

Chapter One Everything In Its Time

*To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven.
Ecclesiastes 3:1*

God does inspire his people to perform his will upon the earth. It has been said that all great ideas are God's ideas, and human beings are the agents through which God moves to bless the world. The how and the why of it are more difficult to establish, particularly as they relate to the inspiration process: Is it that some people are more open to hearing from God or more open to taking risks, or does God simply move as he sees fit leaving humanity to debate the particulars of the process? I can honestly say that I have no answer to that question. What I can say is, by some means, an immense burden for an evangelical work grew in my heart following a family vacation in Penetanguishene in the summer of 1971, after having made a commitment to Christ on March 30th of that year.

The early 1970's were strange years for the evangelical world. History records it as *the Jesus Movement*—a time when cultural insecurities around the Viet Nam war and growing dissatisfaction with the materialism of the Post World War II West inspired a return to faith, particularly among the young. I was among the influenced. The *Jesus People* (as they were called) reached me at a time when the Roman Catholic Church (RCC), of which I was a devoted member, was distracted by the adjustments of Vatican II and struggling to find its own identity in the midst of the changes. Among the stresses being felt by many Catholic leaders was the consequence of relaxing the RCC's view on the reading of Scripture. Particularly in Pittsburgh, where I was living at the time, a wave of evangelicalism was making its mark and creating discomfort among the more traditional leaders. It is significant that the pastor of St. Valentine's Roman Catholic Church at the time was among the more challenged priests and he responded poorly to the questions I had about what I was reading in Scripture. At one point I was threatened with excommunication for questioning the traditional doctrines of the church—a move on that particular priest's part that was to have a huge impact on my life.

It is not possible to discuss the founding of Covenant Christian Community Church (CCCC) without exploring the tension between evangelical beliefs and the Roman Catholic Church. For me, it boiled down to the question of authority. Was the RCC God's authority on earth, as I had been taught as an RC, or was Scripture God's authority? It was not a new tension. Centuries before Martin Luther had posted his **98** and **99 Theses** on the door of Wittenburg Cathedral on the basis of this very conflict. His buzz phrase was *Sola Scriptura*—a Latin phrase meaning "Scripture only"—which he preached as the only basis for establishing truth. Perhaps it was the relaxing of Catholic norms around the use of Latin in the mass, the reduction of the required *fast* prior to receiving communion from three hours to one, or the removal of the mandate to avoid eating meat on Friday—all things that I had seen as sacrosanct—but my allegiance was shifting: If I had to cast my lot among a point of view, it seemed attachment to the unchanging word of God seemed a better fit for me. And cast my lot I did. The clear and

identifiable voice of my heart resonated with the importance of Scripture as the foundation for all truth, and I found myself saying with Luther, “Here I stand, I can do no other.”

Summer vacation 1971, which was spent (as always) in Penetanguishene, was a watershed moment for me. Some found me a curiosity and others an annoyance as I had little interest in much else other than sharing my beliefs with anyone who would listen. It seems the future was cast when three young people responded to this message and I, in raw enthusiasm and naivete, baptized them by immersion in the waters of Georgian Bay at the site of the old Red Dock. This was the pivotal moment in my inspiration process. The Greeks described events like these by the word *kairos*—a word meaning the defining moment, or the “right” time. In that moment, the need for a church in Penetanguishene—one where believers in Scripture could serve Christ according to *the message of Scripture alone*—was forged in my heart. I began to pray earnestly for such a possibility. In particular, I remember one moment when, kneeling beside my bed, I prayed, “Lord, there are plenty of Christians to do your work here (Pittsburgh). Move me to Penetang where I can better serve you.” The next morning my father, Bob Robitaille, announced that he had struck a deal to purchase the old Dairy Queen restaurant in Penetang and turn it into a hoagie restaurant. During the six months that followed, both of my parents received Christ and I was able to share my vision with them. None of us knew how or when, but we came to Canada with an expectation that *in God’s time* an evangelical church was going to be established in Penetanguishene.

I first met David Webster outside of Dupuis’ Groceteria in the fall of 1972. Dave’s father, Ed Webster, was instrumental in our going to Knox Presbyterian Church in Midland and had become a mentor and friend to my father. Both of our dads were eager for Dave and I to meet. At the time Dave was a student in the math program at Waterloo University and was only home on weekends, spending most of that time with his wife-to-be, Doris Leonard, who was a sister of my wife to be, Debi Leonard. We met outside Dupuis Groceteria to discuss forming a bible study for young people. Shortly thereafter, we began meeting in an old paint store that Gilly Robillard used for storage in the old Poyntz Plaza on Poyntz St. (later torn down and replaced with the High Poyntz Mall) and continued there for several months before securing a more suitable space in the basement of the Penetang Library. Later on, Gilly Robillard sold us the land on which the present worship centre is built.

But I digress.

The years between 1972 and the beginning of the church in 1979 were confusing ones. They included several rabbit trails that led off the original path and more than a few conflicts. Doris and Dave married on the 30th of June 1973, and Debi and I followed two weeks later, on July 14th. Before we married, Debi and I had accepted an appointment to a missions team heading for Saragosa, Spain, and a month after marrying we traveled to Prospect Heights, Illinois, for training with an organization called Literature Crusades. This proved to be a bad decision on our part for many reasons, the least of which not being the call that I felt on my heart for a church in Penetanguishene. At one point I was confronted by the leadership of the organization for campaigning to

recruit a team to return to Penetang to establish a church. When it became evident that our hearts were not in a mission to Spain, we were asked to consider if being part of the team was really in anyone's best interest. With the help of Literature Crusades, we decided it was not and we returned to Canada.

It was shortly after returning to Penetanguishene in early 1974 that I made my first serious attempt to get a new church going. At first we entertained casual discussion about meeting with our small group of friends in our apartment on Sunday mornings, but that was never genuinely considered. A more reasonable option came to light when a friend of mine, Ron Lepage, heard about a Baptist organization in Columbus, Georgia, that was eager to plant churches in Canada. With hardly a second thought, Ron and I were on the road to speak with them. To say that I was impulsive at that particular stage of my life would be an understatement. Passion translated into enthusiasm, and enthusiasm (as often as not) translated into trouble. We didn't make it past Covington, Kentucky. I had received surgery about six weeks earlier and the incision became irritated by the long ride. The doctor in the emergency room suggested that it would not be wise to continue the trip and we had to turn around. The humiliation I felt over that defeat placed the idea of a church in Penetanguishene on the back burner where it stayed until November of 1976.

A very fine line exists between passion and impulsivity. Unfortunately it took several years longer before I learned the difference, as illustrated by the events that followed. In the two years leading up to 1976, several significant things happened, beginning with a move to Bramalea, Ontario, where I accepted a job with Olivetti Canada as a sales representative. It was through this connection that I met Dan Tobias—a close personal friend of Mark Napier who was considered at the time to be hockey's best young prospect. Dan thought I had a musical talent that deserved a wider audience and introduced me to Mark with the sole motivation of funding a record. Prior to the advent of the microcomputer and recording software, recording was a difficult accomplishment. Studio time was expensive and space in the scheduling of studio time was difficult. These are obstacles that disappear when hockey's best young pro with his million dollar contract steps forward and clears the way. Before long I was equipped with some of Canada's finest studio musicians and tucked away in a fully modern 16 track recording studio in Springfield, Ontario, recording a full album of original music. If I prayed about the opportunity, I do not remember. Whether or not God had a plan for my life did not factor into the decision. Impulsivity, as opposed to passion: the lesson of my life for that particular era.

Suffice it to say that the record failed. The significance of this event was seminal in that it focused the impulsivity issue in a most unexpected way. Life teaches us, if we are paying attention. When the same lessons are repeatedly arriving on our doorstep, it is likely that we simply are not listening. On a particularly depressing day I pulled into the parking lot of a ball diamond in North York to talk at God. I would like to say that I wanted to pray, but praying indicates a measure of receptivity to hearing God's response. My memory is that I had some feelings to dump and this was the occasion for their unloading. But in the midst of this dumping a light went on in my awareness. About an

hour in I found myself pounding on my steering wheel and saying to God, “I don’t know what it is you expect of me, but whatever it is, I can’t do it.”

