

Marking This Day

Vision Casting Sunday – 12 October 2008

What I want to do now is to offer with some trepidation a review of what has been happening at Living Grace this year. This is not easy when strong emotions are clouding the issues and when I myself have been the centre of much criticism. Yet, I want to offer some thoughts of discernment from my perspective and my hope is that this is going to be helpful for accurate communication and positive decision making. Much of what I am going to share involves me and includes experiences and insights into my heart which I have not shared previously. This is not a comfortable exercise for me. It goes against my desire to focus on church members so that everyone may be released into their giftings and calling. The church is not just about the pastor but – on the other hand – it cannot function without trusting the pastor either.

I want to begin by reflecting on the year 2005. We had been experiencing renewal through the Alpha course, the Emmaus Walk, the visit of Pastor Gemechis in January 2003, the Christian Leaders' Network and other influences, but in 2005 there were a number of breakthroughs that signified high-water marks in the life of Living Grace.

From the 17th of July to the 28th of August churches from across Toowoomba and across the denominational spectrum were doing together the 40 Days of Unity program which I had written. There were six pre-recorded small group messages on DVD, a small group study guide and a Unity Handbook with daily devotions on church unity. More than two thousand Unity Handbooks were sold and with this program we made a contribution to the one church in the city. As Lutherans who used to remain separate from other Christians, we recognized that church unity with all other Christians was mandated in the Scriptures and with joy we took our place in the one citywide church of Toowoomba. For the opening night of the 40 Days of Unity program we had the Lutheran pastor Dirk Willner at the Empire Theatre. The venue was packed and the message was powerful.

The messages of the 40 Days of Unity program were later published in the nationwide One Heart magazine (also on the internet) and found their way overseas with translation work in Japan, viewings in places such as Papua New Guinea and the publication of one of the talks in a Dutch renewal magazine. I also did a one day seminar with pastors at Yepoon. Yet, the message on church unity also caused some conflict. For instance, across Toowoomba various congregations (Anglican, Salvation Army, ...) put up banners advertising the 40 Days of Unity but here at Concordia College we had to put down our banner because the program was not deemed to be properly Lutheran.

Then more conflict of a more serious nature came in the form of an anonymous letter by a number of Lutheran pastors who made complaints about my preaching and practice, especially the use of non-Lutheran speakers and women in worship. The presidents of our church became involved with the result that at a public meeting of Lutherans from across the Darling Downs the district president read out a letter which was addressed to me and in this letter made some rulings which forbade women and Christians from other denominations to speak the Word of God in our services. I decided to bring this whole matter to the Qld pastors' conference where after hearing my case the district president offered a public apology for making these rulings. This was a surprising turnaround but it meant that Living Grace could continue with her ministry. More pressure came in the form of a review into the Toowoomba tensions which amounted to a review

of the soundness of my Lutheran teaching and practice. However, the review concluded with the recommendation that other pastors should refrain from statements suggesting that I was not faithful to the Lutheran Confessions or my ordination vow.

I include information on these conflicts because the nature of our ministry at Living Grace has meant that this kind of pressure has been a more or less constant companion in my work. In 2005 the conflict was a little more traumatic because I think that I came very close to being expelled from our denomination but I also received a presidential visit in 2006 when I began to preach the sermon series on the Holy Spirit and again this year. Even right now I am asked to respond in writing to more anonymous criticism which is in the vein of the following quote: "... Edgar's preaching is typical of the Pentecostal quest for personal spiritual power, at the expense of preaching Christ crucified for our sins and raised for our justification ... " I responded by writing: "This is a rather insulting sentence and again betrays a cessationist reduction of the Gospel."

While these conflicts are unpleasant and draining, they are part of our ministry, if we want to be agents of renewal in the Lutheran denomination. I give you another case in point. Only a few weeks ago we did another But Wait There Is More Holy Spirit seminar in Adelaide, South Australia. Many blessings have come through this seminar but it also meant that without prior warning or official notification I became the topic of conversation at the South Australian district pastors' conference where a number of pastors sought to pressure the district president into stopping the seminar from going ahead. Then there is a congregation in Victoria which a few months ago voted unanimously to call me as their new pastor but the district president refused to sign the call document.

These kinds of conflicts are not nice but I do believe that they are part of our ministry and we already have another invitation to do a Holy Spirit seminar with Lutherans at Ipswich. However, this year the conflicts have come home into our own congregation and we have to have a serious think about this because a house divided will not be able to stand. I myself will not last without the support of this church.

