

Story and Vision of the Church of the Covenant

By Dolly Cardwell, April 3, 2013

The Church of the Covenant held its first service on October 3, 1954, World Wide Communion Sunday, with Irving Stubbs and Beverly Cosby as ministers. The little church that Joe Nelson and his three little boys, Johnnie Withrow, P. G. and his family, and I attended in 1954 was not all too different from the community we are today. They, too, had decided to follow Jesus! The most striking difference might be that the group was young, idealistic, and just beginning to embark on a great adventure in *Church Renewal*. I could clearly see “how they loved one another”, just as the scripture speaks of the love that was present in the early Christian communities. There was conversation about grace, the priesthood of all believers, prayer, reconciliation, agape love, Kairos-time, the Body of Christ, call, and gifts.

There were few over the age of 50, a young group of adults, a number of college students, some small children, and neighborhood youth who came regularly to punch hour following worship and to youth group on Sunday night. There was remarkable commitment to smallness of membership; to the simplification of life; to the integrity of membership through a Covenant which the seven members actively shared and renewed annually; to inclusiveness, ecumenicity; to doing whatever it took to build up the community - providing plenty of nurturing time through worship, education, rides to and fro, fellowship, and work parties.

Classes in the School for Christian Living, seen at that time as mission, steeped us in what “church renewal” was all about. Writings of Christian theologians informed us as to what must change in order for “the church to be the church.” Relationships - with God and with each other - were so important! Here was a vibrant community! Some of my fondest memories of my first years here is of work parties, baseball games on the ball field, and of taking jeep rides across these forty acres, through the woods and the creeks, up and down the hills, and along the western ridge where the driver, either Jack or Bev, would never fail to hold up the vision of a retreat center on these acres.

My reaction after that first Sunday was “I found not a people with a new religion following a set of rules, but a people who were engaged in a way of life.” Although we didn't speak in these terms yet, the balance of the inward and the outward seemed so right

to me. Worship was our heartbeat. We had a wonderful choir nearly as big as the remainder of the congregation; our male choir members, whom are often hard to come by, would have matched any in the city, I kid you not! The entire gathered body loved to sing!

1961 was a big year! It was the year that David Pollitt came as the first paid LCF Director; the LCF paid half of his salary and the Church paid half, as Dave was to work part-time for each. It was the year that The Lodge of the Fisherman opened. The Lodge could be considered the first outward mission of the Church. Sue Garrett, Beulah Cratch, and Sarah Brown spearheaded the Lodge with their vision and commitment, speeding up plans to finish off the three car garage, in which we are now sitting, as a coffee house, where we could meet and greet many friends and the public for coffee, tea, and conversation. Community groups used the Lodge for their meetings, just as today. One such group was the Lynchburg Ministerial Association in which Bev was an active member.

It was in March of 1962 that Martin Luther King, Jr. came to town, delivered an evening speech at E. C. Glass, after luncheon at the Lodge, hosted by a group of black and a few white ministers from the association. The Lodge was chosen because it was a place where inclusion and diversity was desired, welcomed and honored, one of very few such places in our city at that time. Larry Farmer remembers being here. "The Truant Apostle," an original play by Dick Waters which opened in the Lodge in late 1962, launched a ministry of drama, poetry, and music in the Lodge, of such importance to so many people in our community and beyond. Here was David's first taste of this community, some years later. The first pools were built and opened in June of 1961, just one month before the beautiful July day when two precious little black children came to day camp and the status quo was historically altered. This was a full five years before the church had its first and only, thus far, black member, Hazelle Boulware, around 1966.

In 1963, Elizabeth O'Connor's first book, *Call to Commitment* was published, initiating her telling and documenting the story of the Church of the Saviour as it was happening. Betty visited us frequently for 15 years or so. She taught, preached, led retreats, and just hung out. There was a mass exodus from the church in 1964 including Will and me. We were gone for a year, but we did return. I mention this because, in spite of the reduced membership in late 1964, Covenant members began discussing a shift of emphasis in the School for Christian Living, having to do with assuming more responsibility for the structures of the world. The name was soon changed to the Servant Leadership School. We

were evolving! This priority was also alive in the LCF as its call into the housing ministry and City Gate would begin soon. P. G. and his family arrived in 1967 and he began his work as LCF Executive Director, his membership in the church, and a significant influx of new people to our community. Enter Beth Mahler, Vince and Judy Sawyer, and Susan and Paul Henderson and their families. In 1968, Betty O'Connor's *Journey Inward, Journey Outward* was published.