It was that “I can’t do it” part that jolted something in my awareness. In what seemed like milliseconds, the entire history of my impulsivity jumped up and slapped me in the face. I realized that I had not been coming to God asking him for direction; I had been coming to God with my plans in tow expecting him to “rubber stamp” them. Not until that moment did I have the slightest idea of what it meant for Jesus to be Lord. Prayer was always for posting my own agenda to God’s message board; it wasn’t for bringing my will and purpose under the authority and direction of God, as I understood God and his direction. Seeing that for the first time was life-altering as no single experience of my life had been up to that moment. I sat in stunned silence for what seems now like an enormous length of time. When I finally could speak, I had a long talk with God about my self-centeredness and made a commitment that I would never disregard his will again and determined to complete due diligence with God before ever jumping into anything. The significance of this recognition in the founding of the church will become clear in due course. I share it with the belief that without this crisis, Covenant Christian Community Church would never have happened.

With this matter settled, it seemed that the logical next step would be to actually pray. What was it that God had in mind for us? Debi and I made a serious matter of praying about this for the next several weeks. Given all that had transpired in the years leading up to that moment, it might seem like returning to Penetanguishene was a “no brainer,” but it was actually a tough decision. Dave and Doris were living in Kitchener, Ontario at the time, and several possibilities for jobs existed in the Kitchener/Waterloo area. After returning from Kentucky in rather humiliating fashion, it was not easy to recognize that the original vision was still worthwhile, but the timing possibly wrong. We prayed and we waited. One morning about three weeks into the seeking process, Debi and I awoke with a similar conviction: we needed to go back to Penetang. How we arrived at the decision was different for both of us, but we both agreed that returning to Penetanguishene was the direction that seemed to most honor God. Without a job or any idea what was going to happen next, we moved to Penetang in late November, 1976, and settled into a small house on Maria Street. Within the month I had created a position for myself at Huronia Office Services in Midland selling office equipment.

Waiting is not always an easy thing to do, but it seems the agenda for the next couple of years was just that: waiting. The Tuesday night Bible study that originally met in my father’s home had moved to the Hoagie House and we regularly attended that meeting, but little effort was made to do anything toward the establishing of a church in the community. That all changed when I had a most unusual dream. Dreams have often been a source of direction for me. I tend to take a cognitive behavioral approach to interpreting dreams and see them mostly as the unconscious acting out of whatever emotions we are experiencing when we go to bed. While we are sleeping our defenses are down and it is easier for our true feelings to find expression. If we go to sleep worried about not having enough money, we may have a series of dreams where we find ourselves missing important things—a tool we need to fix something, or we need to pay

for a purchase and our wallet isn't in our pocket. Dreams usually are a window into our dominant emotions. In this particular dream I can remember talking to someone about the need for a church in Penetang. As we talked together, I was aware of the ticking of a clock in the background, which grew louder and louder throughout the dream until I was doubled over on the ground holding my ears and writhing in pain. Suddenly, with one loud gong, the sound stopped and I felt the sensation of free falling into a dark hole. I awoke with the sound of the gong still resonating in my ear and bracing myself for the impact of hitting the ground.

In my mind, I understood this to mean, "The clock is ticking, and time is running out"—not in an eschatological sense of "time is running out," like "time as we know it" was coming to a close; it was more a sense that the time for planting a church was passing—the *kairos*. I believed God was stoking a fire under me and I began to talk about it, pray about, even nag about. It is very possible that I was becoming a burr under the saddles of nearly everyone at the Tuesday night Bible study.

It was just about that time that Don and Thelma Webster returned to the Penetanguishene area. Don was the brother of Ed Webster and David's uncle. He and Thelma and their family had spent years working among the Inuit in Alaska translating the bible into Inuit for the Wycliffe Translators. After that they spent another decade or so on the Ivory Coast of East Africa overseeing the translating of the bible for primitive tribes in the Ivory Coast area. Don was an ordained minister and his return to Penetang seemed providential. In late 1978 or early 1979, Debi and I hosted a meeting of interested individuals in our home to discuss the starting of an evangelical church in Penetang with Don Webster as the pastor—the second serious attempt at beginning a church. My memory of the event was that the participants were genuinely interested in discussing the possibility, but it did not lead to a second meeting. The general feeling of the group was that Knox Presbyterian Church and the Alliance Church in Midland were already providing a place for evangelicals to attach themselves, so a work in Penetanguishene was unnecessary. Other than my parents, I am not sure any others in the meeting could see what Debi and I were seeing.

I remained undeterred.

It was (and remains) my solid conviction that Penetanguishene needed its own evangelical presence to relate to the French community. The source of my conviction in this matter rested in the fact that the two communities cooperated on a bus line (PMCL), but on little else. Penetang was Midland's embarrassing half brother. Outsiders rarely saw a difference, but both communities knew they had different fathers. The perception in Penetang was not dissimilar to the feeling much of Quebec has with the rest of Canada. Penetang did not get its due respect, and that created a deep sense of pride in the Penetang identity, not only in Penetang, but in the smaller French communities that saw Penetang as the cultural centre where they did their shopping, found their doctors and dentists, and sent their children to high school. Going to a non Catholic church would be hard enough for most people raised in the Penetang sphere of influence; going to a non Catholic church in Midland could be monumental. If an evangelical message was going to have an enduring impact in an area where 80% of the residents were raised with a

Roman Catholic awareness, it would have to prove its worth within that community by participating fully in it. It is not that the church was intended to reach only those of French descent—a good number of the founding members were of other backgrounds; it was that the platform for that outreach had to begin in the French milieu if it was to be seen by the French community at all. It was this reality that gripped my heart and would not let me go.

Following the collapse of this second serious attempt, I took matters into my own hands. I made application to Ontario Bible College in Toronto and was accepted into their Bachelor of Theology program. Three years of Bible college, and we were in business. That's what I told Debi.

“How are we going to live while you go to bible college,” she asked.

“I don't know.”

“Don't you think you should figure that out before you leave your job and place our long term security in jeopardy?”

Of course, she was completely right. In the moments following that discussion I became aware that my old friend, impulsivity, was emerging once again. As I fumed over what I felt to be a lack of support for this vision, I decided that too much of me was in this decision and very little of much else. Once I connected that in my mind, the matter was completely settled. If God wanted a church in Penetang he would have to make it happen. I walked away from the Ontario Bible College, and I did so with complete peace. I will always remember a very special prayer time I had overlooking Georgian Bay at the Lookout in Parry Sound, ON, where I stopped striving and rested in God on the matter. “Be still and know that I am God,” I heard the Psalmist say. For the first time, perhaps in my life, I “shut up.”

It is odd how God uses simple things that one would never imagine to be significant to accomplish great things. The symbol of Covenant Christian Community Church could easily be a typewriter. In early 1979 I met Ann Marie Shaw. My boss at Huronia Office Services had just finished selling her a Facit 1850 Single Element Typewriter and informed me that I was installing it at New Life Brethren in Christ Church in Collingwood and training Ann Marie on how to use it. She gripped my hand like a truck driver as she shook it. It was apparent she knew what she wanted, and she wanted that typewriter. I was not entirely enthused. The Facit 1850 was a new typewriter that was made to compete with the IBM Selectric and it had a lot of bugs. The seven or eight of them I had already sold were spending more time in the shop than they were on customers' desks and I was reluctant to inflict them on anyone else. But Ann made it clear that the Facit is what she wanted. I met Dale Shaw when I arrived to install it. As I fiddled with cords and set-up procedures Dale casually asked me, “So, is this a good typewriter?”

“Actually, it is a piece of junk,” I responded.

