

Our Church's Mission in Retrospect

David Edward's framing of our mission in the last century and earlier this century: Service

"Co-founded by the Reverends Beverly (Bev) R. Cosby and Irving Stubbs, the church came into being with a particular vision. First, it was to be a spiritual community in support of a mission already underway. A small recreation program for children had begun in 1950 in the basement of the Cosby family home... Camp Kum-Ba-Yah, Lynchburg Covenant Fellowship, and the Church of the Covenant arose as a partnership to respond to the needs of the wider community, particularly its poorest and most marginalized citizens. When the Church of the Covenant came into being that World Communion Sunday, a central part of its vision was set: the church of Jesus Christ exists not for itself but for the sake of service in and to the world." (p. 4) from *The Journey of a Lifetime: Life and Ministry in the Church of the Covenant*

"Our community continues the struggle to remain faithful to its vision of being a Christian Community that is shaped by new movements of God's spirit and the changing needs of the world. The mission group continues to be a vital structure in this regard. Yet we remain open to new forms, new kinds of groups that may emerge. The essential principle is that form follows spirit, requiring an openness to new forms that are shaped by God who is always desiring to 'do a new thing' in and through us for the world." (p. 21) *The Journey of a Lifetime: Life and Ministry in the Church of the Covenant*

Bev Cosby's framing of our mission: Reconciliation


1.) Reconciliation of Christians to unity

1956

"Jesus' final prayer for His Church was that they may all be one. It is the will of Christ that there be a world-wide unity in His Church. The Church is His Body. We are a church committed to this unity, dedicated to breaking down the dividing walls which now separate denominations and the various branches of Christ's Church... Within this movement the barriers of national, racial, social, economic, or educational discrimination have no place. It has been forgotten that the Church is no longer the Church if it is not exerting cleansing and redemptive powers and if it is not constantly pioneering dangerous frontiers in justice and love for the society in which it exists." Bev, (p. 8) 1956 *Church of the Covenant* pamphlet

1961

"It is, of course, both unfair and unintelligent to categorize the whole Church on the basis of one's own limited experience, but there is a wide range of agreement that a new power is sorely needed. Surely the message of reconciliation is to be transmitted in clearer tones and more distinct notes than we generally hear it today... Thus, the Church of the Covenant was called into being by Christ as every church essentially is called into existence by a creative act of God's own Word, to be and to become 'his new creation.' The call was not in any sense away from the churches to which we previously belonged; rather it was and is a call to be on mission in a new, local expression of the World Church which is the Body of Christ, with a conscious awareness that we are 'members one of another' and all belong to the same Body, however different in appearance and function." Bev, (pp. 2-3) March 1961 from "A Covenant Community in Action" in *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*



2.) Reconciliation of Humankind to Unity

1961

“The structure is to serve the People and effectively channel the People of God into the world. The members are not to serve the structure as an end. As a painter builds a scaffold to facilitate the accomplishing of his work, so the *ekklesia* erects a scaffold to facilitate its mission. Bev, (pp. 11-12) March 1961 from “A Covenant Community in Action” in *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*

“Is the Church and all its members willing to become involved in the social, political and economic problems of the world, particularly when the involvement may be costly? In what way and in what places does the Church find its rightful involvements?” Bev, March 1961 from “A Covenant Community in Action” in *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*

1962

“We get our cues from the Bible and from the history of the church through the centuries. God is a God who is always on the move, and He calls his People to always be on the move. The precedent for this started way back some 2,000 BC when God called Abram from the familiar and fairly comfortable surroundings of Ur of Caldea to move out to a place which he did not know, to which had had never been, of which he had no maps to guarantee he could get there, but which he was assured would be shown to him as he went.. This is the dramatic story of the Old Testament from cover to cover. It is the story of those who move out from where they are to some kind of wilderness of opportunity, on some mission for God. This kind of business is unsafe, risky, sometimes uncertain, but always full of adventure. The same pattern follows in the New Testament... Lynchburg is our wilderness—if we’ve never understood it this way, we’ve never understood the Gospel.” Bev – sermon “Venture into the Wilderness” 10/7/1962

