March 23, 2015

To the North Atlanta Church of Christ Family

Dear Brothers and Sisters –

Many exciting things have been happening at our congregation over the past year, as we fully embrace the LoveFirst vision, seeking to be a Christ-centered, Diverse and Community-Impacting group of believers.

One aspect of our move forward as a body of believers to fully live out the LoveFirst vision is a renewed commitment to focus on the core Gospel message, while de-emphasizing traditions and practices that create barriers to some who are seeking to follow Christ. To this end, on February 15, as Don McLaughlin shared with you an update on our LoveFirst initiatives, the shepherds communicated some important messages to the congregation. Bill Long, our minister and shepherd for more than 40 years, shared some observations about how our congregation has, over the decades, been open to change in order to more effectively reach our community. Then, Fernando Nasmyth, speaking on behalf of all of the shepherds and ministry staff of the congregation, announced to the congregation our decision to offer worship alternatives that include the use of instrumental music. The text of both messages are attached to this letter. We encourage you to read them. However, we also encourage you to listen to the entire podcast of the February 15 worship at www.nacofc.org, as these statements are much more meaningful in the context of the overall message that was presented in worship that morning.

By this announcement, we are expressing our desire to be a congregation that embraces both worship through a cappella singing and worship through singing accompanied by instruments (thus becoming a “both-and” congregation). We truly do intend to be “both-and.” We want to treasure and carry forward our tradition of worshipful a cappella singing, but we also want to allow our fellow brothers and sisters to worship God with instruments if they feel it will help them engage more fully in worship.

For many of you, this expansion of our worship options is welcome. For others of you, this is disquieting. And for many of you in the middle, this announcement may be forcing you to come to terms with something that you have avoided addressing directly.

We ask all of you, regardless of the perspective you bring, to calmly and patiently study with us. After all, the heritage of our community of believers (coming out of the Restoration Movement of the 1800s) is a culture of Bible study, of seeking, and of respectfully questioning the traditions and teaching of the prior generation of believers. The shepherds and ministry staff have embraced this heritage, re-examining the scriptures afresh, thinking critically about the biases and other influences that have affected our historical interpretation of scripture on this matter, and seeking to understand all in light of the Gospel message.
We want to share with you the materials that have been influential to our thinking. Would you join us for a time of Bible study? We have scheduled the following Bible studies on this topic:

Sat, March 28  
8:30 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.  
Youth Worship Center  
Three Bible study sessions (the same lessons that will be taught in April – below), but in one sitting. This is designed especially for Bible class teachers and other volunteers who will be unable to attend the combined adult Bible classes, but it is open to anyone.

Sun, April 19, 26, May 3  
9:30-10:15 a.m.; Auditorium  
Three consecutive combined adult Bible classes

Many of you have been asking about the practical implications of this announcement: What will the worship look like? How soon will changes be made? Will I have a choice as to the type of worship? What kind of instruments are we planning to add?

We do have a clear and definitive answer to one of the questions: We do not intend to replace our a cappella worship service with an instrumental worship. We intend to offer both/and. Thus, those of you who are more comfortable worshipping in an a cappella worship will be able to continue doing so.

With respect to the other questions, though, we do not have definite answers. Our ministry staff is actively working on preparations and logistics that will put us in a position to offer alternative instrumental worship settings in the near future, though no firm timeline has been established. Our desire is that our worship, in whatever form, is led and organized in a way that glorifies the name of the Lord. We have encouraged the staff to take the time necessary to prepare effectively for the new worship offering.

Your shepherds and ministry staff love the Lord and want nothing more than to honor God with our individual and collective lives of ministry and worship. We are grateful for each one of you, and we pray that we can continue to walk and grow in the Lord together. Let’s diligently pray for one another as we move through this process of study and change.

Love First,

The Shepherds of the  
North Atlanta Church of Christ
Statement of Bill Long

to North Atlanta Church of Christ

February 15, 2015

I prepared a script last week, but God has been preparing my heart for 80 years to say some of the things I want to say today.

I came to this church, then known as Sandy Springs Church of Christ in 1971 as the pulpit minister. I served in that role for more than 25 years and I have served as an elder for more than 40 years.

In 1972, when this church had an attendance of fewer than 150, I remember a historical milestone at a retreat that set the direction and emphasis of this church and it has always been part of our identity and who we are. We determined then, that we are going to be an evangelistic church, with God’s mission as our mission. This determination has often stretched us and led us into many innovative changes and creative visions. It has been the predominant mindset from then until now and continues to be a part of our core identity. We had a similar milestone retreat in 1977 where this mission was again brought to center stage.