Dale laughed. “Seriously,” he said, “Is this a good typewriter?”

“No, it is a piece of junk. The technology is not perfected and they are spending a lot of time in the shop.”

“Really?” he said. “Then what would you recommend instead?”

“Well, you can either buy an IBM Selectric, which I do not sell, or you can buy an Olivetti Lexicon 90, which I can. It depends on whether you want the carriage to move or the element. Both have their advantages.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Dale asked.

“Because I am a Christian and you asked me,” I said.

Dale purchased the Olivetti and we became good friends. On Thursdays, when I was in Collingwood, I would go to the church and have lunch with him and we would talk theology. There were some major differences in what we thought about various things, mostly in the area of dealing with conflict, but for the most part, we thought a lot alike. In the years following my parking lot experience I became an avowed Arminian. The central difference between Arminian evangelicals and those who are more Calvinistic is in how one views the question of eternal security. Calvinists place the emphasis more on the work of Christ and would see the act of conversion as a single event with eternal implications. Once one decides to accept Christ, the penalty is paid and salvation is assured regardless of what happens afterwards. Arminians see the decision to follow Christ as one that has to be maintained—that one can decide to walk away from Christ. Arminians place the emphasis on free will rather than on election whereas Calvinists would see Christians as those who have been chosen by God unconditionally. The Brethren in Christ and I were compatible on this important point of doctrine.

The BIC also have been influenced by the teachings of John Wesley. Prior to meeting Dale I did not know a lot about the Wesleyan perspective. The Wesleyans would see salvation has having two major crises—the first being a crisis of faith and the second a crisis of Lordship. The first crisis occurs when one understands the need for a Savior and accepts the atoning work of Christ on the cross as payment for one’s sins. The second crisis occurs when one is faced with a full understanding of what it means to be a follower of Christ and must decide whether one’s life will be lived in obedience to the known will of God. I was very familiar with the doctrine in a practical way, as it resembled my own experience of surrendering to the known will of God in that parking lot. It seemed God had been preparing me in definite ways to be open to the Brethren in Christ, and the Brethren in Christ to me. The peace position proved to be the one major challenge to my thinking and became one of the central themes of our discussions when Dale and I met.

In spite of my doubts around the doctrine of peace, Dale asked me if I would consider coming to Collingwood and becoming his adult bible teacher. I informed him that I was staying in Penetang “being still” and “waiting on God.” Little did I know at the time that the wait was about to come to an end. Dale has this marvelous ability to spot people’s strengths and tap them. I am not sure I have ever met a person with more ability to see the possibilities in people and tease them out. Very early in our relationship he took me to a farmer’s field on the edge of town and said, “See this field? The farmer who owns it doesn’t know it yet, but he is going to donate this land to the church and we are going to build a 300 seat sanctuary on it.” Today, New Life Church is situated on that donated property.

Over a period of weeks Dale listened to me share my vision for a church in Penetang—how it began, what had happened to that point, etc. Finally he said, “Glenn, I believe God is calling you to begin that church.”

I was not very open to the possibility.

“No,” I said, “I have already been down that road, and I am pretty certain that I am not the one who is going to plant it. But I do want to be there to support the one who does.”

“How do you know that God did not shut the door on those previous opportunities because he had a different one in mind?” he asked.

“I’m listening.”

Dale outlined a plan where I would become his pastoral intern in Collingwood and eventually plant a Brethren in Christ Church in Penetang. He arranged for me to meet with Bishop Harvey Sider in Oak Ridges, ON, to share my burden for a church in Penetanguishene with him. I saw the meeting as a “no lose” proposition. The chances that a bishop would see potential in a 24 year old, untrained, unpolished novice was so unlikely that I had very low expectations. He asked questions of me, looked me in the eyes, leaned forward in his chair, nodded, and announced, “I would like you to speak to our missions committee this coming Tuesday in Hamilton. Can you make it?”

Dale was the chairman of the missions committee, so I had an advocate. I was very relaxed as I presented my vision to them feeling I had nothing to lose. Again, I encountered an open-minded, interested group that listened to what I was saying. I was not accustomed to that reaction! The plan was approved, and I was installed at New Life as “Pastor-in-training” in May of 1999, with the proviso that I meet with retired bishop E.J. Swalm to be mentored in the doctrine of peace.

E.J. Swalm was a Canadian patriarch of the church who was significant in the forming of the Historic Peace Church designation for the Brethren in Christ and other peace churches in Canada. He had served much of World War I in jail for refusing to wear the military uniform or to serve in the armed forces. His experiences are recorded in his book *Nonresistance Under Test*. Along with being a tremendous mentor, he became a friend. His gentleness and inclusive demeanor was a challenge to my rather rigid conservatism. He once told me, “The longer I live, the more people I allow to go to heaven,” as a way of expressing how his view of God’s love and mercy had expanded over the years. E.J. planted some significant seeds in my thinking that were to come to fruition in due course.

I consider my time with E. J. to be one of the greatest gifts of my life, transforming both my theology and my way of living. Suffice it to say, that through some diligent soul searching and study, peace became a key pillar in my spiritual understanding.

For the next year Debi and I traveled back and forth to Collingwood every Sunday. It was in serving with Dale that God opened up an essential understanding in me that was to become a hallmark of ministry at Covenant. Dale shared E. J. Swalm’s inclusive and gracious attitude towards seekers and was a people magnet. On several occasions we walked through downtown Collingwood together and I was struck with the

numbers of people who would stop him to share greetings. Some of these people came to New Life Church, but showed (in my opinion at the time) very little appreciation for living a disciplined and holy life. I mentioned this to Dale on several occasions and expressed my concern that he was not challenging people enough to let go of the sins in their lives. I remember telling him, “People are like onions (parroting some conservative thinker; I don’t remember who). You need to peel back the layers of their lives and reveal their smelly cores.”

“Really?” Dale responded. “I had no difficulty seeing my ‘smelly core.’ I needed someone to help put the layers back on so I could be a ‘whole onion.’”

It was one of those moments when it seemed like the whole world stop spinning ever so briefly and I was suspended in time. Everything changed, in a moment. Nothing remained the same. In a single, solitary moment, my view of the Gospel went from being a kind of spiritual “Ajax” that bleached out the black stain of sin in people’s lives to being the “bread from heaven” that brought life and hope. Somewhere along the line it became the axiom, “Meet people where they are and walk with them,” which became my mantra at Covenant. I first saw the heart of God for people in the example of Dale Shaw.

Many of the young people who formed the core group of Covenant also traveled back and forth on Sundays—people like Gilbert Robitaille, Carole Galbraith, Jacqueline Desrochers, Fred Sharp, Jean Desrochers, Sue Rose, and Mark Promm. While we participated in the program at New Life, we also initiated a bible study in our home at 13 Payette Drive in Penetanguishene. With the likelihood of the church in Penetang beginning within the year, I approached my parents, Bob and Rita Robitaille, and my brother and sister-in-law, David and Doris Webster (who had since moved to Port McNicoll), about becoming a part of the core group. Both families were fairly involved at Knox Presbyterian at the time and it was in no way guaranteed that either family would leave Knox to begin a risky church planting venture. Both families had plenty of encouragement from other friends and relatives to stay put at Knox and not become involved with what they saw as a foolish venture. One prominent local minister actually was on his way to Fort Erie to talk with Bishop Harvey Sider about me in an attempt to scuttle the project, but (according to his later testimony) felt such a conviction in his heart that he was making a mistake that he turned around. The first couple of steps took a lot of faith on the part of the core members. Very few outside of the core were at all supportive. Nevertheless, due to a real passion for seeing an evangelical work in Penetang, Dave and Doris Webster and Bob and Rita Robitaille agreed to come on board. The hands moved and the clock chimed; at long last, it was Penetang’s time.