Another high-water mark in 2005 was the second national Lutheran prayer summit in Adelaide. I had initiated these prayer summits and in 2005 was the key-leader of a small team. There were about sixty Lutherans from across the nation and New Zealand and we spent three days in prayer, repentance and fasting. Crying out to God for our denomination we engaged in prophetic actions, repentance and even more repentance, and in one session had the privilege of praying for our general church president. After three days I was spent.

At the last session we offered individual prayer before Holy Communion. I was absolutely exhausted (feeling sick). The intense spiritual work of allowing God to lead the prayer summit (not having a fixed agenda) and guiding sixty people with discernment in the process had cost me everything. So I began to pray for people in a rather mechanical fashion. But then a rather heavy-built man crashed onto the wooden floor with a loud thump and I got the shock of my life, thinking: "He died. This man died on the way to Holy Communion. What am I to do?" I knelt beside him and discovered that he was alive. When I asked him how he was feeling, he just looked at me with incomprehension. This was not the first time that he fell under the power of the Holy Spirit. He felt wonderful and he just wondered about this strange pastor. Then I saw Jenny Sutton (our pastoral assistant). She was sitting a few meters away in a pew and she was laughing her head off. The expression of pure panic on my face was apparently funny and even later that night she was still laughing at me over dinner.

During that prayer time two or three other people fell under the power of the Spirit when I prayed for them. I never thought that this would happen to me and it made me think. One of the people was a young woman in her twenties. I asked her what she wanted me to pray for. She said:

“I have been running away from God and I want to stop running.” I prayed and down she went, but when I knelt beside her to check on her, she looked agitated. Her face looked troubled and I asked her: “Are you okay?” She said: “I’m fine.” But she didn’t look fine and before I knew what I was doing, I again laid my hands on her and said: “In the name of Jesus whatever makes you run, depart now.” The next moment her face fell to the side and she looked as peaceful as a sleeping baby. Every facial muscle was relaxed and she was resting in the Spirit. This was also new.

What did just happen? I believe that at this time the young woman became free of a demon (demonic oppression) and I began to appreciate prayer in the presence of Holy Spirit power. There was something about prayer at the end of three days of repentance and fasting that was not there in the same way at most normal Sunday services. There was something about going deeper into the presence of God.

However, as good as that was, it would be almost another two years before anything of that nature would happen again at our first Holy Spirit seminar in Toowoomba¹ and in my estimate this was a long time between drinks for a soul that was thirsty for more of God.

In 2004 I had been in Hopevale twice.² The first time I was accompanied by Carl Humphrey and the second time Hazel Noller and Greg Kleidon completed the team. However, in 2005 more than 40 people (mostly from Living Grace) made their way to Hopevale and toward the end of 2005 Brett Humphrey, Ros Bausch and Kay Crighton made another trip to represent Living Grace at the confirmation service of the Hopevale community. This was another high-water mark in the life of our congregation because from then on the congregation owned the mission which has continued to this day.

Yet another high-water mark in 2005 was the contribution which God allowed me to make to our denominations Commission On Theology And Inter-Church Relations. The commission took up my suggestion of studying the spiritual gift of prophecy and I was invited to present the discussion paper “Prophecy In Today’s Church” in Adelaide at our second meeting for the year. The paper was twenty-one pages long and included another eight pages of testimonies from Lutherans across our denomination. My joy was that spiritual gifts were on the agenda of official theological church conversation with the presidents and numerous lecturers in attendance.

God gave us and God gave me much grace in 2005. One of the results was that at a one day leadership retreat with Pastor Ian Shelton from Toowoomba City church our leadership board (WAM) recognized my calling beyond the boundaries of the Living Grace congregation. God had blessed the citywide initiative of the 40 Days of Unity program, the national Lutheran prayer summit, the contribution to our theological commission and so on. Thus, there was a resolve to release me even more into the city and denomination and wherever God may be leading. While so far the planned release has still not quite happened, because Living Grace is still demanding most of my attention, there are positive signs and a growing understanding that when I minister beyond Living Grace at various seminars, there are teams from Living Grace coming with me for support and expressing church fellowship in mission.

In 2006 our family went on long-service leave. When we came back after two months, we came back to an unexpected job offer. A Bible college (with a number of campuses across the nation and one overseas) expressed a strong interest in calling me as the head of their theological

¹ There was also a conference with the national prayer leader Jenny Hagger in Hahndorf, SA where the conference sought to redig the Lutheran wells of the first migrants. There was a powerful closing session.

