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The Beginning of Seekers

Many ingredients prepared me to issue the call to form Seekers: the faith of my childhood, attraction to theological thinking, a real boost to my inner life nourished by participation in the Church of the Saviour, my involvement with FLOC with its ecumenical understanding of mission groups, my friendship with Fred and our common commitment to the city. The call was to create church, to build a Christian community that would encourage expression of faith in four aspects of life: worklife, family and personal relationship, citizenship, and particular ministries.

We also wanted to be sure that children were very much a part of the intentionality of our life. Certain emphases to our

development were particularly important to me: the freshness and power of liturgy, creating space for people to offer whatever they wanted to bring, connecting people with resources and other people who could help them offer their gifts, stepping away from the details but also caring how things turn out, affirming people and allowing room for conflict, making peace and justice issues always present. I have felt a lot of freedom and trust that things would unfold and that because we work in call focused groups, the necessary structure and boundaries would be created.

Worship

When we started working on what were going to be the unique dimensions of this new community, we focused on going back to the roots of faith. Worship life in the New Testament belonged to the people.

In ecumenical work with Catholics, I had learned that liturgy means “the work of the people” and includes images, beauty, and ritual that enhance what is said. A real call for me has been to create liturgical elements that feed us as much as sermons. Early on we saw the communion table as a table of life and devoted much attention to including art pieces, constructions, nature objects – anything we could think of to help people connect deeply with the liturgical theme. Several questions are in my mind as I help to choose themes and reflection paragraphs, write prayers and litanies, and create the altar each week.

- *Do our worship expressions have theological integrity?*
- *How is the pastoring, the prophetic, the theological dimension of Christian faith expressed?*

- *Do the words, silence, music, and images engage a variety of our senses?*

Is our worship not only nourishing and comforting, but empowering as well?

- *Is there a flow and a beauty that evoke for different people on different days a deepening of their links with the transcendent, the mystery, and the power that the Old and New Testament story seeks to impart?*
- *How does worship link us to the world beyond ourselves?*

I am always aware of the Sunday worship throughout the week.

My own quiet time, world events, experiences of our people – all these flow into this unique experience we have each week as a whole community, being present to each other and the world in the presence of God.

Communion – Union in Love

Gracious Christ, gathered at table, we hunger for a renewed filling by you. Though we often find ourselves uncertain about what it requires of us if we are to be prepared to receive you – your very presence into our physical bodies – we do want to be open to the grace that invites us to do that.

We reflect on the powerful symbols of love here on this table. The symbols of today's bread and the future's fruits quicken our imaginations so we may surround these elements with ever richer meanings from our present life, our past traditions and

from your vision of a new heaven and a new earth.

Holy One, we know Eucharist to be a sign of union in love, love that makes all things new.

We rejoice that these elements symbolize the undoing of injustice in the world: the inclusion of all people and creatures in the embrace of your love.

We speak our prayers as expressions of compassion and solidarity with all creation.

The Bread and The Cup

Jesus, our brother, we see our own lives mirrored in the bread and the cup.

We seek, as you do, to move ever deeper into the depth of life, of brokenness, of refreshment, of forgiveness, of new relationship, of compassion, of new creation.

Offer us your food, O Christ, that we may know and value the deep root of this celebration that connects us with the church's past, which is also our past. Help us experience the affirmation that this ritual act also goes deeply into our present life and work.

When we partake of these symbols we are truly linking the past and the present and expressing our faith in a completed future.

We are truly celebrating the unity and wholeness of our calling to fullness of relationship with you and your world.

Spirit of Christ, we thank you for all the ways you feed us and seek to understand how we may feed others – physically and spiritually.

You are the full expression of liberation and compassion. Awaken that same spirit within us.

We offer our prayers as we bond ourselves with you in loving your world, in loving the universe.

Including It All

Fred Taylor and I wanted to be sure that the call of Seekers included four important pieces – citizenship, close personal relationships, work, and ministries in the life of the church. In each of these we've come up with creative actions through the years, sometimes with more success or focused activities than others. The commitment to all four is an ongoing guideline that helps to hold us accountable to the fullness we want our life to express.

The family/personal relationship piece has been expressed through overnights, canoe trips, creation of original Sunday School curriculum, liturgies created by the kids, unforgettable comic dramatic productions, Myers-Briggs inventory for couples. We are committed to responding to social issues brought by community members. We might be planting trees, writing to corporations urging just labor practices overseas, taking the Seekers banner to the gay-lesbian march, the AIDS bike ride, and Walk for the Homeless.