Chapter Two

Simple Beginnings

*Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves.
A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.
Ecclesiastes 4:12*

On April 21, 1980, Dave Webster, Robert Robitaille and I met in Dave's office at Kindred Industries for the first time as the *Administrative Committee* appointed by the Canadian Conference through Bishop Harvey Sider. This is the designation used by the Brethren in Christ Church to identify the group that meets to organize a new church plant prior to the launching of the new work and the forming of an official church board. It was a very exciting moment for all of us. On the agenda were such things as the naming of the church, official starting date for public worship services, and the date of a charter membership service. Much discussion had already taken place around the naming of the church prior to the meeting, with *Penetang Brethren in Christ Church* holding the early edge. At the time very few Canadian Conference churches were identified by any means other than geography and, given the centrality of the mission to Penetanguishene in the *raison d'être* of our coming together, it seemed logical to follow the conference pattern.

But following the “pattern” did not turn out to be a high priority in this or many other matters. Our earlier deliberations had raised *Bethel* (a Hebrew word meaning “house of God”), *Living Water* or *Faith* as possibilities, none of which seemed to raise much interest when the time came to make a decision. We were within moments of affirming *Penetang* as the local identifier when Bob Robitaille suggested *Covenant*, which had been the name of the Baptist Church he attended when he was young. It had an immediate appeal. Not only was it a biblical word with a connection to God’s promises, but one with deep meaning with respect to the actual mission we were undertaking.

None of us had any illusions about the challenge that lay before us. We were fully aware of the commitment and energy that would be required to “stay the course” and fulfill our mission. In spite of the fact that the word was archaic and would require some explanation, *Covenant* was chosen unanimously for its potential to remind us of the purpose for which we had gathered together. The minute records it in this way:

After much discussion and seeking the Lord’s will, it was unanimously approved to name our church Covenant Brethren in Christ Church. We were impressed with the deep meaning of the word (covenant) which describes what we are setting out to accomplish: “A solemn agreement between the members of a church that they will act together in harmony with the precepts of the Gospel.” We as a committee also covenant together to seek and follow the Lord’s will in all aspects of the founding of the work in Penetang.

It was also decided that the official launching of public worship would occur on June 15th, 1980 at 11:00 AM with charter membership Sunday slated for September 14th, 1980. In the weeks that ensued, Corpus Christi Elementary School (later to be renamed James Keating) was secured as a location at the cost of \$35.00 per week.

Appropriately, June 15th was a beautiful day. 32 individuals arrived at Corpus Christi school with an air of anticipation. The day before I spent in the parking lot of the old Red Dock writing my first sermon and imagining what the future would bring. I felt like David against Goliath—a poet taking on a seasoned warrior. I don’t remember being nervous about that—we had the right team, we had the right vision, and we had an amazing opportunity—but it was a monumental challenge. The image so resonated with me that it became the text for my first message. We could do this thing with God’s help if we remained connected to him, and if we saw it as his battle. Fittingly, we opened the service with *To God Be the Glory*.

As services go, it was fairly consistent with the pattern in popular usage at the time—announcements, a call to worship, an invocational prayer, several hymns strategically placed throughout, pastoral prayer, an offering, a sermon, and a benediction—which, with the addition of a children’s story, was a formula we were to follow for the next 13 years. It was what real churches did. And doing what normal churches did was very important early on.

Church plantings were not a regular thing in Penetanguishene, and there was more than a little concern among many in the town about our beginning a new church. Rumors

began about our being a cult that wore hoods and chanted. I could never figure out where that particular rumor came from, but it did, in many ways, typify the challenge we faced in the early days. On the one hand we needed to reach out to the unchurched and draw them in; on the other hand we had to reach out to the other churches and the community and gain their trust. Both proved difficult. The Huronia District Ministerial entertained a petition from Rev. Bob Little of Knox Presbyterian Church—one local pastor who knew me from my time at Knox—that I be barred from ministerial. When pushed on the point by his colleague, Rev. Albert Farthing of First Presbyterian in Penetang, Bob Little responded by saying, “He disagrees with everything I say.” I was not present to hear the conversation, but reportedly Al Farthing responded by saying, “Well I disagree with nearly everything you say as well. Should I be barred from ministerial also?” It was a fairly cold reception I received when I arrived, but I was eventually invited to ministerial and eventually became a solid member. Later, after leaving Knox for a position at Ontario Bible College, Bob Little requested the opportunity to preach at Covenant and publicly apologized for his earlier attitude—a peace offering that meant a great deal to those of us who had earlier regarded him as a friend.

A larger hurdle was experienced when the Roman Catholic Churches of Penetanguishene, Perkinsfield and Lafontaine published a warning in their bulletins that a cult had begun operations in Penetang and urging parishioners to take extra care with their families. I met this challenge head on by meeting with the pastoral priest of each parish to explain our intentions. My message to them included a description of the Brethren in Christ Church and its recognized inclusion within the Christian milieu and an outline of our mission. I remember saying something to the effect, “It is not our intention to proselytize Roman Catholics or any other committed Christian attending other churches. Our desire is to reach the unchurched of our area regardless of their historic religious background and inspire faith in God.” To the printed claim in their bulletins that we were “causing confusion among (their) youth,” I gave specific examples of lives that had been changed and growth that was occurring in some of these “confused” individuals. Fr. Viatore (Vic) Laurin of St. Patrick’s parish in Perkinsfield was the most receptive to this overture, responding by saying “You will not have any difficulty from me.”

While Fr. Laurin was the only priest to comment on the matter, talking with each of them seemed to relieve some of the concerns of the local Roman Catholic Churches as a whole. No more official denunciations occurred. Nevertheless, we were a long way from being perceived as a positive presence in the community. It remained a goal of mine to change this community perception by serving on local committees and boards. My belief was, if the pastor was a contributor to the community rather than a threat to it, it is not likely the church would be seen as much of a threat. I nearly ran myself ragged maintaining that belief, serving on such boards as Community Living Huronia, Huronia District Hospital and Wendat. I continued a strong community presence on boards and committees right up to the completion of my time as pastor in August of 1993.

Meeting as a church was a real project in those early days. Every Saturday night we would meet at Corpus Christi school to convert the library into a sanctuary—a ritual

that was to continue for nearly 8 years. This required the rolling away of the round tables to the back of the room, the realignment of the chairs into two sections with a center aisle, and the setting up of a platform with a portable pulpit. The east wall of the library was almost entirely made up of windows, so it would get quite hot in the summer. Fortunately they were also dressed with heavy, gold curtains that could be drawn to block some of the direct light when necessary. Every Saturday we would create a sanctuary, and every Sunday we would turn it back into a library. In October we shared our space with the symbols of Halloween—ghosts, witches and spiders—and in December we enjoyed the Christmas accents that were around the room. A metal, portable sandwich-board sign was built for placement at the road listing our name and service information. Every Sunday it was carried to the road and back. Fortunately an empty room was found in the main hallway across from the library that the principals of Corpus Christi, first Doug Muxlow and later Henry Bisschop, allowed us to use for storage during the week.

From the beginning, Covenant had a strong emphasis on children's ministries. Debi Robitaille organized the junior church and nursery programs and, for the first while, these were the only Sunday programs offered. Once a month we would meet in the evening for a Breaking of the Bread service—first in my home and later at the Hoagie House. Eventually this service was also moved to the school library. The pattern for the communion service was a hybrid of different communion traditions involving a time of sharing and reflection, a breaking of a small loaf, and the passing of unfermented grape juice. It was decided to hold this service separately from the morning service to allow for greater reflection on its meaning and purpose and to insure that participants were genuinely participating for the right reasons.

Much could be written about the actual early services and their flavor. In rereading my messages from the first year it became obvious that the central theme was about understanding the nature of God as a loving father who desired a relationship with his children and who was gracious and generous in dealing with them. Much of the material was designed to underscore the idea that we, as God's children, were to meet people where they were and become God's hands, hearts and voice in drawing them to himself. But what most stands out for me is the people. On September 14th, 1980, over 110 guests attended our charter membership service from Covenant, New Life, and Stayner congregations. Guests included Bishop Harvey Sider, Bishop E. J. Swalm, Pastor Dale Shaw of New Life in Collingwood, and Pastor Harvey Stickley of 6th Line Church in Stayner, and their spouses. 16 Charter members were received.

