

“Living the Vision: The Courage of Our Faith” by Peter Bankson

Peter Bankson

July 2, 2006

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INTRODUCTION

In April, when Celebration Circle began writing the liturgy we are using these days we thought that by now we would be in a time of change as we lived into our Next Steps during Pentecost. And ... we are. By the end of our lively conversation at the community gathering last Sunday, it seemed clear to me that we have a vision of who we long to be. We may not all see it exactly the same way, but that should not be a surprise. When have we ever all seen something out there on the horizon the same? In the four small groups – Seekers’ Culture, Conflict Resolution, Structures and Pastoring – there was a lot of energy and a sense of hope that our journey together will take us into this new vision. We will discover what God has in store for us as we journey together with Jesus.

Our journey together will call forth the courage of our faith. Today’s Epistle lesson gives us some interesting insights

about what it takes to claim and live God's vision planted in our hearts. Paul offers encouraging words to the church in Corinth and to the church here on [Carroll Street](#). As we think about how we can live the vision that God is giving us, I want to offer three ideas about the journey:

† It takes courage to choose hope over fear.

† It is more joyful to travel light.

† We can encourage each other to be intentionally on the way.

IT TAKES COURAGE TO CHOOSE HOPE OVER FEAR

[Our reflection paragraph](#) pulls back the curtain on a stark reality: "The community of persons closest to us has the power to keep us in the tomb of fear or to call us into the daybreak of hope." It is the hope of Christ working through the Body – integrating the diverse cells into one being. In addition, it is the fear of venturing into the unknown where we may not be ready for what lies ahead.

More than once in our life together as a faith community I have felt the reality of both parts of that truth.

Fear can shock us into immobility. I had one of those "deer-in-the-headlights" moments about a month ago when, on my way to a Celebration Circle retreat I ran into the back of another car coming out of the 3rd Street tunnel. For a few minutes, I was emotionally shaken and disoriented. However, no one was hurt, and there were things I knew I wanted and needed to do. That got me back on the road.

I remember other times when we seemed locked in a tomb of fear as a community. As we were living through the separation of [Church of the Saviour](#) into the separate faith communities that share a tradition, there were times when our attention was so focused on feelings of rejection that we could do little more than worship together on Sundays and gather for the [School of Christian Living](#) on Tuesday evenings. Those times felt like being locked up for safety, holding tightly to what we had so that we would not lose anything. We were not about to disappear but we were not open to anything new, either.

Later, after our first long search for a new place, we found this interesting old building, a print shop on Capitol Hill with an attached apartment. The main room had a big well in the middle that opened to the basement, where there were brick arches like the catacombs. We wrestled with the idea of moving there, and made an offer. Then we got the news that our offer had been turned down because we were part of a radical church that would probably set up a soup kitchen and encourage homeless delinquency in the neighborhood. Our vision was blocked by that rejection, and I felt locked in.

There have been other times, though, when the way was clearly open before us, when we had a vision of what was waiting for us and we had the energy to run down the road to meet it. One of those times was the period in the early 1980s when "Faith & Fantasy" was the wind under our wings. Marjory and Dave Lloyd were bringing us the deep death-and-resurrection experience of liturgical clowning, a very unconventional worship form. We were offering workshops in other congregations to spread that cheerful, zany good news. I remember a summer day when the clowns of Seekers went to Gallaudet University to offer hand

message to the crowd that gathered to be part of “Hands across America.” We were misunderstood and rebuffed as often as we were understood and welcomed, but we were faithful, and the Spirit carried us along, and we learned some important lessons.

More recently, we have faced a time of major transition as Sonya left and took with her the gifts she had for nurturing call and connections. We have had the challenge of being more intentional in our caring. With the added weight of finally having our own space, I have been afraid that we had lost the ability to respond joyfully with our lives. Then I signed up for the InterPlay men’s retreat at Wellspring, and felt that my hope and joy waking from a fretful sleep. I have the sense that InterPlay will be a major invitation for us to enjoy our journey again. I thank Sue, and Kate and Billy, and Jeanne and Alan and Lewis and all the other InterPlayers for holding up the torch for joyful body wisdom.

It is an invitation to find that enthusiasm that helps us lift our gaze (away from our navels) to the wider world, an invitation to journey with Jesus even when we do not understand.