1964

“Scores of people now, both Negro and white, are standing on the line between the white community and the black community trying to mediate this awful crisis. We will never know who most of them are. They are participating in the pain and suffering of broken relationships. I know of some in our Lynchburg community who are thought cowardly by one segment of the community because their stand is not bold enough, and who are thought radical by the other segment of the community because their stand is too bold. There is nothing but loneliness and a feeling of guilt and dishonor for these people. You say, ‘I didn’t know this is what Christianity was about. I thought it had to do with saving souls and helping people find new life.’ Well, it does. This is what you mean by ‘saving souls’: Closing the gap between persons and persons, persons and God—until there is wholeness and unity in our relationships. This is what the Bible means when it says that ‘Christ is a stone that will make men stumble and a rock that will make them fall.’ Some of us will trip over this one: Community.” Bev –sermon “The Scandal of Becoming a Reconciler” 10/11/1964

“This is probably the worst stumbling block, or one of the most difficult things for us to get hold of in Christian faith; that we are to be priests or reconcilers. It I may make a confession to you I will say that I am usually much more concerned about being right than I am about being a go-between to bring together two opposing factions. Example: ...Negro community vs white community. It is not easy of course to be a prophet, for it often means being cut off from those whom we love and those who want to love us. But it is more difficult to be a priest or a

reconciler. Reconcilers are seldom heroes. They seldom get purple hearts like those who are wounded and who suffer for great causes. A reconciler in the very nature of the case stands between, pulling the opposing forces together to bring harmony out of discord, wholeness out of brokenness, unity out of fragmentation.” Bev- sermon “Three Functions of a Any Minister” 11/12/1964

1965

“I would suggest.. we, the Church of the Covenant stake out a new claim in the city. Eleven years ago we staked out a claim when we said God was calling us to a new form of ministry in the city..., a church which would be willing to face and realistically deal with the issues of the 20th century. Five years ago we staked out a claim when we decided to try to be in the world, in the city among the unchurched through the Lodge... To stake out a new claim may be the best way to put our own house in order. When I’m going away for a week or two I have an added incentive to get all the details caught up and in order. To find a new form of mission doesn’t at all mean that we neglect our present responsibilities. It means that we take them more seriously so that we can move out to a wider ministry. The text for this comes from Hebrews: *‘Lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be out of joint but rather be healed.’* If you go to 5th and Federal Streets and look at the tenements you’ll find a *lameness* –if you go to Madison St between 11th and 12th you’ll find a *lameness* where those who can’t afford it are paying high prices for hovels to live in. If we dare to ask the question about housing and employment for Negroes in our city we’ll find a crippling *lameness*. When we look into the tens and scores around us we’ll see the agonizing loneliness of people who are starved for love and affection. *Lameness* may easily lead to total paralysis. This is what the author means when he talks about being put ‘out of joint.’ He also speaks of ‘straight paths’—‘make straight paths for your feet’—a straight path is the shortest distance from where we are to where the *lameness* is.” Bev –sermon (speaking to beginnings of Kum-Ba-Yah Association & LCF Housing) 10/3/1965

“The Church has been afraid to be open to certain needs; therefore, it has insulated and cushioned itself from those needs until it is no longer in touch with the world. A good example: there are those who think the Church should have nothing to do with the current racial and social revolution going on. There have been attempts to withdraw and to avoid any exposure to this reality, leaving these churches completely out of touch with the world at this point. We have a way of responding differently in proximity than when at a distance. Things that don’t phase us at all when they are ten miles away affect us very deeply when they are on our door step.” Bev- sermon “The Church Getting into the World” 10/17/1965

Rabbi Dr. Ephraim Fischhoff from Agudath Sholom, the local synagogue, encouraged Bev and the Church of the Covenant community when he spoke there on November 14, 1965. From the pulpit, Dr. Fischhoff highlighted Bev’s making “reference to a divided and broken world,” and then drawing a parallel with Noah, said, “[b]ut the world, divided as it was and broken as it was, was not completely without hope, nor is it today... There was a tiny minority of goodness left in an evil world... Wherever we turn in the world at whatever point in history, we find a broken world filled with violence, with only the occasional Noah.” Dr. Fischhoff encouraged the church community to continue to stand in the gap where racism and bigotry dominate civil discourse. Dr. Fischhoff then offered a final thought to combat the alienation this small church might feel (much like Noah): “But in every context, somewhere there has been another; there has been someone who has foreseen the evil. There is someone who has predicted its inevitability; there is someone who has sought with all the power of his voice and his life to awaken his fellowmen to the danger. There is one for whom the world was saved from destruction, and, when the destruction has subsided, has slowly and painfully, but with infinite hope begun the task of reconciliation and reconstruction.”

