

AN INTERVIEW WITH DR. JOHN BLACKWELL

By nature a teacher, Dr. John Blackwell has been highly influential in the improvement of our Adult Education classes.

How were you first introduced to First Church?

I was born and raised in San Diego. My parents have continued to live here and so did my grandmother. My parents were members of this church. I used to come to the cultural events back when Chuck McLain was pastor and, of course, knew people who attended the church back in the 60's and 70's.

Tell me about the events that led up to your returning to San Diego in 2001 and becoming a pastor at this church.

When I was working in Arizona, I learned about an available position at First Church. They had need of someone who not only knew theology but who could teach and help in the School of Christian Studies and things like that. I had known Jim Standiford from 1978 or 1979. He was my closest friend in the ministry. Jim and I used to dream of working together and never thought that we could pull it off. Jim knew me as a colleague and as a team worker. The timing was right. He had certain needs and I had certain interests and skills and so we worked together.

In the beginning, were your duties and job responsibilities pretty much what they are today?

Yes, Minister of Discipleship, and Dean of School of Christian Studies. I preached at the Water's Edge and at the Saturday service. I did work that was involved in developing those two services. Did a lot of teaching at the School of Christian Studies and worked with all the program staff. Kind of coordinate collaboration.

The School of Christian Studies has been outstanding ever since it got started. Tell me more about it.

Chuck Hoffman got it started. It was his brainchild. It has a kind of mission to provide college and seminary level education to the laity. Of course, this is a church that is pretty hungry and thirsty for learning. We provide courses and symposia in the areas of the New Testament, the Old Testament, theology, ethics, church history, and world religions, and we try to expand into some other areas. Probably the biggest addition in the past four years has been the development of a group of academic fellows. We meet about once a month. We read some important stuff and discuss it. And then we offer classes and lead the discussion in the classes.

In terms of history, our first symposium that we put on was entitled "Living with Our Deepest Differences." It began in September 2002. In one session Mark Trotter, Depak Gupta and myself each gave a lecture on the subject of Living with Our Deepest Differences and then we had a dialogue with each other. The next big symposium will take place on October 8th, 2005, on the subject of bioethics, particularly stem cell research, with Dr. William Hurlbut from Stanford, and Dr. Rebecca Dresser, from Washington University of Saint Louis. Both of these people are members of the President's Council on Ethics. They will meet here to give lectures and lead some discussion. This will be fabulous! These people are on the cutting edge of giving the best recommendations on bioethics that we have going in this country.

This seems to be way beyond Adult Education. It is more like information for the community. Do you invite people from outside the church to attend?

Yes, we do. We advertise in the Union Tribune and we have a mailing list so we do reach out to the community.

Recently I attended a symposium on the history of the Bible and I noticed that the majority of the people there were not members of our church. Does this often happen?

This can happen. But, at other times, like when we invited Ellen Marshall and other professors from the Claremont School of Theology to come down, we actually had more members than non-members attending. So, it goes both ways. Also, when we invited Peter Francis, the Warden of St. Deniol's Residential Theological Library in Wales, we had more people from our church than outsiders. And we have had some outstanding preachers. Phil Amerson from the Claremont School of Theology has preached here. In June, Jim Wallis, organizer of Sojourners in Washington, D.C. will be here.

I get the impression that working with the School of Christian Studies has had a special significance to you, personally. Do you find that to be true?

Yes, it has been rewarding to me. But that is also true of all the classes that I teach. And then working with all the worship services has been rewarding. All of this is true for me because I find that people are rewarding. I get far more from all of you than I give. This is not only just an educated congregation, it is a congregation of life-long learners. People who are willing to hunker down and study. There are lots of people here who are insatiable learners, and I guess, because I am an insatiable learner, that makes for a good match.

I've noticed that you have been willing to try new and different approaches to learning. In a church situation it is more common to stay with what is established.

It is interesting that you should mention that because I do try to sense what people want and need to learn. With our Wednesday Bible Study, I discovered that the group wanted to go for three weeks and then take a break and so we did it in three week bites.

I often ask people to describe any "incidents" in their church experience. These are events that are sometimes a surprise and often amusing or revealing. Do you recall any of these?

Well, the first time that I preached in this sanctuary, I had just gotten trifocals and I didn't see the step out of the pulpit and I literally fell out of the pulpit at the end of the sermon. I had never fallen out of the pulpit before, so there is one.

All of us here at the church regret that you are leaving, but are happy for you, at the same time, that you are going on to something that you want to do. In particular, I have heard much praise for you from your colleagues.

Change is difficult. Mark Trotter was here for many years. And the inevitable change that occurred when he left has required many adjustments from the staff. I think working with and helping all of my colleagues to shine is my most proud accomplishment. Helping people to recognize Peggy's gifts, Djalma's gifts, and Randy's gifts is a joy to me. There are a lot of ministries that are behind the scene for a lot of the congregation because when you are in such a large church you don't see it. These are not people who are up in front of the people, certainly not all of the time. So helping people see what a fabulous job that Randy does gives me great pleasure. The one-on-one attention that he gives, the small group attention, the pastoral care, the mentoring, the leader in difficult situations, are all like out

of our ministry. I mean, we had a family lose their house this past week in a fire and Randy spearheaded the ministry, not only to them, but with them. People don't always know that

Tell me about your new job.

Yes, well, it is not necessarily something bigger or better, but it is different. I am going to be Dean of the Chapel and Professor of Religion at Kansas Wesleyan University. It is a United Methodist Liberal Arts College. My daughter is a graduate of that school. She was on the search committee that selected the President of Kansas Wesleyan. I think it is a good match for me because it is what I do best. I'll be preaching the weekly chapel service to the students and faculty and teaching two classes a semester. That's it.

Sounds like an interesting variety. Two roles that might overlap, but also they could be different.

But, I think those two roles are best suited to who I am. This will also give me a little more time for my writing. I'm happy about that. It's time to work on all those books that I have been planning on to get done. I have three manuscripts done. It's time to be getting those out.

I can see why you are looking forward to this change. All of that sounds exciting.

It is. That is one of my favorite things to do.

Is there anything that you would like to add?

Oh, just what an honor that this has been. What a great future I think this church has. I think that First Methodist is positioned to do great things. This church has a diversity of ministries that may be second to none. It has a theologically diverse congregation. You know, we have people in this church who think that the President of the United States walks on water and we have people who have serious questions about his leadership. And they all go to church together.

That seems like a good example of "Living with Our Deepest Differences."

And that was also true with the previous President of the United States. And I think that all of this is very hopeful because you can't hope for peace in the Middle East if people who go to church at the First United Methodist Church of San Diego cannot live with their deepest differences.

Interviewer: Lorraine Barnes – Date of Interview: May 27, 2005

Note: Dr. Blackwell's farewell tribute dinner and roast was held on June 18, 2005. A limerick contest was held in John's honor. Two talented limerick writers won first and second prize, respectively:

There was a young man of the cloth,
Who read Chaucer, Kierkegaard, and Chekhov,
Tolkien, Lewis and Rohr
The whole Bible, and more . . .
Then wrote a big book about Sloth!

By John Imel

There once was a pastor named John
Who made folks so bored they would yawn,
They learned to stay clear
When he quoted Shakespeare
But me thinks he'll be missed when he's gone.

By Sharon Wynott