

# **“Understanding, Appreciating, Investing in Seekers as a Progressive Christian Community” by Pat Conover**



*Paper doves symbolizing peace hang from the ceiling under a mural at the Church of the Most Holy Apostles Peter and Paul in Lviv, Ukraine. Credit: SOPA Images Limited/Alamy Live News*

## **The Fifth Sunday of Easter**

**May 15, 2022**

The author of the Gospel of John wrote in a time when the Jewish Synagogue of Jesus had become the mostly Gentile Church of Christ. He put the following words in the mouth of Jesus. “I am going away and will come back to you.” Whether a spiritual or a body return, this passage in John, as for all the lectionary scriptures today, is focused on salvation on Earth.

Luke's words in Acts were written a generation or more earlier than John, and presented stories about an even earlier generation, when the transition from a Jewish base to a Gentile base was a big cultural, spiritual, and practical challenge. For one thing, in Acts the worship settings were often homes rather than synagogues. Luke places this Peter story in the two Israeli Mediterranean port cities of Joppa and Caesaria. Port cities are commonly multi-cultural environments. He presents Peter as having a vision. God says "...don't call unclean what God counts clean."

The family and close followers of Jesus, gathered as the Synagogue of Jesus in Jerusalem, recognized after the death of Jesus that their memories of Jesus were transformative. The things that Jesus had done they could do as well... healing, teaching, inspiring, leading, acting. Their vivid memories, not Paul's vision on the Damascus Road, is the biblical grounding for progressive Christian faith.

After the Acts story of Peter's vision captures the authority of the founding Synagogue of Jesus for the transition to Gentile Christianity, Peter disappears and the action shifts to Paul's evangelism. Paul's vision empowered him to do and say a lot of great things. What Paul didn't do was point people to the leadership of Jesus.

Christian churches have survived and sometimes thrived while going through big changes.

It is no small thing that Seekers has survived, has thrived, since 1976 embodied as a Christian community with ongoing strong leadership and no one serving in the role of clergy. We have shown the world that this can be done and the world has noticed a little. Seekers was a major example in the book *Excellent Protestant Congregations* and was featured in another

book, *A New Spiritual Home*, which attempted a broad survey of alternative Christian churches and worship groups.

Seekers was born in 1976 out of controversy in the original Church of the Saviour when "others" wanted to do things that were not Gordon Cosby's things. Seekers was a tenant, and treated like a tenant, in the original brownstone mansion at 2025 Massachusetts Avenue.

Seekers started out with a pair of leaders. Fred Taylor understood himself to be a preacher in the tradition of Gordon Cosby. Fred left after a few years and his departure was distressing for some at that time. Sonya continued to provide the liturgy and the tradition of the open pulpit was born in fits and starts. Sonya paid a lot of attention to supporting newcomers when they came to Seekers. There was very little administrative work to do. At the end of the year Seekers gave away its unused money.

Seekers thrived with a lot of creativity, including an active clown troop and active child and youth groups. A group of young teens and a little younger decided to make a lot of peanut butter sandwiches and made a monthly trip to Jackson Square across from the White House to distribute them to people who had no homes.

We knew we couldn't continue on Massachusetts Avenue. Some wanted to just run out the string and dissolve. For those who wanted to move there was enormous disagreement about what kind of space to move into and where. Many could not imagine buying our own building, didn't want to face up to the financial investments we would have to make. Our first step was tiny. We decided not to give away all our left over money at the end of each year. This led to weak and then better and better budgeting.

Some wanted to rent or lease space. I surveyed relevant examples of that option and it was quickly clear we couldn't

afford to rent or lease commercial spaces. Some wanted to find a church to share space with. We took a group to examine a reasonable possibility in a hospitable Episcopal Church on North Capitol Street. That ended that line of thinking.

I pushed to consider buying a building and renovating it. We formed a mission group to work on that. That didn't last. Then we formed a group just to try to find a place to buy. But where?

None of this jockeying around was smooth and easy. Everyone had a mix of mostly reasonable complaints and suggestions. First we looked in the neighborhood around our Massachusetts Avenue home. We led a couple of church services that were basically walking out the front door and walking through our adjacent neighborhood looking for a new home. That didn't work, but it helped fix the idea that we had to find someplace. But where?

Over a couple of years I drove every street in the Washington, DC city limits, often with a partner to take notes, sometimes on my own. We listed many hundreds of buildings, reported our findings, chose some to explore. We took groups of all interested Seekers to look at five different properties in detail, talked about different advantages and disadvantages. We made an offer on a former printers building and lost out due to neighborhood maneuvering.