Our desire has been to be faithful to God and relevant to our community. We have tried to “become all things to all people so that we might win some...” This may be different in different settings and times. The question now for us is “What is best here and now?”

For the past year, you have heard and seen the rollout of a vision that is our way of continuing to be part of God’s mission here. After weeks and even months of prayer and communication the total eldership determined this is God’s vision for us at North Atlanta and we pray that God’s mission will be accomplished through it and to that end we give it our full support.

To be God’s church, we believe first that what we do is in harmony with God’s will. We believe this vision is. The mission is part of all that we do. The vision is our picture of how we will fulfill the mission God has given us, “to inspire others to give themselves fully to God.”

To fulfill our mission through this vision, we know that we need to have a two-way bridge into the community that takes us out into the culture around us with the gospel and that creates an environment around us that is inviting to the community to come in and be part of us. For us to go out, we know that we must relate to the culture around us as we remain both faithful and relevant. In order to assist us individually to invite our community and friends to come across the bridge our way, we “become all things to all people that we might win some” by creating different venues that meet a variety of needs that will become vehicles for the good news of Jesus to be presented. Because the culture on the other end of the bridge never stays the same, we see ourselves on this end of the bridge, adapting in order to relate with the gospel.

In fulfilling this vision, a multiplicity of strategies will be used. As times and circumstances change, our strategies must also change. Not all of us will be part of all the strategies, but we believe it is in God’s will and His mission to provide venues and services that will meet a variety of needs and have an environment where the Gospel can be taught, people from diverse backgrounds can be ministered to, receive the gospel and grow in a fellowship that draws them into a deeper relationship with God and with other fellow followers.

The total eldership stands behind this vision and we are pleased to have Don continue to communicate this vision to us and to keep us aware of the progress throughout the year. As we seek to do the will of God, and be a part of his mission, we encourage you to find your place on this two-way bridge that takes you into the community and that brings the community into us.

North Atlanta Church of Christ exists to inspire people to give themselves fully to God.

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Statement Regarding Adding Instrumental Worship
February 15, 2015

Fernando Nasmyth,
Speaking on behalf of the shepherds of North Atlanta Church of Christ

As the Eldership considered the implications of our Love First Vision, we explored various ways our congregation could be more intentional in drawing others to a closer walk to God by introducing them to Christ and helping them to become his faithful followers. One of the areas that we examined is the role worship plays in helping us draw nearer to God, as individuals and as a congregation. In addition, we considered how worship speaks into the lives of many in our community not connected to a church but are seeking after God. We came to understand that for many of our members, and their family and friends, our current worship is not always adequate in inspiring them to a closer walk with God. This led us to consider ways that we could more effectively use our worship services to accomplish God’s mission for us.

This examination, as with all of our other areas of ministry, was done against the backdrop of Scripture. In considering Paul’s admonition to the Corinthians about saving souls (1 Cor. 9:22, “…I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.”), and considering our current worship offering, we saw a gap as well as an opportunity. To fill that gap and take advantage of the opportunity to reach more souls, we as an Eldership are embracing the freedom found in following Christ, a freedom that does not require us to put firm barriers in place except with respect to core gospel truths. This freedom in Christ also requires us to constantly evaluate our attitudes and practices to determine whether we are truly embracing the freedom of the gospel or whether we are creating or perpetuating barriers and limitations that are not what God intended.

We as an eldership have come to the conclusion that our historical practice regarding instruments as part of worship is one such limitation. Having examined the scriptures together as a group and not being able to find the kind of limitation that would justify our historical position on this matter, we choose to embrace freedom, rather than impose limits, on the issue of instruments in worship.

Therefore, we are announcing today that in the coming months, we will offer a worship service in which instruments will be used in addition to our current a cappella worship service. In so doing, our members and guests desiring to offer Glory and Praise to God in that environment, will able to do so. Those desiring to continue to participate in our a cappella worship service will be able to do so. Our commitment is to offer worship services marked by excellence, regardless of your choice.

We believe that this decision, while difficult to accept for some, and much too delayed for others, will allow us to create more opportunities for our members and guests to honor God, and inspire others to give themselves fully to Christ. As with other strategies we will develop to implement the Love First Vision, we must continue to not lose sight of the mission, and that is to create bridges to introduce others to Christ and grow together into a loving relationship with Him and with each other.

We ask for your continued prayers for our congregation as we take the necessary steps in our efforts to grow in our relationship with God, and are shaped more each day into the image of Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit. We must remain committed to undertaking the hard work of staying united and working diligently to accomplish God’s mission for us, as embodied in the Love First Vision.