So many Seekers see their work as call. Vaccinating children in Russia, advocating for abused families, fostering community

participation in schools, creating beautiful landscapes – the list is impressive. We as a community are dedicated to supporting and honoring people in their work.

Ministries within the church enhance our life in so many ways. Poetry readings, exhibits in Seekers Aloft, wonderful surprising altars, a constant array of interesting music, how could all the ways this happens be possibly named?

These four pieces are always woven into our life.

The challenge is to keep the spark alive in each.

An Offering of Leadership

In the very beginning of Seekers we wrote the call.

I have trusted that call to be a combination of guideline, energizer, and focus.

Because I trusted the call and people's response to it, specifics would come about not because of something I would say or do

but by inviting people into the call.

With call as a framework, visions would come from within.

I have wanted to know what mattered to each person, what they were looking for.

Then I would describe what we had and encourage them to say what they would like to see in addition.

I would try to help initiate something,

encourage them to take an action, or

possibly offer to be a partner in creating what they described.

Almost always when a person says something that matters

or something they want in the life of the church,
we can come up together with a way
to give that a place,
create an opportunity.

Another piece of leadership is having an overview of the whole.

This has to do with knowing people and
being true to the original call.

I have some gifts of perception to
sense the significance of certain things for the whole,
name them, and make connections with them.

I'm pretty good at juggling.

Part of leadership is juggling different tasks
but also giving space for different understandings, approaches
and needs
and recognizing that sometimes the different things are
conflictual,
sometimes one should have preeminence over another
so that the conflict will not be destructive.

Being in Celebration Circle,
whose purpose is to create and grow in our worship life,
gives me the chance to help shape this central part of our
community.

A role I play is to maintain the tension of the old and the
new
so that there is solidity and freshness at the same time.
This has had an impact on the life of the whole church.

I have had a commitment
to having a theological framework to what we do,
to naming the doing of theology when it was happening,
and to encouraging people to put that framework around their
thoughts and activities.

I valued the root, the Biblical basis,
for the community's life,

but also have used other kinds of nourishment for my spirit and was willing to be accountable for that.

An example was the women's theological group which met for so long.

Four of us were interested.

I encouraged us to meet to start working and reflecting.

That ferment mobilized many other things,

not because we set out to do this,

but here was a combination of folks whose energy grew

and who created an influential stream in our life.

Because accountability has always been important to me,

I have kept that concept in our midst

both collectively and individually.

Even though it may not always work,

it is a significant understanding.

When I meet a new person who wants to explore life with us,

I am an interpreter of the breadth of what accountability is

and how it gives energy to things

and has transformative qualities.

My mission group life has been an expression of faithfulness

to the two calls that have been central to me –

to worship and to the city and justice as expressed through

Hope and Home.

These two have been ways to hold in our midst

the inward/outward combination

my own life has been about.

Leadership among people whose gifts are so much beyond mine –

if I got hooked into that I could be overwhelmed or feel inferior.

There are people with greater theological training, intellect,

and preaching skills –

numbers of things.

Claiming my place has allowed me to be in a role

and be appreciated for that

and most of the time not feel competitive.

The servant part of leadership that is important to me involves
trusting in the calls and gifts of others,
not having to be the focal point
or seeking a “following” in order to feel authenticated,
allowing others to take up space and be the initiator or
creator,
not having to be involved in everything,
not thinking my insight or energy is always crucial to the
ongoing life.

Risk and Trust in Leadership

There is risk in offering leadership:
it can be perceived incorrectly,
it may not be valued,
you feel people’s projections and expectations on you.
The bigger the issue, the more stuff is kicked up.

But if you’re in the community committed to each other,
I hope the assumption is that
we all are trying to offer something
to build our common life.

If certain possibilities don’t come off,
it does not mean necessarily that you were wrong,
or that some have not benefited.
It may be simply that we do not have enough people
ready now to respond to what you are offering.

When hurt or misunderstanding come,
we must trust there are resources present to heal it.
We need to talk about these difficulties openly

in the presence of caring supportive people
and usually we can come up with a deeper truth if we stay with
it.

In order for everyone's leadership to flourish,
we have to trust and value each others' gifts
and assume they have something to bring
that perhaps has not been offered before.

It is important to give recognition
to both the individual and the collective present
at the same time and
not get so invested in our own perceptions.