Debra Robitaille was the heart and soul of our children's program, designing a junior worship program, organizing the nursery and later teaching Sunday School. This was a role she was to occupy throughout our tenure in Penetanguishene. She often commented that in 13 years she likely did not hear more than 13 sermons. Every Sunday, following the Children's Story, she would take the children to another area to provide an age appropriate worship experience. For most of the children who grew up in the church during those years, Debi was their pastor.

Robert Robitaille was the first secretary of the administrative committee and later the church board, the first Sunday school superintendent, the first adult bible teacher, the

first deacon, and a regular supply preacher in my absence. Bob liked to refer to himself as a contented “second banana,” but to those who attended he was the “big hug” that made all who came feel warmly welcomed.

Rita Robitaille was involved in the children’s program as a teacher, but shone as a mentor to younger Christian women and as an evangelist. She along with Bob made special efforts to ensure that people felt wanted and valued and was vigilant in seeing that some of our early shut ins were able to attend services.

Dave Webster was the first treasurer of the church, the first pianist (a designation he reluctantly accepted by default but graciously performed for over 10 years), and brought the children’s story nearly every Sunday for several years. Covenant was a part time job for David that he devoted himself to without reservation. None of us will ever fully know how many things he did in the background to keep the cogs moving.

Doris Webster was active in the junior church and children’s programs, designing pageants and bringing her expertise as a teacher and was instrumental in the development and delivery of our social events. Along with making a lot of very good food, Doris also did just about anything that was required to keep the program moving smoothly. She and Debi Robitaille worked very closely together in organizing and delivering our children’s ministries and inspired each other creatively.

Eva Pearl Richardson was the church grandmother. She is best remembered for her birthday gifts to the children of the church and for her regular encouragement to “keep the faith” and to not let your “problems get you down.” She became the first member of the church to meet Christ face-to-face and was mourned by all who knew her. Her picture hangs in the downstairs nursery.

Jacqueline Desrochers was one of the first young people to make a decision for Christ and a faithful supporter of the church from its inception and was responsible for many of the early attendees of the church.

Her brother, *Jean Desrochers*, one of the first to come to Christ, was also very active in bringing friends into the church and has remained one of its most faithful supporters.

Linda Carruthers, sister to Debi Robitaille and Doris Leonard, was the first administrative secretary assisting Bob Robitaille with typing duties.

Gilbert Robitaille built the sandwich board sign and regularly contributed to the set-up and tear-down of the library for worship.

Carole Robitaille taught Sunday School and served in the nursery.

Mark Promm regularly brought his musical talent on the trumbone.

Richard Konieczny was the first usher of the church. He remained a member for the first year until attending Liberty Baptist College.

Mary Kathryn Robitaille (Mary Paille) was a young lady of 15 at the time of our beginning and an enthusiastic participant. With the large number of young children in the church, she was regularly called on to do nursery and to baby sit—a role she cheerfully accepted.

Fred Sharp (now known by his first name, John) provided good questions, challenging models, and was on the forefront of inclusive theology. Even then John was best known for his excellent photography.

Also in attendance on Charter Membership Sunday were *Neil* and *Marie Hamelin*. Neil did anything and everything that was asked of him from serving as usher to serving on the social committee. Marie began teaching in the Sunday School during her first year after committing her life to Christ and eventually spearheaded the Pioneer Girls program.

The budget for the first year was a very simple one. In total we raised \$5022.79 in tithes and offerings, received \$2000.00 from the BIC Missions Board in operational subsidy, and earned \$33.17 in interest for an operational total of \$7055.96. I did not take a salary in the first year and was given an expense allowance of \$100.00 per month for travel, books, and incidentals. We made a decision early on that I would continue to work a full time job for the first while in order to begin raising money to purchase land. As a result of this choice, we were able to place \$2700.00 in the BIC Church Loan Fund in our first year of operation, making history as the first Brethren in Christ Church ever to do so. A letter to David Webster from the treasurer of the Loan Fund, Lester Fretz, dated December 28, 1980 records it this way:

It was a real thrill to receive your cheque. Indeed your congregation has made history as you are the first congregation to make a loan to the Loan Fund during its first year of operation. Also, your principle amount is significantly larger than what some established churches have on hand. We not only commend you for this step, but we also sincerely thank you. The funds which you have loaned us are in turn loaned to other congregations currently in need of funds for some project, so you can see how you are being "brethren to brethren." We certainly recognize that you could earn a higher rate elsewhere, however, by loaning these funds, you are making funds available to another congregation at a very favorable rate in comparison to what they would have to pay at a conventional institution.

In 1981 the decision was made to provide 1 day per week salary at the rate of \$50.00 per day, which would be increased to 2 days per week once the offerings reached \$300.00 per week. We did a lot of that kind of budgeting in the early days—conditional budgeting that challenged the group to express its interest and desire by achieving a financial goal first. By March of 1981 the financial goal had been achieved and I was moved to 2 days per week

We also decided to support the local Bible Club Movement missionaries who were providing bible classes in local schools. In the first year we contributed \$200.00, which was increased to \$70.00 per month in 1981.

It was also decided that the church would tithe its receipts to Cooperative Ministries—the BIC church's agency for funding conference programs. During the first year we were able to contribute \$725.00 to Cooperative Ministries.

Chapter Three

The Corpus Christi Years

*But when some were hardened and did not believe, but spoke evil of the Way before the multitude, he departed from them and withdrew the disciples, reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus.
Acts 19:9 (New King James Version)*

The early task of any church planting really boils down to two things: reach people and bring them into the church and, having reached them, keep them. In the early days we had a formula for inviting people to services. We encouraged individuals who responded to the invitation to come to Covenant to give it three Sundays before making a decision. Particularly for those who were more accustomed to a liturgical style of worship, Covenant, with its emphasis on preaching rather than on ceremony, would seem strange and almost like not having gone to church. I believe it was Debi who first noticed that people had to come three times before she felt comfortable that they were likely coming back, but once the observation was made, it seemed to carry the weight of experience. Neil and Marie Hamelin were two of the individuals who gave it three Sundays, and while Neil seemed fairly ready to stick around after one, Marie required the entire three.

A few people seemed to symbolize the early mission of Covenant and gave meaning to the effort. The first was Jacqueline Desrochers. She made a commitment to Christ through the youth group I led at Knox Presbyterian around 1978 or early 1979 and became one of the travelers to Collingwood once I connected with New Life. Along with her came her brother Jean and her sister Suzanne. One of the early “veins” of relationships that came into the church did so through the connections Jackie made. I look back on Jackie and her connections as the early energy for beginning the work when we did.

The second inspiration was Neil and Marie Hamelin. Neil showed up on my doorstep one morning with a question. I had known Neil casually for several years through his connection with Fuller Brush and his coffee breaks at the Hoagie House, but we had not made a strong connection up to then. All of that changed when the Hamelins began an Amway business and began attending Amway conferences. Following one particularly compelling Amway presentation both Neil and Marie made commitments to Christ and were encouraged to find a bible preaching church to nurture their newfound faith. Neil and Marie knew, or were related to, just about everyone in town and their connection to Covenant created another strong opportunity to increase visibility in the community. Both became key workers with Neil carrying a special interest in creating opportunities for social interaction and outreach, and Marie diving in to children’s ministries. Eventually Marie spearheaded the launching of a Pioneer Girls program.

