

# Martha Phillips: A Church Without a Call

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Martha Phillips

## A Church Without a Call

[Kevin](#) and [Kate](#) have recently talked about fear and I decided that there is no reason to change the topic when our lectionary scriptures continue to focus on it. During the 3 years I served as pastor of Mt. Vernon Baptist Church, I always entered the pulpit with fear. I had hoped that one day it would go away, but I now realize that it is an awesome fear that comes when we choose to bring God's word to a congregation.

I come back to you from a congregation that was riddled with fear. It is a dying church. I went there with high hopes and many new ideas, but in spite of the fact that I loved them and they loved me, I had to conclude that they were choosing to die. They said they wanted to grow and reach out to the community but their actions spoke louder than words.

One morning I witnessed a member of the church who was both a deacon and trustee say to a first time visitor, "Could you please move; that is my seat." When I talked with this person later, she did not see anything wrong with what she had done. I tried to start something along the lines of a mission group. We called it a spiritual growth group. We were studying the book *Celebration of Discipline* by Richard Foster. Only two people came, and they were younger members. We met for several months, then both of them decided to leave the church and go somewhere the people took their worship more seriously. I was sorry to see them go but I knew it was the best thing for

them.

By far the biggest fear is for their building. They had worked hard to build it and they are compulsive about maintaining it. The church was a family and they came together at the family house. It is a source of great pride but it is also the biggest obstacle to their revitalizing the congregation. These days the two-story education building sits empty except for the church offices.

To me this was poor stewardship. We formed a group to see what possibilities there were for using the space. The John Leland Center for Theological Studies was looking for space and they seemed to be a good match. We went through several months of negotiation, but when the final vote was taken, the church turned them down. They did not want anyone to mess up their building or take over their church.

We found out that there were many people interested. It was my desire to have a start-up mission. Several ethnic churches wanted to use the building but the excuse there was that they would do a lot of cooking and that would smell up the building or they also would try to take over from us. To the congregation's credit, they did allow some 12-step groups to meet in one room. This was a significant outreach to the community.

They eventually went to having only commercial ventures. This was less threatening. The building is still not used to its potential and I think the church has lost out in not opening its doors to other congregations. I still feel the pain of turning away an Ethiopian congregation and a Hispanic congregation. The building is heated and cooled 7 days a week and 24 hours a day, so we could have afforded to carry them, even if they could not pay much. It would have been wonderful outreach to the community.

One Tuesday night while eating dinner at the School of

Christian living, Pat Conover asked me about my choice to come back to Seekers. I've thought about it a lot and the main reason is that call is such an important part of Seekers life. Imagine what it is like to be in a committee meeting where no one has a call. People get on and stay on various committees for different reasons. They've always been on that committee, or the nominating committee called them at the last minute to fill a slot. Often, they have been assured by the nominating committee that they will not have to do much. My argument was that in that case they did not need to be on the committee and that it was better to leave some slots open than to fill them with people who did not want to be there.

Without call, it is hard to expect accountability. The deacon board at Mt Vernon was often seen as an honorary position. Only a couple of them would agree to say a prayer when I called on them. It did not matter that the number attending had dropped steadily over the years. This was the way church was and that was that.

My greatest fear was that I would be swallowed up by the negativity, and I would lose my sense of who I was as a Christian. I went to the director of our association to see if there were some things we could do to give the church a lift. He looked at me and said, "Martha, you didn't really think you could do anything with that congregation did you?" I looked at him and said, "Yes I did." The church did move out of the Southern Baptist Convention and into the American Baptist Convention. They were against the Southern Baptist stand on women in the pulpit and they wanted to make sure their money went to the places they wanted it to go.

My decision to leave had a lot to do with my health. At this time, I had been pastoring full time and going to Seminary full time for three years. The church offered to let me take a 6-month leave of absence but my gut feeling was to break my ties with them. Half of my time each week was spent doing the sermon, writing prayers and liturgy and choosing the music. I

thought of Seekers' open pulpit and Celebration Circle and it made sense to me. After all, I got tired of preaching to the same people every week; I am sure they got tired of listening to me. Even though I knew what I wanted, it was a difficult decision because my chance of being called to another Baptist church was slim. Yes, the Baptists do believe in call but it usually applies only to pastors and missionaries. I spent 3 months visiting other Baptist churches and talking to other pastors. I realized I was letting go of the last vestige of my childhood religion.

