

Surrender sharing September 24, 2023

As I thought about this opportunity to share, I realized how much surrendering, letting go, and trusting I was required to do as Alzheimer's gradually took Cindy away from us. Moving to a new location and entrusting her to so many different healthcare staff (esp. during the early Covid months) was challenging. I needed to observe what role I was to play in her life, and what I was being called to bring to the neighborhood, residents, staff, and other family members. The support of you in this room along with others reminded me how God cares for us even, or maybe especially during times in the valley. I cannot thank you enough and realized I needed to add this to what I said Thursday night.

My story this morning, however, is about the second-most difficult task I remember undertaking, the relatively brief time in 1986-87 as a member of the "Caretaker Group" formed at Fellowship of Hope (FoH) to help navigate the closure of the Apostolic Order (A.O.) that included sharing of resources and communal living. Here are brief steps in the process:

*Shalom Covenant leaders opened up church membership to those not part of the A.O. in ca.1979. This came as a result of a growing number of people attracted to the worship, fellowship, and mission they experienced/saw but for whom the structured life of the A.O. was not life-giving.

*Our family was part of the A.O. when we left in 1981 for my social work graduate school in Kansas City as people began leaving the A.O. We decided to return to FoH but left the A.O. and returned in 1984 as "regular" church members.

*We found FoH had grown in those 3 years, with a lot of kids for our 6-yr old twins to join. The A.O. membership, however, was shrinking as others like us chose to either leave altogether or become "regular" church members. I understand the early 80s were the high point in Sunday worship attendance in our church's history. We found the continuation of a vital, neighborhood-focused congregation that remained strong even with fewer living the communal life.

*When it became clear that the A.O. was too small to be viable, a "caretaker" group was established, with both church and A.O. members, to work on: developing "settlement" support to help people leaving the A.O. get started living independently; to sell the 16 buildings (not including the church); determine the future of Hope Builders, a business birthed by the A.O.; and distribute any remaining assets. The six of us were Barb Fridley, Ruth Mallory, Lois Hoover, Barb Rody, Jim Norton, and myself. Soon in the process, we asked for help from two experienced IN-MI conference pastors, Ray Bair and Jason Martin whose counsel was invaluable.

*The caretaker group met many times, listening to those who felt unfairly treated as part of the A.O. and in the settlement "exceptions" for health or family situations. Some were frustrated about their financial status after serving without compensation in the A.O. and giving away their retirement funds when they joined. We needed to address the SS system of determining retirement benefits, a concern for many. Outside experts helped us appraise the houses and, remarkably or due to the Spirit's leading, the purchases were carried out with little conflict. Most were sold to either A.O. and church members.

*After the Caretaker work was finished, the congregation also received major help from Marcus Smucker who processed the emotional hangover of the decision and the pain many suffered in losing what they hoped/thought would be a lifetime commitment. Nina Lancot, a former A.O. member who left, returned as Pastor in the 90s and continued working with the grief many felt.

This story should be told with input from others as even though I have a bunch of notes and minutes, I'm sure there are other opinions of how this unfurled. I share it today as an example of surrender that while not very detached and relaxed, somehow managed with God's help to stumble forward as a church holding together while seeking a new way.... not unlike we are going through now. The desire to be together and serve is still present today, but in what form, TBD!

The history of God's people includes multitude times when its very existence was being threatened and a form of surrender happened: taking refuge in Egypt and then being enslaved; wandering 40 years in the desert after the exodus; domination by powerful neighbors; being removed into exile; giving up the physical presence of Jesus for the wild gift of the Spirit calling the Gentiles brothers and sisters, part of the flock. The developing church has faced many divisions over the centuries, including our Anabaptist forebears. Surrendering, letting go and trusting God to help find a way may be necessary for us. Yet we are told we will not journey alone, that the Spirit of Jesus is with us. I think we saw signs of that Spirit in Thursday's conversation so well-conceived by the Transition Team. I'll close with these verses from Colossians 1.1-14.

May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from God's glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to God who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. God has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

David Janzen