There is a bit of learning here for me. I have discovered, more than once, that I will have more opportunities and more options if I’m moving than if that if I’m locked in a safe room. However, that means leaving my comfort zone. That is not comfortable! (Duh!) I am sure you have your own examples of tomb of fear or daybreak of hope. Think about it – what helps you find the courage to join Christ on the journey ... again?

Fear can shock us into immobility. We can encourage each other

to huddle more closely together and bolt the doors of our upper room. In addition, we can help each other throw the doors open because we have experienced together the freeing call to action, which is the Spirit of Jesus in our midst.

We know how to do both. For me, "Living the Vision" means claiming our courage as followers of Christ – the courage to want, the courage to claim, and the courage to change as we learn and grow. It takes courage to choose hope over fear.

IT IS MORE JOYFUL TO TRAVEL LIGHT

When I am on a hike, I want to carry what I need in order to enjoy the trip without being so burdened that I cannot enjoy the travel. That reminds me of my first overnight hike with my Boy Scout troop in San Francisco. We climbed Mt. Tamalpais in Marin County, and camped near the top. I had never been on a camping hike before, and I wanted to make sure I had what I needed, so I packed my big pack full. When we got to the scout house to board the bus, and I got my share of the troop's cooking equipment, food and water, the load was almost more than I could lift. Ronnie Rosenblum, our scoutmaster, encouraged us to leave everything that was not essential at the scout house before we got on the bus, because if it went on the bus then we would have to carry it all up – and down – the mountain. I was being careful. I took too much. I was miserable.

After the trip, when we gathered back at the scout house on Sunday afternoon, Mr. Rosenblum had us unpack our gear and sort it into two piles: what we had used and what we had not. Then he had us look at those two piles and move what we needed for emergencies that we had not used into the "GO" pile. Then

he had us repack the "GO" pile, shoulder our packs and hike around the block. In that hour, my body learned about packing light, a lesson I have never forgotten. (Anyone who has seen the sawed-off chopsticks I carry in my pack as eating utensils will appreciate this learning.) One of the things that made the learning possible was that I was in a group that was learning together. While Mr. Rosenblum was holding us accountable by not letting us throw anything away on the trail, our own experience delivered the lesson.

Now, 55 years later, I am making lists of what to take to Guatemala when we go on the next [Faith @ Work pilgrimage](#) in August. I have some idea of what we will need, but I want to minimize my load. I need the essentials – heavy boots, jeans, work gloves, wire cutters. Moreover, I have this tradition now of taking nose flutes for folks in the village so we can whistle while we work. [Whistle with nose flute.] Therefore, I will be taking 100 of these to give away. That adds a bit to my load, but the joy that bubbles up as those hard-working villagers figure out a new way to be joyfully goofy is worth every ounce.

Still, I do not want to be overburdened. Part of the encouragement I am getting, and that I hope I'm offering to other pilgrims this year is the encouragement to carry what you really need, but travel light.

Here in Seekers Church we have always tried to be conscious and intentional about the baggage we carry. We welcome everyone, regardless of age, race, gender, economic condition or sexual orientation. We are committed to helping each other heal from the wounds of discrimination. We want to follow in the tradition of Church of the Saviour, and we want to be

responsive to the guidance we are given from prayer, Scripture and the experience of our life together.

That sounds like a heavy load, particularly when we are surprised by pieces of this 'baggage.' Maybe a packing list would help, so we would have a better idea of what we are carrying. (That is what used to be called a 'manifesto' before the term was borrowed by the revolution.) Is there a Seekers' manifesto? Might it help us lighten the baggage we are carrying as we turn to living the vision?

I can offer a starting place from a manifesto I found a while ago. As the year 1985 was ending, I wrote down a list of things that I thought described Seekers Church. It was a kind of manifesto for who we seemed, to me, to be then. The essentials of Seekers included:

- † We are a community of the unexpected.
- † We have an incarnational, relational faith.
- † We believe in narrative theology.
- † We claim a role as co-creators with God.
- † We believe that we cannot do it by ourselves.
- † We live present to the mystery of Jesus, the Christ.
- † We have a hard time with anything we cannot figure out.
- † We find it easier to work than to celebrate.

I have a few copies of the detailed list if you are interested.