² Hopevale is an Aboriginal community in Far North Queensland (located 30 km west of Cooktown) which used to be a Lutheran mission.

faculty. They were also interested in Tatjana giving her the choice of lecturing either in theology or education. As one of the members on WAM said: “The ducks all lined up.” The timing for accepting such an offer would have been right. Living Grace was in a good place. The year 2005 positioned us in Toowoomba and we had now presidential endorsement for the nature of our ministry. Maybe now was the right time for us to leave. The new calling would have brought us closer to family. Tatjana always loved the idea of lecturing. We would have escaped further denominational conflict. The ducks all lined up but after much prayer both – Tatjana and I – separately heard from God that we were not to go. We were not yet finished serving at Living Grace. I then had a few issues with God about confusing us with this job offer and the emotional agony of coming to a decision. What was this about?

The remainder of the year saw me preach the six-part sermon series on the Holy Spirit which subsequently became the But Wait There Is More Holy Spirit seminar. The intention of the sermon series was to spell out and define what we had learned about the Holy Spirit over the previous years. The messages were meant to put a stake in the ground for what Living Grace believed about the Holy Spirit according to the Scriptures and the congregation received the preaching well. A growing number of people were seeking a further infilling with the Holy Spirit and the gift of speaking in tongues also became more common among us.

We experienced some conflict over the use of worship banners but before the tensions got out of hand God granted us repentance of our attitudes toward each other and one Sunday – with David Crighton giving leadership – we humbled ourselves before God and each other offering many spontaneous apologies. We reconciled and we rejoiced.

In 2007 the messages on the Holy Spirit were consolidated when they were recorded on DVD and became the But Wait There Is More Holy Spirit seminar which teams from Living Grace were leading in various places (Toowoomba, Buderim and Kingaroy) three times that year. Still more of our members were filled with the Spirit and more of our members received the spiritual gift of speaking in tongues. So far at most Holy Spirit seminars our observation has been that – just as recorded in the Bible – there would be people receiving the gift of speaking in tongues even when they did not ask for this particular gift. For some it simply seemed to come with an infilling of the Holy Spirit. There were also forays into the spiritual gift of prophecy and prayers for healing.

However, for Living Grace the main focus of 2007 was the Experiencing God course by Henry Blackaby & Claude King. This course was not about spiritual gifts or any ecstatic emotions but it was about the experience of hearing God revealing his will to us. It was about discipleship and we took time from February to August (half a year) to digest and internalize what was taught. In our private devotions, small group studies and Sunday sermons we wrestled with the concepts which for many of us Lutherans were so foreign and even infuriating. One of our members felt like tearing the book apart and he said in one of our services: “You know this course talks about experience and obedience and both of these terms are offensive to us Lutherans.” However, as a church we came to rejoice in the steep learning curve of 2007 and we became excited about knowing and doing the will of God.

Only there was again a cost attached to this course in terms of external conflict. Already in 2005 the anonymous accusations by some of my colleagues included the charge: “... the doctrine: ‘God’s blessings follow Christian obedience’ is central to his [Edgar’s] theology, and consequently he blurs the distinction between Law and Gospel.” In 2007 the Experiencing God course at Living Grace triggered the resignation of another pastor from our own leadership board and then he and his family left the congregation. On both the Concordia College council and the Qld district pastors’ conference planning committee I was accused by colleagues of being a preacher of the law or having otherwise warped theology because I was promoting this course.

Both pastors who were making these judgements had not yet read the manual and in fact knew nothing about the course. Then a few pastors took pen to paper and wrote against what we were doing. However, in the end the pressure did not escalate much further and 2007 was a fairly peaceful year. As a congregation we made progress. We did learn and appreciate anew that some of God's blessings are indeed conditional on our obedience. Yet, obedience was not a negative but an adventure of joining the work of an amazing God who was doing God-sized tasks – taking our breath away with his saving will and love initiatives.

The beginning of 2008 saw us in good shape. Precept by precept God had been restoring to us good foundations of faith. There was the foundation of citywide church unity through the 40 Days of Unity program in 2005, the foundation of the infilling with the Holy Spirit through the sermon series and seminars in 2006 and 2007 and the foundation of discipleship through the Experiencing God course in 2007.

God had been good to us and for the first time in years I had no further concrete plans for the new year of 2008 except to finish the six-part sermon series on healing. What I had wanted to do originally was to preach another six-part sermon series on church unity by drawing lessons from the historical figure of Count Zinzendorf and the Moravians. Over more than a year I had already done a lot of work gathering books and articles, reading and even drawing up a series outline. Yet, finally I had to admit to myself that the series was a good idea but God did not seem to release me in preaching it. It was not easy to walk away from all of the hard work but I did come to a place where I prayed: “Okay. What do you want me to preach then, God?” It was healing by faith and his power. The revelation of how in the Bible the preaching of the kingdom of God and healings would always go together and how the healings often confirmed the preaching began to burn in me. This was central in the Bible but not yet central in my life or the life of the church. However, I knew that God was also going to restore this aspect of his truth to us. There would be much joy among us in seeing hurting people being healed and God be glorified. Even this year we have already had numerous testimonies where healings have occurred in response to prayer. Pure joy!

