

“ ‘When We Get to Carroll Street’ : The First Ten Years” by Keith S.

June 29, 2014

Third Sunday After Pentecost

Good morning.

On this Sunday ten years ago, I was standing here giving [the first sermon in our newly-renovated building](#), for which we had just obtain a temporary certificate of occupancy. I began:

“Here we are at our new building on Carroll Street! Isn’t it great to finally be here? What a remarkable journey it’s been. We can now officially retire the phrase ‘When We Get to Carroll Street’!”

It felt good to be in the building then . . . and ten years later it still feels good. Frankly, we did a great job on this building! It was a big project for us and involved almost everyone who was part of Seekers at the time.

I’d like everyone who played a part in getting us to this building in 2004 to please raise your hand.

And if you have only come to Seekers Church since we moved to the building, please raise your hand.

Like marriage or raising a child or other life-changing events, ten years here feels both like it has gone by in a blink and that we’ve always been here and it’s hard to remember when we weren’t.

Today, just as ten years ago, I want to talk with you

briefly about how we got here, where it is we are, and – more importantly – where we might go from here.

I've found it remarkable in preparing for this morning to quickly scan across many hundreds of documents and emails and be reminded of all the challenges we had to overcome.

It was a very long path. In fact, it took us the biggest part of a decade to make the transition from the Church of the Saviour headquarters building at 2025 Mass. Ave. to our own home here. I'll just touch on a few notable points:

- It was in **1995** that Marjory, Diane Willkens and I strategized and negotiated to see how Seekers might be able to stay at 2025, when the Church of the Saviour decided to sell that building. We had meetings and discussions with both Gordon Cosby and Bill Branner, but couldn't afford that property, much less the renovations it needed. There was some irony that Gordon then kept preaching at 2025 with one and two year extensions for many more years – and the building didn't ultimately sell until 2010 – but it was sure a good thing that we didn't have a short deadline for leaving 2025! And the Zients' non-profit has really done nice things with that building.
- In 1996 and 1997, Pat, Doug Dodge, Molly McMurray, and I comprised the Homemakers Mission Group and worked intensively with Seekers to consider renting or sharing and all other possible alternatives for our church home. The ultimate conclusion was that we needed to find and purchase our own building. After extensive efforts and a review of all sorts of buildings (including my personal favorite – a morgue complete with a dead body on the embalming table) and considering empty lots for greenfield construction, we found a suitable building at 1101 Pennsylvania Avenue, SE, which led to lots of discernment and effort. But Seekers did not proceed with 1101 Penn. because of a lack of sufficient consensus in

the community. As I recall, we only had 80-some percent in favor. The Homemakers Mission Group disbanded and there was no plan for how to proceed. This was probably the low point in the whole process. But it did turn out to be a good thing, since the building at 1101 was half a million dollars more expensive than this one and was a much longer commute for most Seekers. (Plus, there was a huge fire in the hardware store next door about a year ago!)

- This Carroll Street property had been briefly on the market, was taken off for some time, and then came back on the market in the Fall of 1999. After some hesitation about whether it could actually work for us, growing interest blossomed into a full discernment process within the community, with Seekers teams set up to arrange for numerous studies of the property from every angle, including professional evaluations of environmental issues and what it would take to renovate the space in various ways. Despite uncertainties and serious initial questions within Seekers, the process unfolded much more easily this time, and the final decision to purchase this building was very nearly unanimous.
- We purchased the building on February 9, 2000; Mary Carol and I went to the formal closing transferring title to Seekers. I thought the hard part was over. All that remained was to sort out the details of the renovation, hire a good contractor, and move in a few months later! (Seriously, I have with me a May 2000 "Timeline for Renovations," based on input from professionals, which anticipated occupancy here by February 1, 2001!)
- We were big on process and inclusion and formed many teams to work on all the issues relating to our new space, from relations with the surrounding community to decorating the building when it was renovated. The Building Development Team was my focus. We had

responsibility for developing the architectural plans and getting the building renovated. It was the biggest Team and worked well together over many, many months.
How many of you were on the Building Development Team?

We involved the entire community in dreaming about how to design the space for all our goals and possible uses. We had lots of community-wide meetings...do you remember the one I began by getting people's attention with the news that our latest problem was LUST? It wasn't a joke – LUST in the renovation world is Leaking Underground Storage Tanks, which happily turned out to be a false alarm.

By late 2000 we'd turned our dreams into concrete plans with the help of our special architect, Sarah Woodhead. (Our project actually went on so long that we went through three architects – the first one, Sarah, changed jobs...twice, while the second one retired in the midst of our project, which sent us on to the third one.)

