

Why Your Church is Worth the Effort

There are some moments and memories that we never forget.

One such memory is when I first met Bill Self in 1981 at a banquet on the campus of Samford University. I was energized by Bill's after-dinner speech.

He quickly became one of my favorite preachers, not just because he was a captivating and motivating speaker, but because he had a contagious love for the local church.

As the years unfolded, Bill became not only my colleague, but also a friend and a strategic encourager.

We were blessed to have Bill and his wife, Carolyn, spend a weekend with us in Pensacola in May 2014.

For many years, Bill had been a close friend with our iconic pastor emeritus, Jim Pleitz. And Bill had served as the guest "evangelist" for a series of memorable revival services at First Baptist Pensacola during the 1970s.

So, Bill's visit to Pensacola to be our guest for Heritage Day was filled with visits, stories and reunions.

On Saturday evening, my wife, Amanda, and I took Bill and Carolyn to Peg Leg Pete's, our favorite seafood restaurant on the beach.

We laughed and reminisced, but mostly we talked about the future of the local church.

We discussed the many ways the church is in a season of challenging transition.

While some pundits are prepared to offer a eulogy over the local church, Bill believed that if we seize the opportunity to dialogue poetically and prophetically with our culture, rather than launching hostile verbal missiles at our culture, this could be the church's finest hour.

From among his many excellent sermons, such as "King for a Day," "Swimming to

the Deep End of the Pool” and “What Do You Want with Me, Jesus?” I am glad that Bill chose to preach the sermon, “The Church Is Worth the Effort,” for our congregation, a message that continues to be timely and relevant.

Little did we know that our visit with Bill in Pensacola would be our last visit with him this side of heaven. Bill died on Jan. 9, 2016, from complications with ALS.

So, in memory of Bill, each year around this time I give thanks for Bill’s impact on my life and ministry, and I review my notes from his last sermon in Pensacola – a sermon that every pastor and church member needs to internalize as we remind ourselves that the most influential days of the local church can be ahead of us and not behind us.

“I still love the church. I love the church universal, as well as the church local (red brick, white-columned with deacons smoking in the parking lot). With all of its dysfunction and flesh marks, with all of its confusion and humanity, it is still the best thing God has going for Him in this world. We do have a treasure in earthen vessels,” Bill proclaimed that Sunday morning.

“The church is a solid oak tree, not a fragile tea cup. It has withstood Roman imperialism, Jewish legalism, pagan optimism, medieval institutionalism, the excesses of the reformers, wars and rumors of wars, a youth quake, modern skepticism, southern provincialism, resurgent fundamentalism, and heresies in each generation that seem never to die. It can withstand anything our generation can throw at it,” he said.

“It has been victimized by unprepared and selfish clergy, tone-deaf musicians, manipulative members, argumentative deacons, demanding denominations, unloving reformers and greedy politicians,” Bill continued. “Still it continues to provide love, affirmation and community to the fallen in the face of alienation.”

He concluded, “The church is worth the effort.”

Preach on, Brother Bill. Preach on.

[Barry Howard](#) serves as a leadership coach with the Center for Healthy Churches and a pastoral counselor with the Faith and Hope Center. He is a member of the Baptist Center for Ethics board of directors and recently retired as the pastor of First Baptist Church of Pensacola, Florida. A [version](#) of this article first appeared

on his [blog](#), *Barry's Notes*, and is used with permission. You can follow him on Twitter [@BarrysNotes](#).