The church was not in existence for very long when the talk turned to the idea of buying land. Several properties were considered, the two key ones being the property on which the present church is built and the other being at the corner of Lorne St. and Robert on the south side. A large frame home with a vacant lot was for sale at the latter location, but the property was too small for the long haul—approximately an acre. The property we eventually bought also had a small frame house that was ready for dismantling and of

no use to the church and was slightly larger than five acres with the south border fronting on Robert St. E. and the north border on Burke St. Even at the time of purchase a proposed road was planned that would divide the property into two parcels with the larger of the two being on the Burke St. frontage. Since the Robert St. frontage was the section most interesting for the building of a worship centre, we were particularly concerned that the amount of land on the south side of the proposed road be adequate to meet our needs. In July of 1982, roughly two years after the church began, we purchased the entire parcel and erected signs on both frontages of the property that was to become the home of our congregation.

People are the reason for buying land and erecting buildings, so by far the most significant memories of the first few years revolve around people. Terry Dupuis had been a friend of the family for several years when he had a conversion experience while he (to no one's great surprise) was watching a movie—in this case, *Jesus of Nazareth*. Before long he joined our team of musicians and was playing piano during services. Jim and Sue Krant moved to Penetanguishene and opened the Penetang Bakery and eventually made their way to Covenant. Deanna Shearer and her five children began attending, as well as John and Joyce Bednar and their three children, Al and Debi Crawford and their two boys, Murray Stanley, Betty Gostick and her two boys, Chuck Desroches, Tom Belcourt, Steve and Helen Wallace, Eva Pearl Richardson, Agnes Dupuis, Bev Bergie (Desrochers) and Gisele Quesnelle and her three children. Carmen Laurin began attending with her three children (at the time) following an invitation by the Hamelins. Carmen's husband, Jean, took a little longer to arrive but eventually joined as well.

To the best of my knowledge, the charter members and these individuals constituted the early core group on which the foundation for Covenant was built. The faithfulness and dedication of this team still marvels me to this day. Most of them have moved on to other places, projects and pursuits, some for practical reasons and others for reasons known only to them, but at a certain moment in time when a difference was available to be made, these individuals stepped into the gap and risked the ridicule and disapproval of family and the community in order to see Covenant become a place where God could be met and known. When the doors of the church were open, these people were there and serving, sometimes in heat so intense that one wonders how anyone came at all. (The windows in the Corpus Christi library covered the entire eastern exposure and, in the summer months, turned the make shift sanctuary into a virtual sauna.)

Several early challenges are memorable and illustrate some of the tensions that we faced. About the same time as Covenant was beginning, a movement in the French speaking community resulted in the forming of a correspondence high school program called Ecole Secondaire de la Huronie. Several of our young people attended this program, which was to later give rise to Ecole Le Caron. Jackie Puddicombe (nee Desrochers) was among the early attendees and would use some of her lunch hour to explore the bible and to discuss some her faith with some of her friends who showed interest. This created no small stir among the early administration of the school resulting in the writing of the following letter dated January 15th, 1980 addressed to Jackie's parents and signed by the commission scolaire and directeur:

Suites a` des plaintes de certains parents...

Following complaints from certain parents, the members of the board de la Huronie have taken a decision concerning your daughter, Jacqueline.

All oral and written propaganda concerning certain tracts of the bible will be stopped in the school.

However, we respect your daughter's choice, she could, in a restricted room, at certain hours, read the bible. But no other student will be tolerated at these sessions.

If your daughter will not follow these orders, we will be forced to tell her to leave the school. It is, therefore, her choice.

This decision was taken by the board de la Huronie the night of December 17th, 1979. (Translation by Jacqueline Desrochers, January 1980)

Another potentially divisive moment came when Carmen Laurin gave birth to her daughter, Emilie. Jean had not embraced Covenant at this point and believed that Emilie should be baptized Roman Catholic. Carmen wanted her to be dedicated in the Brethren in Christ Church. On several occasions a young deacon from St. Anne's Church met with Carmen and Jean to persuade Carmen that a Roman Catholic baptism was essential to salvation and part of her commitment to her husband. Such conflicts in ideology are to be expected when Catholic and Evangelical doctrine collide in the important family moments such as baptism/dedication, marriage, death, and in the celebration of holy days. When Carmen approached me with the dilemma I affirmed the importance of not allowing differing views on faith issues to give rise to a situation where the "baby got thrown out with the bath water." Rather than placing the child in the middle with two churches vying for influence, I advocated for respect for the Catholic view. To a Roman Catholic, baptism is an essential rite in becoming a part of the family of God and in removing original sin. To the Brethren in Christ, baptism is not regenerative and is only a symbol of one's faith commitment. In other words, whether Emilie was baptized as a child in the Roman Catholic tradition is neither here nor there to us. We do not see the rite as providing saving grace, as does the Catholic Church. Our larger concern would be whether or not she eventually chose to follow Christ as a free agent. At the very least, to us the act of infant baptism is harmless and, in this instance, did not prevent Carmen from having her own dedication rite as a way of expressing her commitment to raising the child as a gift of God and to providing her with the influences that would help her to make a decision for Christ when she was able. Since Emilie's father and family were committed Roman Catholics, to deny Emilie a Roman Catholic baptism would be disrespectful of their beliefs and would cause them to experience unnecessary stress. The Christian thing to do is the loving thing to do, which in this case meant relenting and agreeing to the baptism with the understanding that she saw the actual meaning of the baptism differently.

This would have been our approach in all such matters. One does not have to agree with the beliefs of others in order to respect them, nor is it necessary to publicly

discredit their views in order to teach your own. It was my practice when I was pastor to not preach against Roman Catholic views but to teach the understandings of the word of God that we hold as Brethren in Christ. I saw this as paramount in being an evangelical church in a dominantly Roman Catholic community. The leadership team at Covenant agreed with this approach and we were assertive in our expectation that this understanding of ministry be respected in all public presentations and worked for an adoption of these principles in private beliefs and practice. This commitment to respect for the beliefs of the other churches in the community was only strongly tested once with one individual who insisted on cloaking judgmental remarks in the context of prayer requests. After multiple attempts to modify the behavior with teaching and other appropriate appeals, the individual in question was asked to respect our approach on this matter or find another place to worship that was more consistent with that individual's beliefs.

Making this ultimatum gave the leadership team no joy. Privately I battled grief over the matter and mused about the implication of being “intolerant of intolerance.” When one has a commitment to “meet people where they are and walk with them,” how do you determine that some individuals' walk is too far afield to be accommodated? All of us were greatly relieved when the individual in question returned to us several weeks later with a commitment to respect our approach to ministry, and did so.

Questions were more difficult to address when the matter of appropriate Christian behavior was considered. It has always been difficult for Christian leaders to practice grace while affirming strong Christian values. The approach that I espoused was to see the request for membership as the pivotal moment when belief and practice required reasonable consistency. Under my leadership, issues such as common law relationships and substance abuse—the two that presented the largest challenges—were considered at that time membership was sought. The Brethren in Christ membership covenant outlines a certain expectation in terms of beliefs and practice and those seeking membership were invited to consider whether or not they could honestly affirm what they were being asked to live.

The more difficult problem arose when a person who had accepted membership walked differently than his or her commitment suggested. As a young pastor I weighed the outcomes of influences and energy. What would be the impact on the church if overt contradictions in behavior were not addressed? Scripture, denominational leadership, and local leadership were all consulted for help in knowing what the responsible approach was to confronting behavior that was potentially destructive to the individuals involved as well as the health of the church. Several incidents occurred requiring much prayer and thought and in each case the matters were dealt with as publicly as the presenting issues were public. This was according to Brethren in Christ protocol and with a belief that too little explanation only created opportunity for misinformation and speculation to give rise to bad blood. In the several incidences that occurred, the well being of the church was protected, but the individuals in question were injured. Looking back at it, we did the best we could at the time, and I am not sure we could have done any differently given the

place I was and we were. We did what we believed was the loving and responsible thing to do.

It is still a difficult division to make between protecting the message we send to impressionable minds (particularly young minds) and practicing grace. A church does have to agree on certain principles in order to be the church. However, with the benefit of time and experience, I think we could have been the church with a little more patience on the occasions in question. When erring is possible, it is always best to err on the side of mercy and grace. Looking back with the benefit of hindsight, I don't believe mercy and grace were the more important matters. We were likely more focused on the church than on the individuals.

