

"A Born Again Congregation" by Pat Conover

Sermon for Seekers Church

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Pat Conover

A Born Again Congregation

We didn't have to move Carroll Street two years ago. There were good reasons not to move or to buy and the decisions didn't come easily. It was a ten year pregnancy and we started feeling overdue long before the waters broke. Still, to switch metaphors, since we paid such a high tuition for the lessons of moving and building, we should be sure to take our learnings with us. Here are a few things worth remembering.

It cost a lot of money and many were doubtful that we had enough people and enough financial resources to make it work. But we did make it work and we are making progress on reducing a manageable debt. Furthermore, we increased our giving to ministries outside of Seekers while giving and loaning the money to buy and rehabilitate the building.

We were inexperienced in owning and managing and caring for a building. We had resisted taking on more responsibilities as renters at our previous home on Massachusetts Avenue. But individuals and groups came forward to meet the variety of challenges. New gifts were recognized and confirmed.

The move was somewhat divisive and, as predicted, we lost some members. It has been generally more difficult for our Virginia

members but now most have learned their driving paths and we have a mission group that meets in Virginia. We lost a few people who did not want to be part of the long stewardship and practical parts of moving. But a solid core did make the move, symbolized by the long walk to Carroll Street from Massachusetts Avenue. And, also as predicted, we have added participants during the moving process and during settling in.

Focusing on moving and on all it took to become owners of a rehabilitated building was distracting from other parts of community life and ministry. It has been distracting, especially for those who took on the biggest and longest lasting tasks, for Stewards, and for the Servant Leadership Team. Many worthy agendas, many important relationships have been deferred, and some individuals have felt neglected or rejected in the very long process. For example, the decision making demands in Stewards meetings kept us in a high-efficiency and low-connectivity process for years. Some Stewards resigned because of this pain and the apparent loss of vision and attention to other important matters of community and ministry. At the same time new mission groups have formed and new Stewards have come forward.

We didn't have to move. We could have quit or dispersed into small house churches. I remember Liz Vail holding up the vision of being a permanently wandering community, carrying the Ark of the Covenant with us and living in tents. Many core features of the Judeo-Christian faith grew up among centuries of nomadic wandering after escape from Egypt, not least the crucial feature of living by law, a huge innovation from sheer patriarchy. The prophets had a lot of sharp negative assessments of settling down and building a temple, of centering power in a place, of becoming an establishment like other nations. The republic form of cooperating tribes was lost to a bureaucracy of priests and the King and his court of

mostly military advisors.

We didn't have to move. Many members of Seekers have been scarred by living through building processes in other congregations. I too worry about the dangers of an edifice complex, about paying too much attention to bricks, bucks, and bodies. These fears are good for us. Oft remembered, and oft mentioned, they encouraged us to sustain a community approach to the long process and to avoid many of the worst problems of establishment.

I am particularly pleased with what has happened to our financial stewardship. We needed to grow up in several ways in terms of stewardship and we have.

I carry a vivid memory of the first time I suggested in a Steward's meeting that we should keep our end-of-the-year surplus for a building fund instead of following our usual practice of giving it away in extra end-of-the-year giving. It was the first foot-hill to climb and was resisted by Cynthia Powers among others.

A much bigger hill to climb was the fear that we could not raise enough money to buy and rehabilitate a building. We considered several renting and space-sharing alternatives. I paid a lot of attention to the financial feasibility of buying with many revisions of affordability. It was a conservative model and we ended up doing significantly better than my projections. Part of climbing this hill was sharply upgrading our budgeting process and record keeping led by Marjory Bankson, Sue Johnson, Kate Cudlipp, and the others I have just offended by not including their names. A major part of our financial stewardship was that numerous members and stewards

increased their regular financial giving, more than offsetting financial losses of some membership attrition. This was a significant encouragement to us all, a signal that we were indeed in this together, that the whole congregation and not just mission groups really mattered to us.

Another very steep grade to climb in the financial hill was taking on the stewardship of financial wealth in addition to giving from income. A significant part of the congregation, including a youth participant, made extra efforts in the form of loans. Some refinanced their houses. Others sold stock. One member established a financial trust that was important for helping us make the out-years of our affordability models look good. It would have cost a lot of money and effort to borrow from others. Borrowing from each other within the community was critical to making the affordability model work.