It wasn't long until the Holdrens came to town - Barbara and BeBee and their four children, Steve, Linda, Mike, and Jeff. They had been in P. G.'s congregation in Roanoke and when P. G. moved here, the Holdrens came to visit, caught the spirit, camped more than anyone else ever has in our woods, and eventually moved here lock, stock, and barrel. Barbara transferred with the Girl Scouts and BeBee, with General Electric; they settled at 400 Madison Street, next door to 412 which had been bought a few years earlier in 1966. The Holdren's story looms as one of the most captivating stories of folks who made huge shifts in their lives to be a part of this community. That house next door to the Holdrens had been established as Kum-Ba-Yah Ecumenical Center, housing a myriad of programs, including a downtown summer camp which operated for about three years. There are three things to note here. The 412 Madison and 4415 Boonsboro summer camps were combined in 1971 as Camp Kum-Ba-Yah, although not incorporated yet. Twenty years hence, the ecumenical center's name was changed from KBY to Interfaith Outreach Association. 412 Madison Street now houses the offices of the LCF.

Roman's 12 mission group began to support and nurture the congregation at the 4415 home base. (Beth Mahler) In the late 1960's and 1970's we became more exposed to individuals in dire need. My personal experiences began with the families of children who began to come to church school. Some we met as campers, and others were brought by their teachers who were in our community. The problems were vast - not enough money to pay the bills, no car to take children to school (no busing yet,) or to the doctor - let alone get groceries, go to social services to apply for benefits or to visit counselors, etc. As time went on, we discovered the disgraceful extent of sub-standard housing in our city and the number of folks who used wood stoves or fireplaces to stay warm in winter. In 1975, the Wood Ministry came about, locating on the parking lot outside where most of us are parked tonight, to address this glaring common need, very real for more folks than we had imagined. Wood was split and delivered.

We are into the third decade of the church's life now. The Russells and the Morrisons have come; Don and Mark are hard at work on the wood lot. Kitty Hash has arrived and is tending the garden, baking birthday cakes for our children and even some of us - more cakes than you can imagine! Kitty was Camp Mom for years, all the while living in the cottage we named after her. One thing led to another. When 201 Federal St. was acquired, the Wood Ministry relocated from 4415 Boonsboro Rd. to the Tinbridge Hill area. There was a large vacant lot for splitting and stacking wood, nearer to those who needed the wood. The little historic building also served as New Land Jobs and now is owned by and houses The Haven. The folks, who came to obtain wood, or to whom we took wood, were asked to contribute some time working on the wood lot, splitting and preparing wood for distribution. The majority of these folks had no job, few skills, and were at a loss of how to obtain and keep a job.

New Land Mission Group - the New Land was Tinbridge Hill - began in October of 1984, first nurturing into being New Land Jobs. Barbara Holdren became Executive Director. New Land Community Arts was a vital support group and gave expression to some of our worshipers and a few other friends who joined them; the upstairs sun porch was a lovely place for painting. (Susan Henderson) Alpha Shalom Nursery School began meeting in the new youth building in the mid 1970's and Citizens for a Future World (now LPEC) was born. Wood was still being split and delivered. Mike Buhler arrived and it wasn't too long before he became involved in New Land Industries which provided a work place where the most skill-deficient folks could be trained, by caring and patient staff, toward becoming stable and dependable employees. Back to those workers who came to work on the wood lot: many of them had no permanent address where they could be contacted. They were spending the night from place to place, had no phone (cell phones weren't yet!)

Jump with me to the mid-nineties now. New Land Samaritan Inns became a home for homeless men, providing them an address, shelter, meals, and other support - Miriam's House, the same for women and children. Kay and Jack Hicks first began to visit the church.