The challenge for any leader is to learn
to be tough:
to listen to the intensity of someone's comments
and not wilt,
to receive heavy emotional stuff
and stay with it,
to refuse to deal with second hand criticism
but ask the critic to speak directly,
to realize many interpretations
may be present at one time,
to be open to challenge, confrontation, and accountability.

As leaders we all bring the faith that we'll find our way,
the gifts will come forward, we can all make it work.

Servant leadership is also an opportunity
to give expression to love
which means wanting to see that the best that can happen
for each person happens.

Sometimes that means doing something
or not doing something, stepping away.

That has been hard for me at times,
because there are things I would like from certain people.

To keep myself balanced
I ask, to use Hollis' term,

“What’s the loving way in this?”

Part of leadership for me has been presence, trying to be a fully present person, to an individual, a situation, the whole, to kids. I have also tried to be fully present and championing of the four categories of our call: citizenship, family, vocation, mission.

My way of being a leader has been to use my own gifts to the fullest. Since I have had the opportunity to do that I have wanted the same for other people. Listening and mirroring people into their calls and experiencing appreciation from others for my call – that is the mutual dimension of leadership.

In my role as leader, I have had the opportunity to do all the things I love doing and to be all the ways I love being. That has been the great gift of Seekers for me.

Theology

Being about theology and thinking about life in the church has a lot of appeal for me.

To me, theology is having a dialogue between what you are experiencing or doing and how that relates to who God is and what God is about.

I've done a lot of reading over the years in many different theological understandings. Certainly feminist theology was rich and enhanced the liberation theology I worked with through FLOC.

I do some of my best theology in conversation rather than preaching or writing. It is through interaction with other people that my theological understandings and insights are evoked.

Other activities have also called forth my theological engagement:

participating in the School of Christian Living,
creating prayers for our worship,
working together in the mission group,
naming what is going on as we develop our community
and placing that in the context of faith.

These have a feminine quality about them for me in contrast to seeing the context of theological work as primarily preaching or rational theological study which may be more of a male style.

Some of the best theological reflections can happen out of a particular kind of task or focus.

In Celebration Circle, for example, to create the liturgy, we all bring in reflection paragraphs on the theme based on the types of theology that have meaning for us at the time.

Grappling together with the question, "What is the Gospel message we are trying to convey in its broadest sense?" brings forward insights that are very rich.

We all have different angles on how God is present. Placing these in dialogue with ourselves, the world around us, and the community,

and allowing them to inform us,
but challenging them as well,
helps us not to be bound by any one system.
It is crucial to explore how the love of God
as expressed in the life and teachings of Jesus
connects to us and our times.
To do that together is the essence of Christian community.

Love in Community

I've always been exploring the meaning of love in community.

One of my discoveries is not that you press people to be loving,
but that you name the glimpses of love that occur.
We should focus on when we see love happening.

Love has many dimensions.
It's the warm affirming feelings of acceptance
and receiving people as they are,
not being unduly judgmental
or trying to form them into a mold we feel is more acceptable.
That is important and more difficult than we think.

Another expression of love in community
is to encourage accountability
for all the dimensions of our lives.
We model this and invite others into it.
Sometimes accountability leads to confrontations,
but this is not the usual or most desirable.

That's why the idea of covenant is a useful thing.
Expecting accountability from others toward me and

expecting that of another
is one of the strongest shapers
of my spiritual journey and understanding of church.
The clarity of covenant is the only way you can contain
the complexity of the different places we are in –
faith life, personal life, what we want from community.

To me accountability is being clear
about what we can expect of each other,
not only in our small groups but in the whole.

There are a lot of tensions in accountability.
How to create a situation that is welcoming to all levels of
participation
and also have a core of people responsible and accountable for
creating the whole.

One way to avoid the judging controlling role
and to be more accepting and encouraging
is to try to mirror things to people
so they can see both what they want and
also how their actions are causing division, separation or
unhappiness.

So many times Jesus names what he sees
and leaves the person to respond or not respond.
That seems like a more loving way to me.

How do you continue to love a person
if that person chooses not to enter
into a mutually accepting life in community.
We must always be aware of
appropriate boundaries
that need to guide our expressions of love.
Part of the definition of love comes back
to really wanting for each person
the fullness and wholeness that is possible for them,
that they have a full sense of themselves
and seek to live out of that in positive ways,

but they must want this for themselves also.
To say that I love a person does not always mean
I feel warm but I do care
that that person's life is as whole as it can be.