I particularly remember the painful dilemma of a member who could not bring any extra money forward and felt shut-out of this phase of our financial effort and worried that she might be devalued as a result. She and others helped us to focus on the spiritual meaning of investment and helped all of us keep clear about valuing every kind of investment, of giving and loaning from our abundance. In the famous parable, the widow gave her small coins from her abundance of spirit and that spirit lived again in Seekers. The financial challenge and opportunity of moving to Carroll Street helped us to talk freshly and more openly about issues of money, a difficult subject in our culture. We remembered: that money is not a measure of individual worth in the Eternal Realm of God, that we are stewards and not owners of our wealth, and that investment is a heart process and not primarily a financial transaction.

Now we face the happier challenges of paying off our remaining debt to ourselves and anticipating the freeing up of more financial resources for ministry, an opportunity for newer folk to participate in our surprising financial generosity.

I also want to notice that we have grown up in the sense of gaining spiritual confidence as a community. That is at the heart of the stewardship story but it has shown up in numerous other ways as well. While moving through the building process we not only moved out of our parent's house on Massachusetts Avenue, we have moved through the leaving of Fred Taylor and the retirement and moving of Sonya Dyer, along with the much-loved Manning Dyer. The first generational transition is now mostly completed though there are still members carrying feelings of loss. And we are fortunate to still have several first generation members with us. No one is really replaced in Seekers. It is not as if we think of losses in terms of organization holes to fill. We are a community and losses of precious relationships matter. Still, those of us who share the collective consciousness of our ant colony know that the colony is somehow more critical than each of us as ants. Transitions help us to appreciate our place in the Seekers Story, our place in the larger Christian Story, our place in the Eternal Realm.

Each of you matter to me because you are helping to write the ongoing story I share in and care about. You are precious to me and I feel that we are, for the most part, precious to each other. For you who are newer, as you come to know this in your bones, more of the things that seem strange or ambiguous in Seekers will make more sense.

Two dominant metaphors for understanding Seekers are circle and journey. When I came to Seekers in 1986 it was clear to me that circle was the dominant metaphor, as for example in the name, Celebration Circle, for our mission group that creates our Sunday morning worship. We were renting at Massachusetts Avenue, essentially invisible to the larger world. Finding the circle, feeling you were part of the circle, mattered a great deal for the formation of community. While I value that metaphor I was, and am, concerned about the emphasis on being in or out that comes with the image of a circle, and also concerned with the inward facing of the circle in Seekers usage.

I've pushed for the metaphor of journey as a balancing metaphor and have emphasized journey language in many of my sermons. We need to break camp every morning, break the circle every morning, and re-gather at the end of the day. Finding the circle in the evening is not automatic and some are lost along the way. But we cannot remember our direction, or even know we have a direction, without breaking camp. We cannot find food for the journey without breaking camp. We cannot find new companions for the journey without breaking camp. And we will miss important dimensions of trust if we do not break camp. Carrying our processional cross and banner from Massachusetts Avenue to Carroll Street, even though my feet were too limited at that time to make the full walk myself, is a living image of journey that matters to me.

I think that one of our important spiritual challenges at the two-year mark in our time at Carroll Street is to remember to break camp every morning. We have talking about this as giving higher priority to our outer journey as Seekers, in contrast to earlier emphases on inner journey and community. We have to have all three all the time, but, at any one time, one or

another of the three parts of this guiding slogan: inner journey, outer journey, and community, gets extra collective attention.

Before going further with this theme, I want to remember that giving more attention and encouragement to the outer journey of Seekers does NOT mean that those of us whose ministry is focused on inner journey and community are less important. In many ways, those with callings to the inner journey and to community building are even more important because they are carrying a basic Seekers value without getting as much attention and encouragement. Of course the transition away from a collective emphasis on inner journey and community building may feel like loss to those who care deeply about inner journey and community building. It is easy to feel less valued when community focus has moved away from your primary concerns to other concerns. But, when we think about it, we know that more outer journey concern will not last long without an accompanying inner journey and will not be a common journey without ongoing community building. Without inner journey we are in danger of not finding the camp in the evening. Without community building we are in danger of not finding directions to the camp every evening.