In the early days, Covenant had two strategies for outreach: Family-friendly programming and social events. For this reason we initiated a Sunday School early on. At first Bob Robitaille served as superintendent and was later replaced by Doris Webster. While Corpus Christi was less than adequate for worship space, it was an excellent location for beginning a Sunday School. Several classrooms were made available to us for the various age groups and classes were offered for adults and children alike. At first Bob Robitaille was the sole adult teacher but, over time, electives were offered with various adult teachers contributing. We also maintained a strong emphasis on Junior Church, which Debi Robitaille organized and led throughout our tenure. Eventually Christian Service Brigade and Pioneer Girls programs were also initiated.

Social programming included several annual events that were well attended and popular: A New Year's Eve gathering for games and snacks (Trivial Pursuit was in its infancy and was the big draw), a Valentine's Day social for couples, often involving a dinner out and dessert at a participant's home, a 24th of May Weekend Fireworks event, most often held at the Crawford's farm on concession 14, an August corn roast (Crawford's again), a fall event of some kind, and the Christmas Banquet—a formal dinner with music and a Christmas devotional to kick off the Christmas season. These events were organized by the Social Committee, which, along with the Worship Committee and the Board of Trustees, represented the full complement of committee activity in the church outside of the actual Church Board.

Perhaps that is the best way to characterize ministry at Covenant during the Corpus Christ/James Keating years: Social events and children, mingled with a strong emphasis on discipleship and growing. I often commented that the day would come when we would look back on those years almost idyllically. I cannot say that idyllic describes my present view of that era, but I can say that I hold those memories with great fondness. The outcome was worth every ounce of the effort.

One other happening of the pre-worship centre years is worth noting. In 1985 Covenant participated in a joint effort with Communion Chretienne Nouvelle Vie, the Canadian Conference and the General Conference in bringing Carol and Helene Proulx to Covenant to do a six month pastoral internship. The Proulx's were being considered to plant a second Brethren in Christ congregation in Quebec City, and the various agencies of the church felt it would be good if they learned something of church planting in a dominantly French Catholic setting before they did so. Much could be written about this

event in our church, but suffice it to say that I did not recommend that the conference leadership go forward with a church planting. A number of problems surfaced during the Proulx's time here that made the success of such a venture seem unlikely. In spite of this recommendation, the second Quebec City church was launched, and closed within the first year.

Chapter Four **Covenant Builds a Home**

*When the people of God are together in God's place,
And the presence of God is there, there is power.*

Dr. Roy V. Sider

The LORD said to him:

"I have heard the prayer and plea you have made before me; I have consecrated this temple, which you have built, by putting my Name there forever. My eyes and my heart will always be there.

1 Kings 9:3

For most of the years prior to building the worship centre I rented office space from Bob Cascagnette Insurance on Main Street in Penetanguishene. A small sign was placed at the road providing us with some community visibility and a sense of permanence. This office was conveniently next to the Hoagie House—my parent's restaurant—where we held our mid week bible study until the business was sold in the early eighties. Following that, I finished my basement in my home and we held bible studies there for the next several years.

All of these accommodations only fueled our desire to have a building of our own.

I was perhaps a bit enthusiastic in my promotion of the idea of building, which was probably best illustrated by an exchange that occurred at one of our board meetings in early 1983. I proposed to the board, at that time made up of Jim Krant, David Webster, John Bednar, Bob Robitaille and myself, that we should mortgage our homes and begin construction on a building as soon as was reasonably possible. The room sat in stunned silence. Finally, I picked Jim Krant as the person to query for some kind of response.

"So, Jim... what do you think of that idea?" I said.

"I cannot believe the audacity of that suggestion!" was the response.

Needless to say, the ensuing conversation did not go well. Objection after reasonable objection followed, until finally I stood up in rather dramatic fashion and

announced (tongue firmly planted in cheek), “I am Moses, and I am going to lead you into the Promised Land!”

“That’s fine,” said Jim Krant, “providing we don’t end up wandering in the wilderness for forty years!”

It is important to keep in mind that I was only 28.

Nevertheless, we contacted our Director of Stewardship, Lester Fretz, and began a feasibility study. Lester performed interviews with everyone in the church and looked at the potential we had to actually build a building. It became evident in short order that we were yet long on vision and short on cash—something David Webster knew before we requested the study—but at least we knew what had to be done.

In 1986 we began to talk more seriously about building a building. It was very important to us that we not incur unreasonable debt that would limit our ability to provide solid programming, so we decided to take it one step at a time. The first step was to make a few sketches of what a worship centre might look like. Several proposals were put forward, one of which was a single floor design with classrooms wrapping around the west side of the building. John Bednar prepared a rough drawing of this concept. It was an attractive design, and was likely the emotional favorite early on. I favored a two-storey option that had kitchen and classrooms in the lower level and offices and sanctuary in the upper level. I prepared a very rough sketch that illustrated my idea and eventually we decided that this two-storey approach offered a more efficient use of space and cost effectiveness than the single storey option. Keith Fairbrother was retained to complete the blue prints—the son of a former Baptist minister who lived in our area—which he completed free of charge.

Secondly, to help finance the building of the building, we did several things. First of all, I approached the Board for Evangelism and Church Planting and requested a capital grant. \$50,000.00 was generously pledged toward our effort. We also sold the back portion of our property for approximately \$40,000.00, which, oddly enough, was around the same amount that we paid for the entire parcel in 1982.

Even with these amounts of money available, it still appeared as though building a worship centre would be a stretch for us financially. After much discussion, we finally agreed that we had the money to build the enclosure with complete roofing, brick, windows—everything necessary to secure the building. It was decided that we would go as far as we could go and see if the Lord would bless our decision. If money continued to come in, we would continue to build. If money ceased to come in, we would wait. We never had to wait a single day. Once the work began, it carried on to completion.

Thirdly, we retained two members of the church, Jean Laurin and John Bednar, to act as contractors and agreed to do as much of the building with volunteer labor as possible. This really was the key to our success. Not only did we get hundreds of hours of volunteer labor from our own congregation, we got support from other churches and congregations as well as interested local skilled workers. Ken Keefer—a friend of mine since youth and an elder at Knox Presbyterian—brought a small back hoe and dug the trenches for the footings. Rev. Greg Funk—a pastoral friend of mine from the Bertie congregation in Fort Erie landscaped the property with a rented bulldozer. Albert

Scholtens—an electrician from the Bertie congregation and a future pastor at the Springvale congregation—installed the electrical service. Ed Cober—a plumber from the West Heights congregation and member of the Board for Evangelism and Church Planting—installed the drains. Debi and Doris’s brother, Richard Leonard, provided finish plumbing. Rev. Albert Farthing of First Presbyterian Church in Penetanguishene helped install dry wall. We put out the call and help came. It was truly inspiring.

For much of the weekday work, Jean, John and myself were the crew. Since I was already on staff, it was decided that I should put as much time into the building of the worship centre as possible. I did not skimp on lesson or sermon preparation during that period of time, but not many people got a personal visit. If work was being done on the building I wanted to be there. In the end I gave 800 hours worth of time to the building project, and I loved every minute of it.

It helped that I was working with a couple of clowns. One never knew when a bucket of water, strategically placed above a door, was going to drench you, or when you would get up to walk to find that your boot had been nailed to the floor. Anyone who stepped onto the site was fair game. My favorite prank was when Albert Scholtens, our volunteer electrician, sent Jean Laurin to Ideal Supply in search of an 8 OHM coil. Apparently Jean hit three or four stores before he learned that no such part existed. When he objected to that treatment, I reminded him of the time he sent me to Beaver Lumber with \$10.00 to buy a new cut saw, which would not buy the blade of such a unit.

In short, we had a ball.