1968

“[W]e’re concerned with disruption and fragmentation, with any dehumanizing process which thwarts a man’s potential and which robs him of his personhood... [W]here such wholeness is threatened and denied, that is the point where the problem comes to focus... Genuine brotherhood involves not only getting the racial barriers down, but all sorts of human barriers, the multitude of separations which dehumanize us—including national, political, economic, social, religious, cultural, education and personal barriers. There was never a deeper cleavage in human history than that between Jew and Gentile in the first century—with racial, national and religious and political dimensions—and this the disruption which came into focus in the new Testament times, and it is the dividing wall of hostility which Christ made it clear he would break down: ‘There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, Barbarian or Scythian, male nor female, for all are one in Christ Jesus.’ Now as committed Christians we need to know what kind of people we are to be and what it is that we are to do in the midst of the disruptions. We need to be aware of what our function is... including the racial revolution in which we are presently involved. The New Testament word is a very hard word. It is ‘reconciliation.’ It is the essence of Christian faith.” Bev –sermon
February 1968

1977

“Often the poor become the objects of our charity. We often do it for them, thinking in turn God is going to do something for us. They are objects of our efforts in generosity. We think and act from what is above and move to what is below. We are always moving from us to them, but this is not how Jesus intended it to be. Jesus does not tell us [that] those of us who have it are to be the benefactors of those who do not have it. Jesus is telling us something quite different. It is difficult to get a hold of but if we can ever grasp it, it will mean the most significant shift we can probably ever make in our lifetime—in our thinking and in our mode of operating in this world. We may not be able to grasp it today. But perhaps some of us can begin working with it until in time it becomes clearer and then the truth will break in upon us one day—that the people are not first the objects of our charity, but are already the subjects of a messianic kingdom of love. That means simply that Christ is hidden in the world, in the hungry, in the thirsty, the alien, the naked, the sick, and imprisoned. And because of our limited perception, we may not be able to recognize him there... Mrs. Elliott [the Wood Ministry’s first client] is Jesus. Mr. Bayes is Jesus. Mrs. Clark is Jesus. Mr. McDaniel is Jesus... And when we are in the presence of these people, we are in the presence of Christ. We are dealing in that moment with the world’s judge, and whatever we do or don’t do with the least of these people, we are doing it to or with him—that is, Christ.” Bev –sermon 5/1/1977

1979

“It was about three and half years ago when several of us were in the truck delivering some wood to somebody’s shack. As we passed along Park Avenue in front of the Lee School somebody said, and I really can’t remember who, ‘Why can’t that building be used to house some of these poor people?’ A week or two later we were passing that way again, and this time I remember it was Irma who said, ‘There it is.’ Somebody said, ‘There is what?’ And Irma simply said a second time, ‘There it is.’ And it was probably at that moment the dream was born when everybody laughed and said, ‘There it is,’ and the dreams of the two schools began three and half years ago, the Fall of ’75. The whole drama can be recounted another time, but I do want to say today that it is a rare joy to be part of a community out of which this sort of impossible dream can be born and nurtured and sustained. And hopefully there will be still another, and another and another, as long as we are people of faith to the vision of Jesus Christ. It seems to me that it is the unique combination of the communities of the Church of the Covenant and the Lynchburg Covenant Fellowship out of which so many people whose gifts have come to be an essential part of the complex puzzle. The Ezra and Nehemiah are Herb and P.G. and beyond that it would not be possible to know who

is most responsible. There are many without whom it would not have worked.” Bev –sermon “Pioneers of Restoration” 3/25/1979

“The sustained and sacrificial commitments of this Church of the Covenant community over the years has been and will continue to be integral to this mission and the life it will bring to the people of this city.” –spoken from rooftop of Lynchburg High Apartments under construction later in 1979

