



Worship Resources for *Steeple* Ad Run – Fall 2008

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Ephesians 2:19-22

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God.

THE REAL TALL STEEPLE CHURCH

Recently, a friend of mine was celebrating her installation as the new senior minister of a grand church, and it was my privilege to preach the installation sermon. As friends of hers through her years of ministry drove up to her new seat of ministry, which we had never seen before, there was a hushed silence as this magnificent building loomed on the horizon. “Whoa,” we said, “now that’s a *tall* steeple church.”

Traditionally, the tall steeple church is the one with the big budget, a lot of members, a large, impressive and usually old but well cared for building that has, of course, a very tall steeple. The tall steeple church makes a mark on the town. Apparently in the history of church architecture, size does matter.

In the town where we live, Glen Ellyn, Illinois and the nearby town from which many of our members hail, Wheaton, there are a lot of tall steeple churches. We are a very church-ed community, where the churches thrive. Christendom still exists out here, even though people see signs of slippage like those Sunday morning sports events. But the schools still give less homework on Wednesday nights because it’s “church night” and there’s not just one big church in town, there are many. And our United Church of Christ congregation is one of them. We would give the appearance, when you drive up, with our 1924 neo-gothic ivy covered building of being one of those tall steeple churches.

The church I attended in my high school days was quite the opposite. My tiny church in the suburbs of Washington DC was not one of the tall steeple churches. It had a modest physical plant, and no towering steeples. The small membership often wondered what we were doing wrong, and why people chose the big tall steeple churches over us. And it always came down to programs. They had the youth groups, and the large Sunday school, and success drew more success. We couldn’t compete with that. So we just had to be ourselves: small, quirky and intimate. I had three kids in my confirmation class, two of whom were brothers. We met for instruction in the pastor’s basement. Sunday school classes were combined in large age ranges and the small choir wasn’t invited to any international choir festivals. And I loved my church. It got my family through deaths, divorce and nurtured in me a call to the ministry. It didn’t take a tall steeple to be a mighty fortress of God’s love in the storms of life. To carry the odd metaphor a little further, it’s not the size of the steeple but what you do with it that matters.

Because of this, I know that there is a certain danger in being a tall steeple church, and it is the danger of arrogance. Having been loved and nurtured in a small family size church, I know that having a large budget, multiple staff and powerful programs are not the only way to follow the gospel call. Churches shouldn't be measuring the numbers of our youth group against the numbers of another church's. Jesus saved the world with twelve disciples. He can work with all our churches, no matter the size, as long as we are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ himself as the cornerstone. That means we are no longer strangers and aliens, but instead say, "No matter where you are on your journey, you are welcome here, in the household of God."

This week, you will see the new United Church of Christ television spot, a clip we've come to call the "Steeples ad." It will run Monday, September 29 through Sunday, October 12, on CNN, Bravo, BET and TV One and will reach more than 10 million people.

The ad begins with hands opening up in the childhood game, "Here is the church, and here is the steeple. Open the door. See all the people." Then you hear the phrase "*all* the people," repeated, with an emphasis on the word "all." You see a variety of images. There are young people and old. There are children of all races. There is a man in a wheelchair. There are heterosexual couples and there is a shot of two women who are a couple. At the end of the series of images, the ad says, "God accepts *all* the people; the United Church of Christ. No matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here."

And when I saw that, I thought to myself, "Now that's a real tall steeple church."

Tall, not in physical stature, but tall in spirit. It takes a spiritually tall steeple to have room for so many of God's children. It takes a large holy space to make room for the rich diversity of Christ's people. It takes a grand and expansive heart inside of each of us to make room for everybody at the table. And that can take place in a cathedral full of hundreds, or in a confirmation class of three.

So knit your fingers together like you did when you were a kid, and say the rhyme with me. "Here is the church and here is the steeple. Open the doors. And see *all* the people." Now, when you get to part about the steeple, point to your own heart, and ask God to create a real tall steeple church inside of you, with Christ as the cornerstone, and room for everyone.