Before anything much happened in 2008 I noticed that my preaching changed and other people also noticed. Tatjana had been praying for me that I would gain more authority in proclaiming God's Word and all of a sudden (it wasn't planned) my passion for preaching went even deeper (the words have to come out), the delivery became freer (previously when I tried to be less tied to my notes I did not become freer but wordier) and I began to “feel” even more the power of God on me when I was speaking his Word. This was exciting and our staff joked among themselves how it was hard enough to share the pulpit with me before but now it became too daunting. They also noticed that something had changed.

Then we had a Living Grace prayer meeting for the new year on the 1st of February. At this meeting one of our members offered with much trembling and trepidation a prophetic word whereby the Bible reading of Revelations 3:15-20 was said to apply to us. What Jesus had previously spoken to the church in Laodicea, he was now also speaking to Living Grace. I quote from the Word of God: “ ... you are lukewarm ... You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched ... I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich ... and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see. Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me ... “

I did not like this word, put it to the back of my mind, was not going to act on it and went about our normal church business. However, our staff and others agreed that there was truth in this word and when in March I was overcome by the Holy Spirit at a conference on the Gold

Coast I found myself lying on the floor weeping over the lukewarmness of Living Grace and our denomination. I went to the conference for spiritual refreshment and not any weeping over our church. Yet, I stopped fighting God on this and proceeded to release this word to Living Grace on Sunday the 16th of March. [There were to be three sermons on this.]

At first we received the preaching well. We had never had a prophetic word like this before but many of us responded with repentance and even tears. Yet, a few weeks later on the 6th of April I managed to upset a good number of people by announcing that I could no longer uphold my Sunday morning program with three consecutive church meetings (one prayer meeting and two services) and therefore we would combine our two Sunday morning worship services. This had been on the agenda since January but I managed to botch the process and cause unnecessary hurt because a good number of people took my announcement as rejection and a lack of love for them.

That Sunday became the time when I lost much of my leadership at Living Grace in the sense that many people stopped listening to me and what I was actually saying. Floodgates opened with angry criticism of every kind. The judgements were often personal and aimed at my character. However, I was out of the loop because almost no one sought a conversation with me. I became a terrible person on the grapevine of Living Grace.

Yet, when the dust settled somewhat, it became clear that the energy for the ongoing tension at Living Grace was not fuelled by thoughts of combining the two services. What seemed to have happened was that my mistake served as the trigger which allowed pent-up discomfort over the two prophetic words to spill out into the life of the congregation.

People were concerned about more freedom in worship, the nature of a possible revival, barking like dogs, the Toronto blessing, Todd Bentley, becoming too pentecostal, the manifestations of the Spirit and lots more. We initiated a reconciliation process with twelve representatives of our congregation and theology was judged to be the most crucial tension point. Even the original proposal for the establishment of separate Saturday evening services gave as the rationale that some were wanting to pursue more of the Holy Spirit while others felt led in a different direction.

Some real points of contention were whether Living Grace could actually expect more from God. Were we not already experiencing revival every day? What more would we want from God? Furthermore, the idea of having to press in or actively pursue the presence of God met with resistance.

What made proceedings difficult was that many of the issues were not clearly defined and even the reconciliation process was to prove helpless in this regard. At the second meeting the representatives of our congregation came to the surprising conclusion that we agreed in terms of theology but this did not stop the confusion and judgements which were often more based on perceptions and fears rather than on reliable facts and information. Even the other week two of our members were absolutely convinced that Todd Bentley prophesied over Living Grace and that I showed footage of him prophesying over Living Grace in one of our services. Fact is that he never spoke to me and was not even at the service when there was some prophetic encouragement for us.

However, in my estimate not everything can be attributed to miscommunication or offended hearts. There are some real differences emerging in our church. For the last seven years many of us have been transitioning from a non-charismatic Lutheran background into the things of the Spirit and for the last seven years this kind of slow transitioning was rather peaceful. Yet, at the same time much of the transitioning was in the preaching and in the hearing first and did not necessarily find an outlet in practice. It was okay to hear about the Spirit and grow in our intellectual understanding but to give him free reign in our worship services was another matter.

Not that many of us had been that intentional in exercising faith for the Holy Spirit to come down on us with the glory of God and power.

