

The Impossible Dream.

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In early September, 1986, a small group of 10 to 12 people on Sunday mornings sat around a table in the Chapel to read Scripture, to pray, to worship, and to dream. The question we faced was, Is God calling us to establish a new church? We wrestled with this question until we felt His calling. We had consensus to establish this church.

A few months later, we called a special Sunday afternoon service to celebrate the beginning of this church. At our inaugural service, this chapel was filled with people. Some came to join us in our ministry. Others came to encourage and support us. Others came with considerable disbelief.

There was excitement in the air. An impossible dream was being realized.

We were then 29 years younger, more enthusiastic, and more imaginative. The church was the beginning of new relationships, of new friendships, of many challenges, of business meetings and of much interesting church related work.

We were at the beginning of a new journey. We felt committed to a common vision of ministry. God was here amongst us. What should we fear?

In the early 50s and beyond, I along with many Mennonite University students, prayed that someday a University student ministry would be established near UBC. It was our hope that this ministry would be intellectually stimulating, theologically robust, spiritually stretching and communally based. Our prayers were answered.

We were looking for newness, for freshness, and for spiritual renewal.

How might this happen? How could our dream be realized? Who would join us? Where was God in all of this?

We came from different denominational backgrounds. The question before us was: Would denominational commitments interfere with the essentials of our vision? Could we work towards the peaceful resolution of differences? Who were our exemplars or models we could follow in addressing denominational differences?

I was the first moderator of this church. I took on this responsibility with joy and enthusiasm.

Martin Luther King, one of my exemplars once proclaimed "I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together on the table of brotherhood.

A similar question was faced by this church. Can we as members of this church sit down at the table of brotherhood and sisterhood and honor our cultural, spiritual and theological differences? Can we share in each other's joys and sorrows?

We believed in the priesthood of all believers? Can we be priests to each other? Will love and tolerance be our earmark? These were important questions in those early years.

In order to more fully understand the difficulties of planting a new church, I wish to

give a short history of church planting activities in West Point Grey in the last 50 years or so.

I provide these historical details in order to provide a context for understanding the development of this church. We were not perfect. Our differences, however, were always overcome in a spirit of tolerance and goodwill.

Since the early 60s, at least 4 churches were established by Mennonites in the Point Grey Area. Of these 4 churches, only this church remains. The other three have closed their doors. I wish to

briefly tell the story of each of these 4 churches and then move on to a short reflection on 2 Corinthians 3: 5-6.

The Corinthian church was much like our church. It had many of the geographic features of Vancouver. I will provide more details of Corinth after giving a short history of church plants In Point Grey.

The first church plant in Point Grey was most unusual. It was undertaken by University students in 1964.

The students were looking for a church which was transformative, intellectually stimulating, theologically robust, spiritually stretching and personally enriching.

This student oriented church met in the great room of a large mansion in Shaughnessy and later in a community center . It included Dr. Kassis, an Anabaptist and UBC faculty member in the Religious Studies Department at UBC. It also included a few prominent business people such as Ken Smith who among other things ran halfway houses for troubled youth. Approximately 75 to 150 people attended this church of which most were students.

Erna and I and our four children were requested by the MB leadership to join this church. We were sporadic attenders because we lived in Tawassen, and this was simply too far to travel to church for our young family.

This student led church had no pastor. Speakers were invited from Sunday to Sunday.

After 4 or 5 years, this church closed its doors. The graduate students left for graduate studies elsewhere . Many received PhD's in further studies. Other students found employment and still others left the church or attended elsewhere.

This was a time of serious studies by Mennonite students who had left their rural communities to enter the world of the University. Our churches were not ready to entertain this new mindset. Freethinking University students were excommunicated. Church leaders were

often baffled by this new development. They sought for better understanding of this situation.

A second church was planted by the Board of Church Extension of the MB conference. A couple, the Wiggins, were appointed to assume leadership of this new church which was to serve the community and particularly the University students at UBC.

The going was rough. The church had no place to meet. It had no support group. The pastoral couple had limited experience with universities students or even relating to families in Point Grey.

After a year or more of planning, praying and organizing, Katrina Wiggins in an article in the Mennonite Brethren Herald, wrote;

"Amids the chaos, our church planting efforts continued. We determined to target a community called Dunbar, just outside the University of BC endowment lands, hoping to eventually build the campus ministry at UBC... We planned an inaugural church service for December. Only four people showed up".

She wrote ; "We felt overwhelmed. Should we give up? Had God left us to free fall off the edge of a precipice? We struggled in the darkness, looking for God's leading, angry that he had let us down".

This church closed its doors.

A third church plant, was initiated by the C2C, an affiliate of the MB conference in British Columbia. This church was called Urban Journey. It met in a number of locations including this Chapel. The pastors of the church were Andrew and Rebecca Stanley.