1980

“Reconciliation means that instead of having to be on the right side of every issue, we may be willing to sacrifice our rightness to be the bridge across which people can get to each other and touch one another and build some semblance of community.” Bev –sermon 9/14/1980

2002

“Every man at the Gateway, every woman at Miriam’s House, every child at Elizabeth Early Learning Center... every inmate in every prison is potential wrapped in human flesh and bone. I want my vision to be able to see that and to respond to that potential, and to ask God how I can call it forth and be a small part of its happening—by providing in my person the environment (i.e. soil, water, light) in which it can grow.” Bev’s last sermon January 2002

2003

“Church of the Covenant was not built on popular so-called successful strategies. God worked through Bev to help us, to some degree at least, choose the narrow way. Bev was most of all courageous and uncompromising on the issues of peace, equality and justice. His vision of the church was to primarily side with the last, the least and the lost, as did Jesus. This was a difficult way for many of us, but God called a sufficient number of people to either readily embrace this path, or at least to hang in and work through some of the agonies involved when rough waters were encountered...” Dolly –reflections on the essence of the Church of the Covenant 4/27/2003

Dan Harrison’s interpretation and re-framing of the church mission:

2018

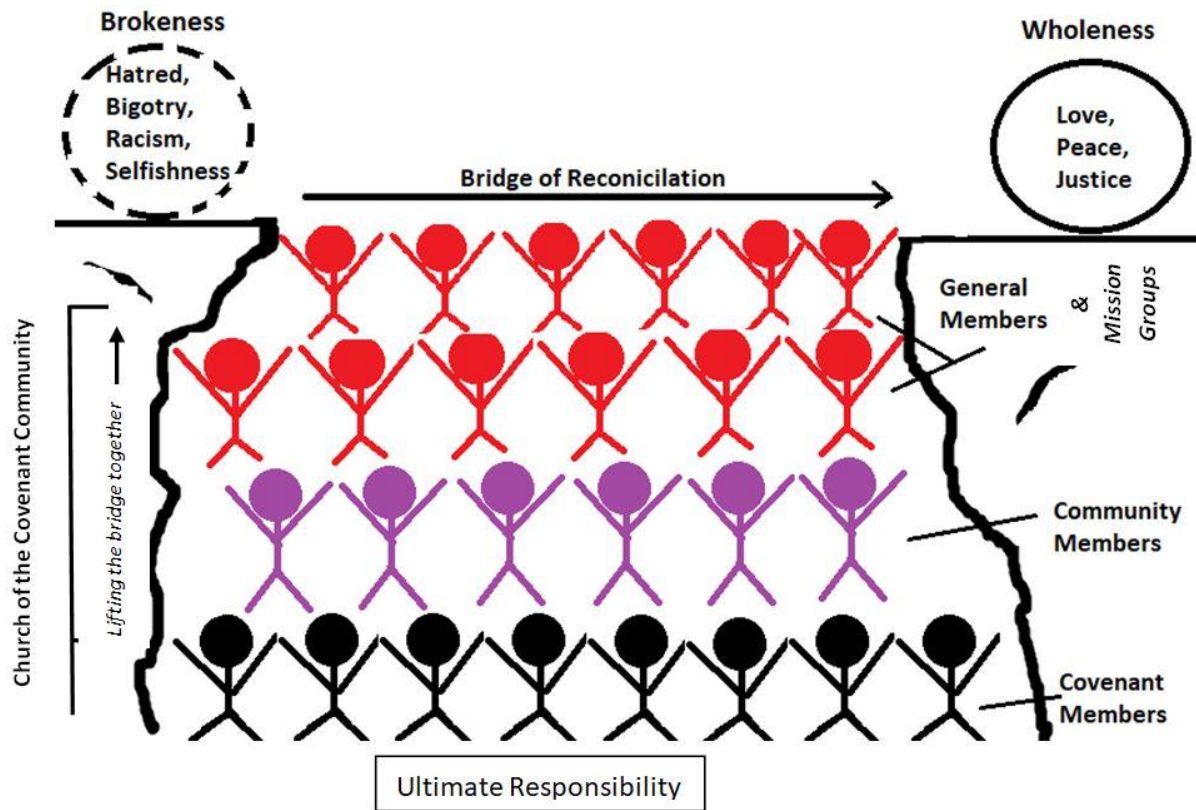
“Dr. King’s very dream of equality was wrapped in the justice prophesied by Isaiah and proclaimed by Jesus. The day of unity is now. The Good News is this, we are free. And if we are free, what will we do with that freedom? My prayer is that we will join with our brothers and sisters of other faiths, other races, other cultures, other languages, other practices, and say we are ALL God’s creation, God’s beloved. We are in this together. If you hurt, I hurt. If you struggle, I struggle. If you rejoice, I rejoice with you. Jesus prayed ‘so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.’ May our prayer reflect the same spirit. What is your personal prayer for this community in light of a call for unity with the others who surround us? May we invoke a call for true love for all people, even the Samaritans who knock at our doors; may we do more than simply open the door, may we in fact give them the door itself as a gift of true equality, with a spirit of ‘what’s mine is yours.’” Dan –sermon “Complete Unity” 3/11/18