Therefore, the question which we now face and have been facing all year is: “Can we make a decision to surrender to him completely and allow him to come? Can we gain ground whereby we act on the revelation of the past few years and exercise faith in the fullness of his presence?” The prophetic word to the Christians in the Bible said: “ ... Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me ... “ I believe that we are suffering the current situation because God loves us. He loves us and therefore he disciplines us because he has even greater plans for us. “Those whom I love I rebuke.” God wants to come in fullness and – on an encouraging note – in some ways we are not completely sailing blind because at the Holy Spirit seminars we have already been experiencing more from God. It has already been our experience that as people come hungry and spend whole days in repentance and worship, God responds with releasing the fullness of his presence upon his people whom he loves.

I come to a close. No – one more brief observation – a small but important tangent. In the midst of this year’s turmoil we have experienced an amazing influx of new Christians and mature Christians. There were a few miraculous testimonies of how God directed them to join our church. They made no demands but immediately began to pray (even fast) for Living Grace. Their church attendance was regular. They became active in small groups, outreach, mission trips, serving and there was enthusiasm at a time when others – including myself – often felt like crying. At this point of time I want to say “thank you” for the encouragement and giving us hope that God will not allow us to self-destruct but bring us through this crisis.

God has been shaking this church in 2008 and it has been less than pleasant. Yet, today I want to ask you again that you forgive me for being a less than perfect leader. I have made mistakes and I am sorry. I have crowded the agenda, confused people, caused offense with my words and did not appear to be soft enough. I do not want to minimize my faults and give time for healing but can we nevertheless mark today as the day when we begin to move on and make the conscious step of saying “yes” to God – despite the hurts, despite possible fears of revival and losing control? Wounded as we are, can we get on board with the Bible and exercise faith so that the following Bible verses also come true for us – 1 Corinthians 2:4-5: “My message and my preaching were not wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God’s power.” Romans 15:18-19: “ ... Christ has accomplished through me in leading the non-Jews to obey God by what I have said and done – by the power of signs and miracles, through the power of the Spirit ... “ Matthew 10:7-8: “Jesus said: ‘As you go, preach this message: ‘The kingdom of heaven is near. Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons ... ‘”

God is saying to our church – Living Grace – and he is saying it with compassion and much favour: “ ... Those whom I love I rebuke ... Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me ... “ We open the door today.

Devotion

The apostle Paul was a high achiever but considered his previous life rubbish when he put his faith in Jesus Christ. Then, he spelled out his new ambitions – Philippians 3:10 – I read from the Bible – he said: “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings ... “

This is also what we want. There is “the power of the resurrection” (e.g.: preaching with authority, driving out demons, healings, ...) which is made perfect in weakness (purified in suffering) and which flows from “sharing in Christ’s sufferings” (sharing his aching compassion for a fallen world and overcoming evil with the sacrifices of love). However, the ultimate goal is “to know Christ” because not even “the power of the resurrection” can satisfy our souls and compensate for the love relationship with God. [Human example: A husband wants more from his wife than someone that is a good cook or can raise the children. A husband wants his wife to be a person that is sharing love with him. He wants intimacy.]

As a church we are pursuing the same desire as the apostle Paul and also Moses in the Old Testament. God privileged Moses “to know” him in the encounter with the burning bush where he even revealed his name to him. Then, God privileged Moses to witness his powerful presence in the exodus from Egypt and miracles in the desert. Moses was further privileged to spend time in the presence of God on Mount Sinai when no one else was bold enough to draw near the thunder, lightning, thick cloud, fire, trembling mountain and trumpet blast. The people stayed at a distance, trembled with fear and said – Exodus 20:19: “ ... do not have God speak to us or we will die.” [They were happier with the self-made Golden Calf.] Only Moses was not afraid. He was hungry for all of God and after penetrating the presence of God further than anyone else his face was glowing with the glory of God. Everyone saw it. At this point he also won a great victory in prayer when he prevailed on God not to withdraw his presence from his people.

Moses was valuing the presence of God more than anything else and with all of his experiences one would think that God had satisfied him now. Moses had experienced the burning bush, the exodus, the glory on the mountain and the promise of God’s abiding presence with his people but for him this was still not enough. Moses wanted more. He said to God – Exodus 33:18: “Now show me your glory.” [How bold and breathtaking!] And God did. He did not judge Moses to be greedy or out of line. On the contrary, God was pleased with his desire for intimacy and said – Exodus 33:19-20: “I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the Lord, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. But,” he said, “you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and love.”

We at Living Grace want to be on the same journey as Moses and the apostle Paul. We want – more and more – “to know Christ”. Amen.