Finding where was a time of sharp disagreements because of reasonable trade offs that seemed good to some and not to others. We got better at disagreeing. In addition to finding alternatives in the District of Columbia, I took the lead in presenting a series of cost estimates for purchase and renovation. Seekers was building a capital base by saving our annual budget surpluses. I did the math to show that if we dug deep and invested together we could buy Carroll Street without bank financing. Fifteen or so families and individuals gave gifts and made loans. One was a high school student who

gave a couple hundred dollars. Some other gifts were small because the givers had little money. Some of us refinanced our homes to make gifts and loans to Seekers. We celebrated one Sunday by walking out the door of 2025 Massachusetts Ave and hiking with the flag and cross now in stands in our worship space to our new home at 276 Carroll Street.

There was plenty of conflict along the way. Multiple families and individuals left or withdrew to the margins. We got it done because enough of us wanted to invest in each other and getting it done. The biggest trade off was that it was a long way from Virginia. We all thought that being near a Metro station would matter a lot. It didn't.

Then came another round of serious controversy. How did we want to rehab 276 Carroll Street and how much could we afford? The building was in bad shape and it had significant architectural challenges that we knew would be expensive. We did the transitional work ourselves to create a temporary shabby worship space. We were proud of the shabby results. Later we undertook an amazing day tearing out duct work and walls and stuff.

We hired a terrific architect who helped us talk through trade offs and costs. I got what I wanted most, turning the whole ground floor of the house part of the building into a kitchen. My theme was that significant conversations were more likely to happen in a kitchen than in a living room or parlor. Others got what they wanted. I had gathered a fair amount of used furniture to save money and get things going quickly. It hurt my feelings when it was all thrown out so we could have a more decorative look. I wanted a lower class, cheaper, and more practical look.

In 2000, Sonya Dyer and Jackie McMakin, wrote *Seekers: Growing Our Life Together*. They wrote: "There is risk in offering leadership. It can be perceived incorrectly, it may not be valued. But if you're in the community committed to each

other, I hope the assumption is that we are all offering something to build our common life. 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." I've been liked and disliked, supported and opposed. I've hung in because the vitality of Seekers matters a lot to me. I testify that the inner work of discovering, exploring, engaging, and finally embodying God's callings makes daunting investments feel like coming home.

All along the way, people have joined Seekers for awhile, some making significant contributions of one kind or another, and then left. Some left in dissatisfaction over not having their way. Those of us who have invested in Seekers for twenty years or more are a small sample of the hundreds who have been with us and contributed over that time frame and helped keep Seekers spiritually alive and growing. When Sue Johnson was with us, spiritual movement and dance was a common occurrence during Sunday worship. I loved it. We don't do that much anymore. Investing in the life of Seekers isn't equivalent to staying in Seekers. On the other hand, making life choices about where to live is one measure of how important Seekers is in your life. Sandra moved from California to be with us. Ken commuted regularly from Philadelphia and then moved here.

I believe a big reason Seekers is thriving is because we have grown into progressive Christian theology. The triumph of feminism was the first big step and many more have followed. Our focus on here and now salvation, looking to Jesus for guidance and inspiration, escapes the flailing and failing traditional denomination theologies focused on going to Heaven. The guidance and inspiration of Jesus, not God supposedly punishing Himself so he could forgive us, is what matters.

Some of the marks of progressive Christianity are the following.

- Focus on the here and now meaningfulness, guidance, and inspiration, of following Jesus.
- Embrace critical biblical scholarship in the interest to raising up important theological, moral, spiritual, and practical questions for considering and reconsidering our faith. Critical biblical scholarship shows up in School of Christian Growth classes and often in the diversity of people who preach for Seekers.
- Take on the hard theological questions, including faith in the midst of tragedy.
- Welcome everybody and wrestle with the challenges that diversity presents.
- Emphasize that people need to explore, engage, consider and reconsider, then prioritize God's calling to ministry. Focusing on God's call puts all the other life choice contingencies into perspective. Focusing on God's call can lead into deep investment in Seekers and can also lead into leaving Seekers for opportunities to pursue God's calling.

Authority in Seekers is most fundamentally grounded in recognized exploring and engagement of God's callings to ministry. The primary, not the only, location for the recognized authority of God's calling to ministry, is in mission groups. Mission groups are constructed around call statements to shared ministry. Mission groups are also constructed to support members other callings to ministry with informal, sometimes formal, accountability for naming, claiming, exploring, engaging, and investing life energies and resources in one's claimed calling.

One can be a member in Seekers because you like the people, like the friendliness and fellowship, like Sunday worship and School of Christian Growth classes, like special events such as cleaning up Sligo Creek or spending time at Still Point. Moving from liking Seekers to investing life energy and resources in Seekers is at the heart of sustaining, growing,

and changing Seekers over the decades. That isn't everyone's call. Seekers nourishes the lives of people who come to Seekers, stay for awhile, and then move on. Seekers thrives when enough people invest heart and treasure in making Seekers thrive.