Listening to each other,
not in a perfunctory way,
but always assuming there is something fresh and new
to be heard that will hopefully take you
deeper into what it means to be church with each other –
this is another expression of love.
This takes a lot of intentionality.
People have to be very desirous of this and pursue it.
It does not happen casually.

I believe these understandings about love
carry over into love for the whole
as well as individuals and small groups.
It troubles me when our differences develop into
a critical spirit that fosters a “we/they” attitude.
A better way is to see these differences as another approach
or view
that can be woven into a greater whole
without devaluing the insight we might have to offer.
This can produce a “we” stance
in creating our
life together.

Fun With Spiritual Nourishment

In my early Church of the Saviour days
I learned a lot about

the church's understanding of daily quiet time,
regular reflection on Scripture,
prayer and journal writing
as ways of nurturing awareness of Spirit.

But to keep these alive for me,
it has been important to find fresh, fun, alternative ways
to nourish my spiritual life as well.
If one practice does not work for me,
I have repeatedly chosen alternatives
that have been more life giving.

Keeping a color journal,
using water colors to draw images,
making my spiritual reports in color, drawing, or painting
instead of words,
using humorous as well as serious reading,
being intentional about early morning walks,
arranging flowers in a meditative way,
always using my swimming as a time for prayer,
particularly intercessory prayer,
looking at the weather report for parts of the country
where I have friends or family,
putting myself in connection with them –
my weather rosary beads –
these are examples of what has brought life.

To me the key in all of this is
the intentionality, the purpose, and the consciousness
of how a particular experience feeds my spirit.
It doesn't mean that other practices
are not also important.
But sitting quietly for a half hour every morning
is not the whole story.
All parts of my body, mind, and spirit
need to be cared for.

The tough part is to be

intentional and conscious.

Tension Between Being an Inclusive and a Christian Community of Faith

One of the driving elements of the evolution of Seekers has been expanding our understanding of what it means to be an inclusive community.

It started out early on when we worked with feminist theological and social issues.

That led us to opening ourselves to other inclusion issues from expanded understandings of spirituality (non-Christian spiritual practices) to issues of sexual identity and to having lesbians, transgender and now bisexual families.

This has resulted in a questioning – are we really a Christian community or simply a community that says anything goes as long as the individual is willing to be part of community and is on a journey exploring Christian faith.

This opens us to different challenges.

How open ended or boundaried are we in theology, spirituality, sexuality?

We are made up of such a broad group of religious traditions and

theological understandings

many of which have enriched one another.

When these are challenged,
the tension between staying together as a community
and being honest, accountable, loving and appropriately
accepting
is sometimes pretty hard.

Because we've put a high value on being known
and committed to integrity about who we are,
we want these issues to be spoken about instead of withheld
and this calls the whole community
to deal with things we may not have chosen to address.

Most of these issues were not directly addressed by Jesus,
so we get back to his mirroring of situations to those
concerned,
and lifting up the justice dimension in each instance.

The approach we take is to live in the tension of each
situation,
engaging it on its own terms and
also being open to wider ramifications.

Certain questions help us explore the way for us.

Is love present?

Is anyone deceived?

Does everyone understand the terms?

Is it enhancing or limiting of life?

In what ways are we present to the Christian story in this
situation?

For me personally,

as long as I want to present myself to Christian worship,

to be open to Scriptural wisdom,

to be nourished by truths from the Christian story and
history,

I belong with this Christian community.

The ways I nourish my inner life vary.

This does not seem a bit conflictual.

The Christian story is still my story.

The ways I engage the transcendent or my own inner life

or embrace the Christ spirit
flow different ways at different times.

Playful Justice in Partnership

There has always been a spark for me
in my participation in FLOC and Hope and Home.
I've had a variety of roles over the last thirty years –
executive board, management board member, staff person, and
most
consistently, volunteer member of the mission group.

Seekers has been connected with FLOC from the beginning.
FLOC Director Fred Taylor and I issued the call to form
Seekers.

Many people in Seekers have been involved with FLOC.
And my involvement in Seekers and FLOC informed each other –
justice work has been central in both groups,
particularly centered with women and children.

Let me tell you some of what I've learned and experienced in
this setting.

The work of helping inner city families move from homelessness
to their own homes
is tough, no question about it.