After four or five years, funding for this church dried up and Urban Journey closed its doors.

In 1986, the dream surrounding this church became a reality. The birth and development of this church was a miracle.

This morning we thank God for this church and its service to hundreds of students and many others. We thank God for each of you who have stood by this church and who have provided leadership and support for these many years.

The Scripture reading I have chosen for this morning is 2 Corinthians 3:5 to 6. This Scripture was written specifically to the Corinthian church but also to all Christian churches.

Some years ago, while in Athens, my colleagues and I rented a car in Athens and traveled to the old city of Corinth. While in Corinth, we visited the ruins of the city and gained some insights into the people of this ancient city.

The ancient city of Corinth was located on the Isthmus of Corinth, a strip of land with water on either side. The old city was a leading naval power as well as a rich commercial center. Trading was its major occupation.

It was difficult for St. Paul to maintain orthodoxy in this Christian church. There were numerous points of view held by the people. It was pluralistic in thinking with many competing worldviews and philosophies. It had numerous temples including the Temple of Apollo. It was known for its games and its athletic activities. This was a proud city containing many rich people enjoying much debate and dialogue.

Paul writes to the church of Corinth;

"Not that we are sufficient to claim anything as coming from us; our sufficiency is from God, who has qualified us to be ministers of a new covenant, not in a written code but in the spirit, for the written code kills but the Spirit gives life".

This passage draws our attention to the insufficiency of human endeavors and that God's Spirit needs to be connected to our endeavors. It is God who qualifies us to be ministers of the new covenant. This new covenant is not written in stone as were the 10 Commandments, but written in our hearts.

How are we to understand this Scripture? How do we make sense of this in a materialist world? What other Scriptures are there to help us give meaning to Paul's assertions.

Perhaps one of the most significant Scriptures of the Old Testament which addresses a similar viewpoint is Jeremiah. In fact, Jeremiah provides the only reference to a new covenant in the Old Testament.

In Jeremiah 31:31-34, we read;

"Behold, the days come says the Lord, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they break, although I was an husband unto them, says the Lord; but this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel: after those days, says the Lord, I will put my law in into their inward parts and write it into their hearts; and I will be their God and they shall be my people".

Jeremiah makes the point that the nation of Israel failed to live up to the terms of the old covenant. And therefore God promised a new covenant.

I would like to spend a few moments reflecting on the old and new covenant.

The new covenant represents an important new understanding of God's way in the world. Using the language of psychology, this change of understanding is a paradigm shift. Such a shift represents a fundamental change in the way of thinking about or visualizing something.

The old covenant focused on an external locus of control. Rules and regulations were the focus. In contrast, the new covenant focuses on an internal locus of control.

In the realm of religion, the old covenant is an example of an external religion. The emphasis is on rules and regulations which were followed in great detail. Submission to the rules was required. Examples of such external religion is of course Judaism and the



Islamic faith where submission to the rules and regulations is mandatory.

In contrast, the new covenant focuses on relationships, love, compassion and mercy. Christianity teaches the significance of relationships. These include our relationship to God, to Jesus and to the Holy Spirit as well as our relationship to each other.

To summarize, in our passage St. Paul addresses the emergence of a new paradigm by which Christians should live. We should live by the principles of the new covenant.

The second issue Paul raises in our Scripture reading is the work of the Spirit working in us.

Last Sunday, Ruth Enns introduced us to the theme of God's Spirit in Christian hymns over the centuries. The hymn, Veni Creator Spiritus, which translated is, "Come Creator Spirit". is an example of a spirit oriented hymnary.

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul places a strong emphasis on the work of the Spirit. He maintains that while the written code kills, the spirit gives life. He argues that the spirit authorizes us to be ministers. The Spirit is God's power in us.

For the remaining few minutes, I wish to identify a number of manifestations of the work of the Spirit in us.

I want to give credit to Paul Tillich, a leading theologian, for his contributions in identifying the work of the Spirit within us.

1. The spirit can work in us with a soft but insistent voice, telling us that our life is empty and meaningless, but that there are opportunities for a new life in Christ.

2. The spirit can reveal to us that we have hurt somebody deeply, but can also give us the right word that reunites us.

3. The spirit can make us love, with divine love, someone we profoundly dislike or in whom we have no interest.

4. The spirit can liberate us from hidden enmity against those whom we love and free us from open vengefulness toward those who may have violated us.

5. The spirit can awaken us to sudden insights into better ways to perceive our world and open our eyes to new opportunities.

6. The spirit can give us joy in the midst of ordinary routine as well as in the depth of sorrow and grief.

7. The spirit can create warmth in the coldness we feel within ourselves and toward others.

8. The spirit can give us the power of prayer with which we can overcome mountains.

With this list of manifestations of God's Spirit working in us, I wish to end my remarks and trust you will raise comments and questions in response.