As I look at us today, 20 years after that I scribbled down that list, it still seems relevant. A few of the points are worth sharing in full.

Number 5: We believe that **we are co-creators with God**. We exercise delegated authority for the present and the future. God is the fundamental source of creation, but we have been given the tools of creativity: imagination, intuition, observation, sensitivity, decisiveness. To put it simply, we are responsible for what happens next, but not for what happens in the end.

Number 7: We **stand present to the mystery of Jesus, the Christ**. We know that we must trust what we cannot understand. When John writes, "In the beginning was THE WORD..." we see that Word in a special light.

Number 9: **We find it easier to work than to celebrate.**

As I have been sitting with this week's Epistle, I have come to see that in this encouraging letter to the church in Corinth, Paul is offering his own manifesto for the journey of a faith community. It is a list that I think we are carrying as we continue to break camp every morning on our journey with Jesus.

Here is what I see as Paul's manifesto for the church at Corinth:

† **Maintain accountability.** Paul says, "I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others." We want to be known and

trusted here. We know from the overnight and our work with Next Steps that we are hungry for better ways to nurture the genuineness of our love and our earnestness. That will take both pastoring and prophetic intervention, that is, accountability.

† **Serve those in need.** Paul says, “For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ; that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.” In our annual recommitment, we pledge to be stewards of the whole of creation, to foster justice and be in solidarity with the poor; and to work for the ending of all war, personal and public. One of our challenges is to know the joy that comes from a life of service – and the service that flows from a life of joy.

† **Claim your commitment.** Paul says: “And in this matter I am giving my advice: it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something – now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means.” For us, this is a call to be on the road with Jesus. For us there are three elements of this commitment

o An inner journey with Christ, journeying to a deeper level of love of God and trust in God’s never-ending love for us.

o An outer journey, finding where God’s love is calling us to be a loving, reconciling, empowering presence in the world. Our call is to go out from this place to “...empower others within the normal structures of our daily lives (work; family and primary relationships; and citizenship) as well as through special structures for service and witness.” That is commitment.

o A community journey, to be intentionally on the way, together, so we can encourage and help each other in living out God's call, and we can celebrate the grace and love that flows from God.

† **Trust God for the gifts you need.** Paul says, "For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has – not according to what one does not have." Gordon Cosby was quick to remind us that our task is to be faithful. Whether we are successful is up to God. We want to respond joyfully with our lives, as the grace of God gives us freedom. Sometimes we need some help from each other so we do not have to carry the whole load of our lives alone.

† **Keep a balance.** Finally, Paul says, "I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance." This suggests to me a value that we wrestle with: How can we be 'fair,' given all that we have received from God.

Here, again, the ideas that are sprouting from the Next Steps conversations can help us have the courage to choose hope and live the vision that God has planted in our hearts.

All this sounds like it might be a heavy load, and if I had to carry it alone, it would be. However, I have come to know the comforting power of life together as a place of deep encouragement, which leads me to my final point.

WE CAN EN-COURAGE EACH OTHER TO BE INTENTIONALLY ON THE WAY

A few weeks ago, [Pat Conover offered](#) us the idea that as a people who are intentionally on the way we need to break camp every morning. I know that is true, but sometimes the thought of lingering around the campfire for good conversation and another hot cup of coffee is very tempting.

Pat was reminding us of something that is clear in Seekers' call:

By "Seekers community," we mean an intentional body which sees Christ as our true life source. Koinonia with one another and genuine self-giving to the world are the ways we can be in Christ today. Seekers are not persons who have arrived, but persons who are intentionally on the way.

In the Epistle lesson for this week, the Paul also talks about breaking camp. He is encouraging the church in Corinth to follow Christ in faith, and keep moving – together.

I think that kind of encouragement is appropriate here in Seekers, too. We need to carry what we need but travel light so we can find joy in the journey. What to take, and what to leave behind? That has been part of our discernment for a long time. I pray that we can continue to look carefully at the balance between tradition and creativity.

Some of us carry things that others do not. That is as true here as it is on the trail. We do not all need to carry a big first-aid kit, if we can trust the one who **is** carrying it to be there when we need a band-aid. When we are in Guatemala, I

will be making sure the first-aid kit is on the bus, so the rest of you pilgrims do not need to worry about that.