But we've always had fun doing it –
at picnics, with skits, celebrations of birthdays, joking
around together.

Partnering together in many ways to create our approaches,
bridging suburbs and city,
involving those with more resources and those with less
as equals in rehabing apartments,

finding good educational opportunities for children,
and enriching experiences for families –
this has been how we all have claimed our power
to make positive change.

It has seemed important that Hope and Home, particularly, has
always been
a bite-sized chunk.

We started with single apartments and individual families
and only when we had confidence in the solidity of our
approach
have we expanded.

Expansion most recently has meant several apartments on one
street
so community could develop.

Hope and Home has been a seedbed for new creations and
other programs such as Manna.

We are always creating opportunities to share what works
so that others in the city might use some of our methods
and fit them to their situation perhaps on a larger scale.

It's gratifying that our whole approach has been recognized as
valuable and unique by many in the city.

Most important in all of this has been the personal
relationships
we have with one another.

When you scramble through a ropes course with a mother or
child or staff member,
you build ties that are so rewarding personally
and which help you stick together when the inevitable setbacks
occur.

Else Sizemore captured the spirit of what I'm trying to say
in
this poem.

Sonya

at Hope and A Home

and in Life

Quicksilver movement

Childlike delight

Deep-seated laughter

Down to earth sight

Helping hands

Giving start

Good advice

Mother's heart

Inner voice

Outer deeds

Compassionate action

God's sower of seeds

It makes me very happy to be able to say "Yes" to these words.
What an incredible opportunity my participation
in FLOC and Hope and Home has been.

To give, yes, and
to receive so much.

The Prophetic Community

The challenge of creating a prophetic community has always been big for me.

A prophet sees something that needs changing, names it, calls others to examine it in light of the faith story, and then challenges them to respond with some kind of action.

There always are great prophetic leaders in our midst.

Gordon Cosby, Dr. King, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton come to mind.

Prophetic movements such as the Black Panthers, PFLAG, and FLOC also have major influence.

Much as we value prophetic leaders and movements, our challenge in Seekers has been to be prophetic as a group, to be a prophetic community.

That means re-inventing for our times what it means to embody compassion and justice in our homes, at work, in the community and the whole earth.

It means staying alert to societal challenges as well as internal challenges, and to be open to engaging each on their own terms, being in the push-pull of giving attention to a situation we might like to avoid, and then taking the time necessary to discern what actions will produce a truly loving and creative situation.

I believe everyone potentially has a prophetic piece to offer.

A prophetic community
makes room for each person to develop
their own prophetic word,
“hears them into speech”,
and then responds as deeply as possible
to what they bring.

Playing It Loose

One of the things I've learned is
the importance of not asking
more of a situation than is possible.
You want to take each person seriously,
move with that and
hope good things will come.
But you also want to
have a light touch and
be willing to let go easily
with the anticipation that there are other possibilities
and that moving on gives space for the unexpected and
surprising.
So I try not to spend undue energy
in getting bogged down with
something that isn't working.

I'm fortunate in that my natural stance is
to have an optimistic attitude,
not goody two shoes,
but I expect good things to happen.
That has helped me to encourage people to try things,
and at the same time I'm willing to poke holes.

Sometimes humor brings perspective when plans are becoming too ponderous
or people are getting carried away with themselves.
I know that humor can be a two edged sword
but I've found that it often is just what is called for
to lighten up the situation,
release tension,
or help people not take themselves too seriously.

I think it's important to enjoy myself,
and I want others to enjoy themselves in what we're doing,
to see fun and pleasure as well as commitment as part of being
in community.

I'm always open to an art gallery visit,
lunch anywhere in town,
a walk in the woods, or
a musical event.

When these happen with Seekers,
all the better.

The bottom line is

I really want to have a good time and a playful spirit.

The Future is Possible

As we each face new junctures
in our lives,
what enduring truths
will you and I
be seeking to embody
in our new situations?

We will continue to challenge patterns

in the culture, in the community, and in ourselves
with the yardstick of faith.

We want to be everyday prophets
engaging the challenges we see
without knowing where we will come out,
living with what is unresolved and unclear,
being patient with the time it takes
for the new to become clear.

We will stay alert to what is present in our new situations
and what we bring to them,
and trust that new insights, energies,
and possibilities will emerge.

We will continue to create pockets of hope,
name those we see,
and when possible,
expand their power.

We believe that it is possible
to be people of compassion and justice
in every corner of the globe.