- After the plans were finally developed, we hit a huge barrier as contractors wanted about twice as much to do the work as our architects thought they would, which hung us up for a good while. We agonized over every element that added cost (along with function and beauty) to the building, from the elevator to the skylights, to places where we'd planned for nicer materials and needed to cut back.
- As we looked everywhere to try to find a suitable contractor, Manna (which had begun as a ministry of the Church of the Saviour) formed Providence Construction, a new for-profit arm for projects such as ours. We were finally on track again, and Providence began working with us in August 2001.
- We moved all our collected furnishings out of the building in September and held Seekers work parties to do much of the demolition work in October 2001. Glen's video of the demolition is great – especially Paul and

Andy and Caren, which we plan to watch downstairs right after worship today. That was a definite high point, and there were times later in the process when it might have been helpful if we'd kept a sledge hammer and a little extra rubble around to pound on!

- During the long renovation phase, which was well over two years, Peter, Deborah and I (with Glen documenting each step on video) met weekly with our construction manager as one snag after another slowed progress.
- Among the challenges:
 - a. We had both lead paint **and** asbestos in the building – never a good way to begin a project!
 - b. We had to get permission from next door to erect a “party wall,” as our plans were drawn so the new construction would be in line with the existing wall, which turned out to straddle the property line. And that is how we ended up with a gate in our fence for our neighbors!
 - c. Pepco’s unexpected requirement that we must go underground to connect to the power line on their pole led to the concrete “artwork” at the bottom of the stairs downstairs.
 - d. The “load-bearing masonry” wall in the lower level turned out to be **non**-load-bearing wood, which impacted our plans.
 - e. The elevator pit leaked.
 - f. We had serious weather delays; personnel changes; subcontractor issues; inspection delays; Certificate of Occupancy challenges; and much, much more.

But we worked through them all!

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So what does all this mean for us after ten years? Thinking back over it makes me appreciate what a substantial investment we have in this place and makes me value all that it has meant to us over the last decade. And, frankly, I think

we also learned that it is sometimes a good thing **not** to know all that lies ahead, because we might not have had the fortitude to proceed if we had known what was in front of us.

But more than anything else, it was a remarkable time of working together and trusting each other as we dealt with nuanced issues and complicated logistics. The faithfulness of so many was required. I particularly appreciated the ongoing love and support of the community for all of us in the trenches. There was remarkably little impatience, even though the delays were long and often hard to explain.

A good half of every Stewards Meeting was building-related during those years, as we got authority step by step for all the decisions required to thoughtfully spend well over a million dollars. I've got to confess, Stewards Meetings have never had the same sizzle for me since we completed the building – I'm always getting in trouble with Brenda by asking her if the Stewards' agenda is really all that needs to be decided each month!

There are obviously a lot of additional interesting things we could cover, from the creation of the mosaics on the outside of the building to the little crosses in every room inside, not to mention having to replace the sanctuary floor after just one year when our high-end floor started delaminating – but we've got to curtail this story somewhere!

The biggest building-related development of these **last** ten years was the creation of the Time & Space Mission Group, which was formed late in 2005 by Peter, Deborah, Glen, John, Sue Johnson and me (and now contains Katie and Denise in place of Sue and me). Time & Space labors so faithfully behind the scenes to make decisions about the building and take care of things that the rest of the community is blissfully unaware of. Like the other day I happened to hear from John that there had been a recall on some part in our commercial-grade toilets, so Time & Space was faithfully installing the new part on each of the commodes in the building. Who knew?

Another building-related development that Kevin faithfully oversees is Martha's Mob – the quarterly clean up and tune up of the building that involves everyone able to participate. I'd forgotten until going through old building documents that Martha's Mob started out as the "Tabernacle Team," before Dave McMakin jazzed up the name. Doesn't Tabernacle Team sound funny now?!

I. WE'RE HERE! And Where is That?

Ten years ago, I warned that this building must not be an idol for us, even though we'd dreamed, worked hard, spent lots of money and had a pretty special place. But as the song goes, "the church is not the building." The building is merely a tool which I suggested – as much to myself as anyone! – that we not hold too tightly, but expect that it would get used and then renewed over time. And it does seem to be playing out that way.

We put a lot of effort into the building because we wanted to make it useful, and beyond that wanted it to be wonderful and beautiful. This is the place where critically important aspects of our lives occur. We lavished attention and love, building our dream home together.

Fundamentally, it is still as true as ten years ago that this building embodies our faith in Seekers' future. It demonstrates our belief that God will work through this faith community now and for years to come. It is our tangible commitment to the ongoing life and vitality of our church community, which is still playing out in ways unknowable and remarkable. Our building invites us to be who we really are – and who we really want to be – both as individuals and as a church community, and provides ongoing opportunities for involvement and connection with the world around us.