In our tradition we understand this as part of the life of our mission groups, where we encourage each member to have authority within the group at the point of the gift she or he has received from God and has had confirmed by the group. At Seekers, most of us do not need to worry about preparing for worship, or getting ready for the School of Christian Living. We trust those with the call to be there when the time is right.

In the larger community some of us carry our sense of commitment, others our hunger for joy, still others the understanding that there can be deep satisfaction in service well rendered. That makes us different. We do not look identical, which suggests to me that we do not all have to be identical. I believe God must celebrate diversity or we would all look alike. As we grow in our life together, we can learn even better how to encourage each other to exercise our particular gifts, and help all of us celebrate what God is doing through the call of every one of us.

Around here, we talk a lot about "call." We understand that God calls each of us to a particular place of love and service. One mark of God's call is the passion, the joy, which fills us when we are following it.

One of the lessons in our tradition from Church of the Saviour is that while call is individual, the gifts needed to claim and live call are given in community. This is counter-

cultural: in the popular culture, the image of success is the independent, self-reliant, fully actualized individual. In our mission groups, we are learning to rely on one another, to trust that God will provide the group with what the group needs to carry out the call that has been given to its members. We learn to rely on one compass, one first-aid kit.

As part of the Body of Christ, we need to be on the road, but we need to travel together. We can encourage each other to be intentionally on the way.

CLOSING

We're about to gather around the altar table and celebrate Communion, about to remind ourselves that it is Christ who calls us, Christ who feeds us, Christ who encourages us so we can respond to that call with joy.

As we nourish each other, sharing the presence of the Risen Christ in bread and cup, I hope we can call one another into a new daybreak of hope. We have come a long way since 1985, and there is still an open road before us. That does not surprise me. We are a people who have not arrived, but are intentionally on the way.

Those of you who have a dream, I urge you to take the next step. Let your eagerness grow as you break camp and move onto the road again. As my Quaker friends remind me, "Way opens." We have more options when we are on the move.

For me, “Living the Vision” means claiming our courage as followers of Christ – the courage to want, the courage to claim, the courage to change. Living the Vision will not be easy, but it is the path before us. Can we encourage each other to choose hope over fear? Can we encourage each other to travel light, trusting each other to share the gifts God is giving us? Can we encourage each other to be intentionally on the way ... together?

Amen.

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PENTECOST REFLECTION

The community of persons closest to us has the power to keep us in the tomb of fear or to call us into the daybreak of hope. Do those around us call us to huddle more closely together and bolt the doors of our upper room? Or do they help us throw the doors open because we have experienced together the freeing call to action which is the Spirit of Jesus in our midst?

Sr. Loretta Mather

From an address to the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, 1981

Quoted on “Inward/Outward,” <http://www.inwardoutward.org>

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SCRIPTURE

Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you – so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking. I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others. For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. And in this matter, I am giving my advice: it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something – now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means. For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has – not according to what one does not have. I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. As it is written, ‘The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little.’

2 Corinthians 8:7-15

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SEEKERS CHURCH

CREDO

1. We are a **community of the unexpected**. We do not fit in, and we can tell each other all the reasons why.

2. Ours is an **incarnational faith**. We believe that Christ really IS present in the world, even when we cannot see, or feel, or hear that presence.

3. We also have a **relational faith**. We experience the Creator – God, Christ, Spirit – in relationships among people, and with the larger environment.

4. We have a **narrative theology**. We look for the revelation of God's story in the story of God's people, including our own stories, as individuals and as a community.

5. We believe that **we are co-creators with God**. We exercise delegated authority for the present and the future. God is the fundamental source of creation, but we have been given the tools of creativity: imagination, intuition, observation, sensitivity, decisiveness. To put it simply, we are responsible for what happens next, but not for what happens in the end.

6. We believe that **we cannot do it by ourselves**. We look to the empowerment of all people, guided by a common Spirit, to achieve everything that must be done. Creativity is an individual gift, but creation is the work of the whole body.

7. We **stand present to the mystery of Jesus, the Christ**. We know that we must trust what we cannot understand. When John writes, "In the beginning was THE WORD..." we see that Word in a

special light.

8. In spite of all this, we have a hard time with anything we cannot figure out.

9. We find it easier to work than to celebrate.

15 December 1985

PRB