality.

Recently, we have also been expanding our commitment to needs outside our country's borders with various initiatives (which I also mentioned earlier) through projects that span three continents and engage dozens from our church. I'll just mention a few. We have maintained a multiyear commitment to a Haitian orphanage, where teams from our church have traveled every year—usually with bags bursting with toys and clothes for the kids. In the process, the team has become a true Christian *koinonia*, sharing fellowship among themselves and with our Haitian sisters and brothers. Last year, Jim Coons, our youth pastor, with a team of advisers led seventy-five high school students to the streets of post-Katrina New Orleans to extend God's love there by passing out food and helping to tear down houses so that they could be rebuilt. They worshiped with charismatic Christians there; some even described "the Holy Spirit" moving. So that was definitely an unusual Presbyterian mission experience!

We have teamed with Agros International to care for a poor village in Honduras. I am thinking of Mario, standing on a steep Honduran hillside that had been painstakingly cleared of its tropical brush by machete, and the conversation he had with our head of staff, Steve, about the corn that will one day be planted. He spoke with the dignity of no longer living under the tyranny of subsistence farming but of planting the community's *own* crops they would sell. Sometimes public school is inaccessible because families cannot afford \$1 bus rides or inexpensive uniforms. He beamed with joy and hope when he described how his children could attend school.

Jeff Gephart, our university pastor, has taken a lead in



connecting us to Albania and to one of the very first Christian congregations to take shape after this officially atheist country opened its doors to religions. There the college students met Zef, an Albanian pastor, who told of how his congregation, Emanuel Church, responded to the refugee crisis in Kosovo in 1999, when hundreds of thousands of refugees fled the violence of the Serbs. Emanuel Church was assigned the job of running one of the main camps in town, preparing meals daily for thousands of refugees, finding mattresses for them to sleep on, and coordinating aid. The Kosovar Albanians, who were primarily Muslim, were astounded by the tireless and generous acts of service that this tiny group of Protestant Christians poured out, all because of “their love for Jesus.” For our college students, it provided a clear picture of “being” and “doing” the gospel. It also transformed Emanuel Church and brought the members together in a new way.

The Sovereignty of God

If that last paragraph sounded a bit too focused on *our* actions and *our* responsibility, I close this section here. Ultimately, it is God who leads us: “Christ calls the church into being, giving it all that is necessary for its mission to the world, for its building up, and for its service to God” (G-1.0100b). That lapidary statement from the *Book of Order* summarizes our experience at Bidwell Presbyterian. God has called the church universal into existence, and we at Bidwell Pres share that vocation. God is indeed the Lord of what is now happening. Our Sovereign God is doing something remarkable, but the decision is God’s alone. The leadership of Bidwell (and that at least includes session and paid staff) has the strong sense that this current renewal is nothing that we could engineer or fully comprehend. God is dynamically at work, and like glimpsing a fish shimmering through the water, we seek not to catch it but to follow its beauty. In fact, we believe that Spirit has been at work long before any of us arrived on the scene and that our responsibility is to follow God’s lead.

One critical response remains prayer. We recognize that we are called to pray consistently because this is ultimately God’s work and not ours. When we pray, we open our ears to obey God’s leading. We have a monthly prayer meeting, focused not only on people’s needs but also on the mission of the church. Our staff prays consistently. We have teams praying for Sunday morning worship. Through prayer and its effect on



daily life, we try to keep open to what God is doing. We have tried to be open to changing anything so that God's Spirit can move freely.

There is, of course, a countervailing question: can these efforts be replicated in other congregations? As I first began writing this reflection on Bidwell, another pastor-friend—entirely gifted, faithful, and thoughtful—reminded me of his ten-year slog against the negative effects of life in a declining downtown and a dying congregation. He was not successful in any of the ways I have described. In the end, it will be God's free decision and work. Our vocation as a church remains in responding faithfully to God's voice and in being faithful to follow. And that brings me to my final reflection.

IV

The biggest challenge we face—with our focus on “grace alone”—is to sit back and “let grace take over,” by which we could become lazy and complacent, thinking we have arrived—or worse, that somehow we are blessed because we are good. This can become matched with that lovely pair of presumption and pride. It leads to a phrase that comes poignantly to mind—although I record this with some hesitation—at one Fifth Avenue Presbyterian meeting the title “the Cathedral of Presbyterianism” was proposed. I advocate a ban on that sort of conversation.

And so we seek to continue this journey with humility. But we do not walk ahead in fear. We believe Jesus Christ will be faithful to his church, to the body of believers throughout the globe. Indeed, that does not necessarily imply the ongoing growth, or even existence, of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The denomination may rise or fall. Bidwell may continue to grow or it may contract. Another congregation in Chico may achieve greater prominence. And yet, I am convinced that, whatever happens, we are called to be faithful.

When Annie Bidwell died in 1918, the session reflected on her life and its impact. As I pored through those original session minutes, I found a statement that was quite exciting to read in its original handwriting. I take this epithet as an immense promise and yet also a challenge to our stewardship of the congregation of Bidwell Presbyterian Church. Here is an excerpt:

In the death of Mrs. Annie E. K. Bidwell the Chico Presbyterian Church has lost an honored and devoted



member. Firm in her convictions yet gentle in her dealings she filled her days with a passion of untiring devotion to the rich and needy, the tempted and outcast, the stranger and the foreigner, in the Spirit of Him who “went about doing good.”

Among the varied interests to which she gave minute and conscientious attention, the church occupied a prominent position. . . . Within its walls much of the spiritual life of the community was fostered. . . . God grant that we may be wise in the right use of the influence of such a life to enlarge our ideals, confirm our purpose in the righteous course and establish the love of God in our hearts, that the kingdom of our Lord and his Christ may come amongst us.

That indeed is an amazing legacy. May it also be so for us.