This building also fostered our transition into a more fully separate and mature second-generation Church of the Saviour community. As long as we stayed at the CofS building at 2025,

we were similar to grown children living at home. Leaving 2025, we gained both the freedoms and responsibilities of being on our own. This metaphor has proven true, and is playing out at Eighth Day now, as they are taking on ownership and all the responsibilities for the space they were using at Potter's House.

It has been very satisfying over the years to hear how new users and people coming into our space love and appreciate the building and instantly feel how special it is. And we – that is, Time & Space, and Katie in particular – have done a good job in making sure that the building is well used...by Seekers, by other faith communities, and by outside groups as room permits. It has indeed become a Ministry of Place, and annually there are some 600-700 uses of the building by groups other than Seekers!

But ultimately, this building is really about **us** as church here. While we're pleased with all the outside uses of our building, personally I'd be even more delighted if Seekers developed into such a vibrant place that most of the uses were Seekers activities. We've always wanted the building to be fully used, but Seekers usage always comes first and the rest is really making lemonade out of the fact that we have space we're not fully using.

This is still the dream home of our church community: a place where we gather to worship God and support each other in the challenges of daily life outside these walls. Today's lectionary from Matthew 10:42 talks about giving a "cup of cold water," which we do here, offering the good news to people that we have a home where they too are welcome.

I. WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE? The Next Ten Years

So this final piece is the important part. And to make sure you are ready for it, here's an exercise – you baseball fans (Dave) can think of it as a 7th inning stretch:

Step One: Think of your age – I'm 55.

Step Two: Subtract 10 years from it – I was 45 when we moved into the building.

And here's the kicker: Now add 10 years to your age – I'll be 65, ten years from now. And I'm still very nearly the youngest member of Stewards and of my mission group.

The point, of course, is to think about where Seekers is heading over the next ten years and how we might want to shape that future.

Importantly, I am **not** raising this to generate concern or anxiety, but seeking to lift up the topic thoughtfully and prayerfully. I hope we can consider this with no pressure and no fear – for we are in God's hands. Our Church of the Saviour heritage has always focused on Call and emphasized letting things go when Call has shifted or is gone. So as the angels always say, "Fear Not" – the pressure is off...so we can bring our best and most creative selves to these questions.

Frankly, as Seekers, we have not felt particularly called to evangelism and aggressively pursuing new members; even expressly inviting people to church seems a bit pushy to many of us. And I don't propose to dramatically change that.

Yet there are seeds of change and outreach that **are** different than in the past and that may grow and develop in the future, from the race-and-diversity conversations that have developed here and our connections to the Covenant church community, to participation in the Takoma Park Folk Festival, our involvement in Art Hop, the success of Carroll Café here, and other connections with the wider community that are not simply church-focused. And, as more housing is added in the neighborhood, we may have more people coming toward us in ways that will make it very natural to invite them in for a "cup of cold water."

So let me ask: are there particular things that you'd like to

do here or see Seekers do? For instance, are we ready to embrace being a “12-step” church with many helpful groups, or to focus on immigration, or on homelessness? Or to consider one-day, in-city silent retreats; or midweek noontime concerts; or encourage other activities in which Seekers are involved, from nature to book clubs to swing dancing? We’d had many ideas about particular uses as we dreamed and designed the building; it may be useful to go back to some of those ideas to see if the time is right for them now.

But my real question is whether we are ready to focus some intentional energy in thinking and praying about the future of Seekers. Maybe some potlucks and brainstorming? Do we want to be intentional about developing a plan (dare I call it a strategy?) to take us into the future? We might, for instance, focus on reaching out to younger folks in the neighborhood – or we might build on all the resources (and experience) in the community relating to aging well and emphasize that. Or we might **consciously** continue to simply be a deeply-committed church community, with our doors open to whoever seeks our “cup of cold water.” My question to you today is simply: do we want to **intentionally** have a conversation about how we move into the future?

Change is coming to Seekers, one way or the other. And that can be good and energizing, and stir new calls and new possibilities. **Fear not!**

CONCLUSION

It seems quite remarkable that we’ve been a full ten years in this building. And it’s even more remarkable to think what Seekers may be like ten years hence! What would we **like** Seekers to be like? Are there things we could do now to bring that about? And are we **Called** to those things?

This may be a conversation worth having – maybe even beginning over lunch today, if you are so moved! And knowing this group, there may be a lot of wisdom that immediately bubbles up

during comment time in the next few minutes.

Our future begins now!

Amen.