

## Who is Fellowship of Hope now and in the coming 50 years?

~ Wendell Wiebe-Powell, 25 Oct. 2020

And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.  
–1 Cor. 13:13

So if love is the greatest of the three, why not Fellowship of Love!? Well...in the context of 1967's Summer of Love and bed hopping cult leaders, maybe.....not. But seriously, Love in this fellowship is real, it is central and it is vitalizing as Donald Lanctot reminded us yesterday and as Suella has not let us forget over the years she has been our pastor.

But we are a Fellowship of Hope; an audacious claim. If it was shallow hope, cheap hope well...no big deal but our hope and our idealism has been battered by storms and seasoned over a half century. Out of joyful times and the beauty of mutually caring relationships but also out of painful disappointments, conflict and losses, our hope and our idealism has been tempered and has become more mature than it was in our past. We see situations with more nuance and complexity. We started as an intentional community and we **ARE** an intentional community NOW – as Suella reminded us – pliable in God's hands for what that means for new times and new circumstances. Our head and our heart dance together better than they used to. Our faith is becoming more embodied. We are contemplative and political. We are a creative group. We have strengthened our ability to be vulnerable with each other. We hold our views more lightly and gently.....at least **more** often now. We are a little more like the reed that bends in the wind than the brittle dry branch.

It's a lot easier to be cynical and hopeless because hope makes demands on us. It means we believe something can be done to make things better. It means we stop singing the old tune of privilege, "it's always been that way...you can't do anything about it." Authentic hope means that it's not just a head trip to say that the Holy Spirit is at work in the world and we are invited to participate in that work, to join in that joyful dance. In our audacious active hope we have eyes to see glimpses of the kin-dom of God taking root in the world, in south central Elkhart, here and now. It means we believe in our hearts as well as our minds that WE can embody that kin-dom of God as a community. It means we know we are on a long journey and are very imperfect in living

out our intentions. But we still hold a vision of the aliveness of God one day **filling the earth!** Our light shines ... now ... even in the darkness. That is the hope of this fellowship!

Now, let's step down a bit from the bold proclamations. There are many stories about how Fellowship of Hope is unique, special and exceptional AND...there is an overarching story or collective identity around our uniqueness. We have heard the heartwarming stories over the last couple days. They are good! But there is a shadow side. We quite easily point the nationalism and exceptionalism of the dominant culture of our nation but may have a harder time seeing the shadow side of exceptionalism of our fellowship. However...part of that seasoning and maturing that I mentioned before comes with a sense that God's spirit is working every bit as actively and creatively within **other** congregations and even in the secular world! ...

We are a fellowship who takes caring and mutual aid seriously for our own members but also for our surrounding community. The parking lot of the building we moved into was strewn with trash and a place of drug deals so we cleaned it up, held community events and put up a no loitering sign. Part of that spiral of growth and maturing can be seen in how John Stoltzfus made us aware of how the no loitering sign – put up with good intentions – was offensive and a sign of our white privilege in a neighborhood populated predominately by people of color. New signs with a spirit of joyful solidarity have been put up. In its early years, Fellowship of Hope had a hierarchy with men in control at the top but came to see that as a fallacy. We have been blessed by several women pastors since then! And so the spiral of orientation, disorientation and new orientation continues.

FoH is amazingly earnest in seeking to follow Jesus / to live out the faith in this time and place...with THESE people. We are a community that values having our eyes open to the wider world. Political systems are convulsing, structures of racism and economic exploitation are rearing their heads but ALSO being named, unmasked and engaged..... The fabric of life on EARTH is unraveling before our eyes. We are a fellowship that faces and responds to these things together with each other and with the power of the Holy Spirit, the example of Jesus and the grace of God. It's all hands on deck for this global exorcism of the domination system. Fellowship of Hope will be shoulder to shoulder with the great throng in this endeavor. At our best we hold the working out justice and

reconciliation in our own lives and fellowship hand in hand with being in solidarity with movements for structural change in wider society. Two sides of a coin.

### **But what of the next 50 years?**

We have two options as I see it to put Fellowship of Hope to rest or to find new aliveness and growth in spirit and numbers or, as John Stoltzfus has put it, to plant or to be planted. Both options are valid.

If we put Fellowship of Hope to rest, this audacious journey of hope will not have been in vain. Many lives have been blessed and transformed along this journey through the ups and downs. The essence and spirit of what God had done in our life as a church will be ripple out into other vistas and congregations. God's salvation story will continue and what we have done will be part of that story and will inform and inspire new stories and audacious experiments on an even deeper level.

BUT....if we choose the path or...if God leads us on a path of continuing, enlivening and growing THEN...I can see some of the following possibilities:

I can see an ecumenical interracial woman's group organizing its own expression of Martin Luther King's "beloved community".

I can see FoH helping to organize a youth group for justice and peace with fun activities and mentoring along with consciousness raising and confrontation of structures of oppression that effect their young lives.

I can see FoH participating in creating Ulury Park as a enjoyable beautiful place for our community maybe with a commemoration of the school that was once there.

I can see, in the quite near future, a garden oasis for the community developed on FoH's vacant lot; a place to re-member the dis-membered African American community that once thrived in that part of town but also a place to re-member hopes and dreams for what our community can become; a place that invites conversation and the weaving of relationships; a place of peace amidst the frenetic energy of the city.

In the coming 50 years we will have laid to rest our identity as exceptional and re-clothed ourselves as a part of the wider body of Christ with a unique and vital role to play among other congregations and movements each with their unique and essential functions in the greater whole; imperfect, learning from and celebrating each other. Our collective self-doubt, our spirit of hesitancy and reticence will have melted away replaced by a clearer sense of our role as part of the wider body; not more than others but not less either. We will re-present our part of the body with humble confidence ... even boldness. We will celebrate and proclaim the precious gift we have to share; honed through the joys and storms over 50+ years. We will be teachers of community making. We will ALSO have a much keener sense of the gift that these neighborhoods have been to US! ... teaching us about needs we didn't even know we had! We will have grown in our ability to listen and learn especially to our neighbors of color. We will have deepened our rootedness and connection to the particular blocks and people of south central Elkhart.

These are dark and anxious times and things could easily get worse on a number of fronts. Through solidarity with each other and our neighbors, God's grace, the power of the Holy Spirit and the loving way of Jesus we will shine brightly. As we are more deeply able to hold the grief among us, our joy will burst over the horizon in the morning. If and when we are broken, we will be re-membered in the love that God gives us for each other.

That is HOPE for this fellowship!