In the 1990's we began the lean years in my view. Now you must understand that even lean years in this community has a richness unknown to many in the traditional church. Fair Harvest Co-op and Equal Access came into being and served for a while. Things wax and wane, and some wax again. Don Morrison's Equal Access writings back then are being made

available currently on our website. After The Gateway was underway and the mission shifted from serving homeless men to serving homeless men with addictions, the need for longer term housing for men graduating from the program and for women from Miriam's House was realized - and The Haven was born.

Next came Jubilate Mission Group, which began a dream of establishing a l'Arche Home in Lynchburg. Now we have two l'Arche homes in our neighborhood. The Servant Leadership School was offering fewer classes. Although the need for wood-splitting had passed, there was tireless and devoted effort being expended on other outward mission off-site; there was a pervading weariness though; fewer new people were returning to worship as strength to nurture new folks dwindled, perhaps, in direct relationship to the strength required to care for all the fledgling missions. We were aging, children grew up, and church school ceased. Sunday worship featured audio-tapes of sermons given by Gordon and others, readings from esteemed Christian writers like Henri Nouwen, Thomas Keating, Howard Thurman, more guest speakers, mission group speakers, every member and then-some preaching. All of this was still really good stuff, but everyone was weary and none more than Bev who simultaneously was trying his very best to nurture, not just one or two but all, or nearly all, the outward missions - as well as to serve the church as pastor. His zest for preaching and his care for his own health dwindled, and in January of 2002, he died of a heart attack in prayer on his knees in his bedroom. P. G. and Judy Bork found him and called Vince who came immediately to assist. Our beloved founder and leader had entered fully into the Kingdom of God.

The church held on to its vision as best it could, leaderless, for just over a year. The Mary and Martha group formed to sustain our housekeeping. In March of 2003, David accepted the call to join us as minister, yes, without a job description. With David's leadership, I think our new focus is on *Spiritual Renewal*. We are still evolving. We know we are called to maintain a balance between the inward and the outward. We seek to find and then to do the good and right things for the structure and the mission of the Church of the Covenant. Keeping that balance is a sensitive challenge for us as individuals, as well as for us as a community. How much time do I spend on my inward journey? Do I have as much concern for the needs of others as I do for seeing that my own needs get met? How much time do I spend on my outward journey? How do I usually come down when I am faced with deciding whether to tend my own need or to stand with another in her/his need? How much

time and energy do I contribute to the work that needs doing around here to maintain, sustain, and develop our community? We work with these things each day.

David said recently that we are not a community which studies about the Christian life, but one which lives and does the work to bring about that life within ourselves and others. Our Covenant One-with-Another is still at our heart. Each of us is encouraged to become atune to our call and our gifts, to consider commitment to the inward and to the outward. We have community membership and we bought and refurbished Pantops, the former Cosby home, as our parsonage. Our worship and music are again vibrant! Our vocabulary has expanded to include unlimited liability, contemplation, the Lectionary, boundaries, sustainability, pastoral care, chickens, and geese. We have added mentors like Elaine Prevallet, Michael Morwood, and Thomas Berry. We had the Festival Center for a time; things wax and wane.

We trust that we will have children as an integral part of our community again soon; *Children Wonder and Worship* is waiting and ready. We are ecumenical and mindful that this, the twenty-first century, cries out for brotherhood and sisterhood with people of all faiths and even of no faith, so we are also interfaith. Our newest missions are on-site: Chrysalis Interfaith Retreat Center (yes, we do have one!), The Outdoor School, The Crofters, The New Lodge, Genesis group, St. Francis group - all helping us wake up to see God within each of us and to accept our part of the responsibility to maintain and sustain the fragile, precious gift of life in people and in all of creation. The Haven continues to faithfully pursue its expanded mission of bringing The Healing Place, a residential treatment/recovery program to Central and Southwestern Virginia.

Life, for each of us, has its ups and downs, its crises and its smooth-running time as Will likes to say, its thin places, and its hard places. Certainly that has been true for the Church of the Covenant. Some missions come and stay and some go. Emphases fluctuate as we evolve. There are so many dear to us who have joined the great the cloud of witnesses, and so many who have scattered throughout this big wide world of ours, touched and enriched by the life we have shared here in this place. Life truly is a journey. I am so grateful for where God has planted me and for my still-unfolding journey. May God bless us all as we continue the journey!