2019

“Church of the Covenant also found its place in mobilizing the faithful to stand in the gap during some of the city’s most challenging times, building a bridge of love between the black and white communities... Now it’s your turn. You’ve read the story of the Church of the Covenant. You’ve wrestled with intersections of faith and social justice. You’ve reflected on the teachings of the leaders that courageously shaped this community of faith, **and have grasped the essence of its mission [of reconciliation]**...” Dan –in Module 1 (2019)

Illustration (by Dan) from Module 1 (2019)

Church in Action Illustrated



2020

“This church has tried and tried again to dismantle those systems of oppression through genuine countermoves. When housing was bleak and unsatisfactory, they worked tirelessly to provide good housing for as many as people as they could. When there weren’t enough jobs to sustain families in need, they worked hard to create jobs. When

addiction threatened to cast men homeless, they worked night and day to save as many as they could. When women and children were forced onto the street, they banded together to curb homelessness. On and on it goes, a story of revolutionary responses to evolutionary problems—each time providing stop-gaps, putting at least a temporary end to the hemorrhaging. However, the core issues of our larger Lynchburg community have stayed largely intact... Now what are we going to do? Well this has been my personal conundrum, my crossroads of indecision: What can I do? What should I do? The answer has become more and more apparent for me, personally. I feel I must rally together and catalyze a movement together with others, that will do four things: eradicate, educate, compensate, and elevate. This has potential for real distributive justice, taking us all back to a caring relationship with The Garden, with one another. This will take time, energy and resources. It will take brazen leadership and an unapologetic truth-telling. It will require honesty, integrity, and compassion. This was and is the work of Christ in our world, a movement from brokenness to wholeness, from injustice to justice. May we fall in love with Jesus again by falling in love with each other through the work of painful, tear-filled, uncomfortable, but absolutely necessary peacemaking—as our Lord said, “Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God” (Matthew 5:9). **It will require many of us to make it work, but this is where I am at. What is your gut reaction to being couched at this intersection of racial justice and peacemaking? I beckon you to listen to the voice of pain calling from within the cracks of oppression bleeding out from the often invisible depths of our communities. Listen to the moans and groans of injustice, pain and turmoil—the pain of disharmony and selfishness, and know that we each have a role to play in its reunification.**” Dan –sermon “Ready to Leap with Me?” 8/16/20

Other insights to consider:

“ownership”

“The basis of our relationship with the material world is that of trust. By this we do not mean that we trust in the material, but that we hold the material in trust. The world belongs to God; it is not ours. Whatever we have has been entrusted to us. It still belongs to God; it is not ours. Whatever we have has been entrusted to us. It still belongs to God. We simply administer a little part or a big part as the case may be. So we begin to handle the material world as though it were not our own, because it isn’t and we begin to administer that over which we have control as though belonged to God, because it does.” Bev – sermon “Toward Christian Maturity” 11/23/1958

“change”

“God’s vision for the church doesn’t change, but the structures of the church must change to speak that vision in authentic ways to each new era. We must be ready at all times to transcend all our loyalties to religious traditions in order to find the new ways that will reach people now. No one knows what any church, genuinely seeking to be Christ’s body on behalf of the world, should look like. There is no single right way, only the willingness to move into the new, not knowing with certainty where we are going but with the Holy Spirit’s companionship going anyway.”
–Gordon Cosby (2004) *The Authentic Church*