Today I want you to know that I am working to become a [Steward](#). I do this with some fear but mostly with joy. I joined the Artist Mission Group because at this time that is my call. I come to art with fear because only I can claim myself an Artist but when all is said and done, will my work be counted as Art? When I voice my concerns to Danny, he always comes up with a unique way of looking at things. He suggests that I just tell people I am a "kept woman". My response to that is that I am indeed a kept woman. I am kept in hand of the Almighty. The mission group provides me with a place where I am accountable for what I do. I am grateful for this. I know I will not always agree with Seekers but I know that it is a place where I am heard, and where I count.

I know you do not want to hear about water after all the rain we have had this spring but water is a compelling symbol through out the Bible. There are the chaotic waters of creation, the flood waters of Noah's time, the parted waters of the Red Sea, the still waters of the psalmist and most important of all the living water of our Baptism. Water can be calm, symbolizing peace as in Psalms 23. When we are lead beside the still waters. On the other hand, it can represent our fears in storms of life as today's story where Jesus calms the perfect storm.

The one thing we know about water from our reading in Job is that the Creator controls the waters. Our fears often come

from feeling as if we have to be in control. In our Job reading for today many terrible things had happened to Job and God remained silent. In chapter 38, God breaks his silence and replies to Job with a host of rhetorical questions including one about the sea. "Who shut up the sea behind doors when it burst forth from the womb? [Where were you?] When I made the clouds its garment and wrapped it in thick darkness? When I fixed limits for it and set its doors and bars in place? When I said, "This far you may come and no farther; here is where your proud waves halt?" Creation itself testifies to God's sovereignty.

In the Mark 4 reading, the disciples are with their Master. On this particular day, everything had been going well. The crowd had heard amazing things from the Master but now the sky was getting dark and the teacher gets into the boat along with his disciples. The moon was showing and the wind was still. It would be so easy to glide across to the other side. Jesus lies down in the boat and falls asleep. Then, without warning, the winds begin to rage. The water breaks loose in large violent waves. The storm was tossing the boat about. Andrew and Simon who have been fishermen all their lives were surprised by the furious squall. Terror began to set in because each man realized that this was the perfect storm and there was nothing that he could do.

Then someone remembered Jesus. Where was He? Asleep? When his disciples were in danger of losing their lives? In desperation, the disciples called out "Master, wake up?" Can't you see we are about to go under? Don't just lie there! Do something to save us!

Jesus did not answer the disciples directly. Instead, he got up, looked around and spoke three words, "Peace, be still." The winds immediately died down and the Sea became as smooth as glass.

Jesus now addresses his disciples. "Why are you so afraid?"

The disciples must have been thinking, "We've just come out of this terrible storm and you want to know why we are afraid?" Before they have time to answer, Jesus puts another question to them. "Do you still have no faith?" You will notice that Jesus did not ask them about their faith until after he had calmed the storm. These men had seen and heard all of the wondrous things that Jesus had done and they still did not have the faith to weather the storm. The disciples are again afraid with a different type fear. They look at one another and say, "Who is this man that even the wind obeys him?"

The story of Jesus calming the storm is a wonderful teaching about life in the hands of God. It reminds us of who is in control. When the sea is calm and when it is erupting, Jesus is at peace.

What we fear is what we cannot control. The disciples were not afraid of the waves and the wind, they were afraid of their inability to control what the waves and the wind might do to them. Our fear grows as we discover our inability to control what happens to us. Our terror multiplies when the thoughts begin to roam around in our head that maybe nobody's in control. Do not mistake the person of Jesus asleep for the presence and power of Jesus being absent. No one was thrown from the boat No one was drowned. The presence of Jesus was there.

Jesus does not promise to calm every storm in your life. Nevertheless, he does promise to calm you in every storm of life. We can ask Jesus to bring peace to our minds. He holds the events that will unfold tomorrow. We can ask Him to bring peace to our hearts.

Often we react to the storms in our life in ways that prevent us from discovering the peace of Christ. We react with anger, resentment, grudges, unforgiveness or even rationalization. There are storms that are so real, so traumatic, so painful that there is nothing else we can do except ask Jesus to help.

Often we keep one hand on the rudder, just in case God does not know where he is going.

Our story today does not say that if we have Jesus in the boat with us, our lives will not be rocked. It does not mean that being in relationship with Jesus promises us perfect health, a satisfying marriage, a successful career, or a life without cares. As Christians, we are still subject to all the same adversities of the human conditions that others experience. The message we need to take from this is that when the storms of life threaten we have someone to call on.

When I came back to Seekers after being away for about 4 years things had changed. That is only to be expected. I did not see a storm on the horizon but I did feel restless waves. I am sure that the impending move to Carroll St. has much to do with this. I also miss the presence of Sonya. To me she was the one who kept her finger on the pulse of this community. Seekers has remained the stepchild of the Church of the Savior for a long time. Our boat is full and ready to push off. Is Jesus in the boat with us?