

WHAT'S IN A NAME

by **DION GARRETT** *Senior Pastor*

“What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet”
William Shakespeare

Fifteen years ago I began to understand, like never before, the power behind a name. Jocelyn was newly pregnant with our first child and long before we knew whether it would be a boy or a girl, we had already gone out to the bookstore and picked up a baby name book. For the next several months we poured over names in the book and there seemed to be no consensus in sight.

“Charles?”

“Whoa, that sounds too stuffy. What about Asher?”

“Asher? Is that a Mormon name?”

These conversations went on and on. The pressure was real. This wasn’t just a name, but this would become part of our child’s identity, an important part of their first impression to the rest of the world. We couldn’t come to an agreement. Thankfully God was knitting together a girl (so we could scrap our volatile list of boy names), and we ended up picking a name neither of us had ever heard of.

Through our last two years of research, both of what’s going on

in the broader Church in America and also of what unchurched people in our community are saying, I’ve been faced with a hard reality: St. John is a church that so many unchurched people are looking for, but few people know that. Standing in the way of more people discovering a life-giving relationship with Jesus is baggage from previous church experiences, cultural attitudes toward Christianity as a whole, and closer to home, our name.

When respondents in our research from two summers ago heard about who our church is—our values and our personality—they were intrigued. One person even said, *“If that’s really who this church is, I’d be very interested in checking it out.”* But our name gave them pause. These are actual quotes from real people in the focus groups.

“You automatically think it’s Catholic.”

“Not having been raised Catholic, every saint is the same to me.”

“When I hear St. John Church, it sounds formal. I wouldn’t associate it with the casual setting that I’m looking for.”

“I would change the name. St. John sounds too old. It’s old school...If you’re trying to be modern and more progressive, why go to such an old name?”

As I heard these comments, my stomach dropped. I have a strong sense of loyalty in me, especially when it comes to names. Having struggled to love my own name for the first 20 years of my life, I learned to proudly own it despite people's comments, jokes, and odd reactions. But this was different. This wasn't about pride or heritage, in the focus group room were people for whom a name, our name, was a significant barrier to them knowing the real Jesus.

As I've prayed and searched the scriptures for over two years on these issues, two things have become clear to me. The first is that God sees names as much more "flexible" than I do. There are countless examples in the Scriptures of God giving someone a new name for a new season.

Abram → Abraham

Sarai → Sarah

Jacob → Israel

Simon → Peter

...to name only a few. There is also a strong precedent in our own history of previous generations wrestling with this. At its founding, St. John was once named, *Evangelische Lutherische Eintrachts Gemeinde* and yet when we became an English speaking church, a church for everybody and not just German immigrants, our faith-ancestors decided to embrace a new name for the new season. As we are now firmly living in a "Post-Christian" America, I've come to the conclusion that it's time for us to do the same. Not only that, I've begun to rethink church names as things that don't need to stand forever, but only to suit the purposes of the time or season they're ministering in.

The second thing that has become clear to me is although I feel strongly inclined to preserve and protect heritage and legacy, God doesn't seem to have the same concern. If preservation of heritage were a priority for God then Jesus would've never uttered the seditious words of John 4.

²¹ "Woman," Jesus replied, "believe me, **a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.** ²² You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the

Jews. ²³ **Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks.** ²⁴ *God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth."*

If heritage preservation were a strong concern for God, we would still be making daily sacrifices in a temple, speaking Hebrew, and making pilgrimages to Jerusalem. It's mind-boggling to me that Israel's rich, God-given heritage was obliterated by the end of the 1st century, *by God's own mandate!* **God's concern** instead is to **bring LIFE to a dying world at all costs**, even the cost of his Son. So while I feel inclined to preserve history, legacy, and heritage, God's primary inclination is to preserve *people*, for eternity. God is always willing to sacrifice heritage for the sake of his mission to *people*.

So if you haven't heard by now, on the weekend of March 18, I announced our intention to actively explore a name change for our church. An announcement that has been met with a full range of emotions, including some grief and concern and also a lot of support. For some, this is a bold, exciting move that is bound to help us better fulfill our mission. For others, this comes with a sense of loss of 140 years of continuity. I understand it all. More, I *feel* it all.

William Shakespeare once remarked "What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet." To Shakespeare, I'd ask, "Yes, a rose by any other name would still smell sweet, but if called by another name would you blindly take the risk and smell it?" I am excited to give our community a name that better describes the sweetness they'll encounter when they take a step into our church.

I know there are a lot of questions about how we will move forward together, so make sure you read all the FAQ questions on the next couple of pages in this issue. This is an exciting time for us to help elevate our reputation and standing in our community, to help more people come into the LIFE of Jesus. But for that to happen, we have to keep moving *together*.