Part of our outward journey is using our building for ministry and supporting the ministry of others. This was a major goal that was repeatedly articulated as part of our stewardship commitment to putting so much time and money into the building. Many of us were unwilling to whole-heartedly join in the Carroll Street effort if it was just going to be for ourselves. Thanks to Jeanne Marcus, Peter Bankson, Katie Fisher, mission groups, stewards, the Servant Leadership Team,

and numerous individual efforts, we are getting the hang of sharing the building and are mostly pleased with its utilization.

What feels newer to me is a shift of attention and encouragement to another significant part of our call as Seekers: to offer ministry in the context of the many places, circumstances, cultures, and structures where we live our daily lives. In part we are responding to the Faith At Work movement. It seems to me, however, that the grounding is primarily in the caring that many individual Seekers are already giving to faithful engagement of the powers and principalities, to the signs of grace and judgment, to the lures and opportunities of what God is doing in the world, to the felt heartbreak of so many people who need our help and encouragement.

Let me clear about a particular bias of mine, shared, I hope, by many others. I'm glad that we have new members and participants and that some long-time members are experiencing strong new engagements. But I am not counting bodies as in, bricks, bucks, and bodies. I am not measuring success in Seekers by such outward signs. We don't need to fill our pews, to get more participation in our programs. We need more ministers, more people who are working with their gifts and callings, more people who are exploring new commitments, more people putting their hands to the gospel plow.

It is clear in Seekers that it is counter-productive to rush the discernment processes for individual ministries. Imaging, visioning, getting the tools, finding companions and opportunities, starting and stopping, centering and grounding, are all critical to appreciating and living out our individual gifts and callings. Taking care of the practicalities of life

and sometimes giving priority to the needs of others instead of focusing on one's own journey are part of working out ministry. We don't need to rush the process. This is no message of salvation by works. This is not about earning a place in community. It is about constructive engagement and sharing identity with others who are trying to do their best. It is about finding meaning, taking risks, getting hurt, embodying caring. It is about firm foundations, changing identities, building new habits, accepting responsibility for your part of the world. And it is about intercessory prayer and appreciation of the ministries of others because any one of us, even Seekers as a whole, is so overmatched by the needs of the world.

The Gospel of John was written much later than Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In many ways it has moved on from engaging Jesus of Nazareth and is instead presenting and defending the orthodoxy of the early Christian Church. John incorporates Greek philosophy and has moved from concerns about experienced life to a theorized eternal life. But, in the lectionary this morning, John talks about being born again as an experienced life moment that he considers a sign of acceptance into eternal life. It is marked, he writes, by the experience of glossolalia, or speaking in tongues. That's the reference in our lectionary scripture today to the wind, the same as of the metaphor of wind found in the Pentecost story in Luke. The out-of-body experience that comes in such ecstatic moments is taken by John as a sign that life in-the-body does not define or limit the human connection to spirit.

In this sermon I am pointing to the simpler and general gifts of ministry, the everyday acts of caring, the hope that our work matters and makes life better for others, the solidarity with those we give our work to. Sometimes boring, sometimes

frustrating, a lot of ministry just isn't as exciting as ecstasy, however attained. I've had a few special ecstatic moments and I treasure them

in my memory, but what excites me about Seekers is the dailyness of caring, the trying again after failure, the forgiveness and understanding as we repeatedly fall short, the lifting of vision because we are showing that we are not letting ourselves be defined by the powers and principalities.

Salvation into calling, and grounding, and community, and meaning, and trust, and hope, and finally into love, always begins now. No more preparation is needed. No special permission is needed. You don't need to pass a doctrinal test first. You don't even need to know all the words to the song. But it does begin now and you can't start any other time until the next now. And, after you start, you can only deepen and grow **now**, only start over **now**, only seek forgiveness **now**, only overcome fear **now**. That is what I think being born again is about. It is a turning from things defined by death to what is life-giving, to aligning yourself with what is life-giving, to learning the land marks of what is life-giving, to holding your gifts with an open hand rather than lifting them up as trophies. It is about humming along, learning some of the words, picking up on the rhythms and harmonies when we sing together, of recognizing that you have found your place in the choir, your seat at the evening camp fire.

Our building here at Carroll Street is ill-designed as a fortress. Maybe we can be a landmark, an Ebenezer, a birthing chamber. Maybe you can notice that God has found you here, notice that Seekers can hold you both gently and strongly, notice that you personally have been born into salvation, salvation for the life we experience as part of the body of Christ. Coming in. Going out. Pregnancy. Birth.