Probably the scariest moment occurred during a Saturday work bee when we were preparing the floor on the second level. The sanctuary floor is made of concrete slabs, custom fitted to span the width of the sanctuary—perhaps ten or so lengths. The area in the foyer is made of $\frac{3}{4}$ inch plywood and required the framing to be done in the rooms located directly below. I remember Jean asking me to go into the furnace room and check if it was square. To do this requires measuring from corner to corner and getting the same measurement both times. I asked my daughter Cherie, who was eight years old at the time, to come with me and hold the tape measure at each corner. I did not notice the workers above, nor did the workers notice Cherie crouched down below them. One worker above was working with a crow bar trying to remove a crooked nail and lost his grip on the crowbar, which fell at a vertical angle grazing the side of Cherie’s head, missing her shoulder, and landing harmlessly at her feet. Before I could get to the car my hand was filled with blood. All of us were in shock. Thankfully the cut only required several stitches to close and, although we had to follow the routine for head injuries, she had no concussion. Sometimes the difference between a couple of stitches and death is the difference of a 16th of an inch. Twenty-six years later that image still haunts me.

Three hours later I was performing a marriage on the hull of a yacht near Honey Harbour.

We worked on the worship centre from July of 1987 through April of 1988. Hundreds of hands and thousands of hours were donated. We set our sights on Palm Sunday for our first service in the new building, appropriately dubbing it *The Triumphal Entry*. At 11:00 PM on the Saturday before, we were still trimming the sanctuary and

arranging pews. The Stayner congregation had provided us with the furnishings from their old building—pews, pulpit, chairs for the platform—and they had to be cleaned and arranged. The Bertie congregation had recently purchased a new organ and gave us their old one. Palm Sunday 1988 featured David Webster on the organ and Terry Dupuis on the piano and a decent choir. All in all, it was a pretty good day—a pretty good day indeed.

Chapter Five **Caring, Sharing and Serving**

See, I am doing a new thing!
Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?
I am making a way in the desert
and streams in the wasteland.
Isaiah 43:19

For the first eight years of Covenant's existence the goals of the church were quite well defined: Reach the community, provide family friendly programming, and build a building. Once the building was completed, the emphasis began to shift to other things—what we encapsulated in the church motto: *Caring, Sharing and Serving*. On June 6, 1989, I tendered a proposal to the church board under the heading *Discussion Paper: Five Year Vision* that affirmed the general direction of family ministry and proposed several things: That we add a minister of youth, a marriage and family therapist, and a secretary to staff by 1995; that we develop a program of one-on-one discipleship for new believers; that we double membership and attendance in all programs; that we establish support groups in areas of special need (parenting, communication, addictions) and to support evangelism and outreach; purchase new pews to seat 200 by 1991; retire debt on the new facility by 1995; and begin construction on a 400 seat sanctuary once the debt had been retired.

I also raised, for the first time, the issue of my tenure as pastor. With my leadership approaching the ten-year mark, I thought it wise to openly discuss the question

of whether or not a fresh set of eyes might produce a larger benefit for the congregation. The minutes of the June 6, 1989 board meeting record the receiving of the discussion paper enthusiastically, but it does not appear that it did much more than stimulate us to begin thinking as it is never officially mentioned in the minutes again. Following two extensive congregational surveys and a congregational retreat a *Ten Year Vision* was adopted that incorporated many of the ideas that had been raised in the earlier version.

In the years directly following the completion of the building, several key individuals and families were added to the congregation: Al Parker, Wayne and Cookie Harrison, Bob and Ruth Keller, Walter and Loreen Ens, Suzie Brazeau, Doug and Marlene McClure, Brad Fisher and Zoe Hilton, just to name a few. Up to this point the majority of our attendees were experiencing evangelical Christianity for the first time. It was very encouraging to see individuals with experience in ministry choose to identify with us and have them actively involved in programming.

With the addition of these families and the worship centre completed, my thoughts turned to the shape ministry would require for Covenant to continue to reach the Huronia area. I had a sense that a significant change was happening in the way worship was being perceived in the greater Christian world and I began to make strides toward effecting that change. These were in the days prior to the mega church movement of Saddleback and Willow Creek but, when I reread the lessons and sermons from those days, I believe I was tapping into the same energy in making my observations.

The crux of my belief was that the church was not being relevant to the “buster” generation (as it was called back then—the group that followed the baby boomers and were inclined to “bust” the templates for how nearly everything was done from church to business to family), or even less relevant to “gen X” (the present generation that refuses to accept a narrow definition for anything). Like many at that time, I saw the style of music being utilized in worship as a major focus point. We began to introduce worship choruses as a modest first step; but the major issue for me had little to do with cosmetic adjustments and more to do with examining the substance of the message and how we were delivering it. Pepsi was coming in and old Coke was quickly fading. And just as it took a whole new approach—Diet Coke—to save the Coca Cola empire, I believed a dynamic equivalent was required in the church; not just new packaging, but a new philosophy, new methodology, and most importantly, more accurate, biblical theology that could address the issues of the day.

As I look back on that time, several realities impacted my thinking. First, was a growing dissatisfaction with exclusive theology that creates “us/them” thinking. It was then and remains now my conviction that Christian faith does not need to be triumphalistic or exclusive in order to be effective. It is possible for one to be fully committed to Christ and to sharing the message of the Gospel without requiring that every person mirror those exact beliefs in order to be deemed acceptable. God can reach people with truth in ways that do not necessarily fit the evangelical mold. I studied the Tao Te Ching, the Dhammapada, the Bhagavad Gita, Rig Veda and Upanishads, the Koran, and other more obscure texts to see first hand how *general revelation* might have found its way into these sacred texts of other religions, as Romans 1-3 teaches. (*General*

revelation is the theological concept that suggests God makes the knowledge of himself known in general ways, primarily through nature and reason, as opposed to through *specific revelation*, which Christians most often believe is a designation reserved for the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures only. I personally add a third kind of revelation, called *personal revelation*, which I believe is exemplified by God taking on human flesh and revealing himself in the person of Jesus Christ. This *personal revelation* supersedes both general and specific revelation in revealing the nature of God, as Hebrews 1:1-3 so eloquently proclaims.) This emphasis grew out of an increasing belief that religions can only have a positive impact in a global economy if they are able to foster a spirit of *understanding* and *respect* between people of differing faith and ideologies. *Tolerance* is a weaker concept that is having its own difficulties gaining acceptance and would more accurately reflect what I was trying to create within the church at that time—a spirit of tolerance. One does not need to deny one's own theology or affirm or embrace the theology of another in order to be understanding or respectful of another's spiritual faith. The events of the early two thousands amply illustrate the point.

While this remains a difficult thought for anyone raised in the Christian faith and born before 1975, it is an absolute essential consideration for most individuals raised after that time. Exclusive, sectarian, triumphalistic thinking does not sell well in younger people who have been raised in the relativistic, post Christian West. The idea of Christ being Lord is a truth for all times; the idea of Christ being an iconoclastic destroyer of competing ideals is not an idea for this day. Now that the world is in our backyards, the new believer believes it important to be good neighbors.

The second reality that impacted my thinking was the primacy of love in the way God is understood, how individuals live their lives, and in the way ministry is understood. In the early 90's I introduced a document to the congregation through the monthly pastoral newsletter *Paraklesis* (Greek for encouragement) called the *Seven Points of Light*, which unpacked how the agape definition of love impacts personal faith and mission.

SEVEN POINTS OF LIGHT
ILLUMINATING THE GOOD NEWS

1. By nature and choice, humanity is both good and evil--a reflection of God's image marred by the innate selfishness inherited from our first parents. We possess great potential, but as a result of our choices and the choices of others, we are broken, partial and flawed.
2. God can redeem that which is broken, partial and flawed, and make us whole, complete, powerful and perfect, through the death, resurrection and example of his Son, Jesus Christ. He does this as an expression of his love--the essence of His nature and the foundation of all virtue--both as an expression of his grace and kindness and as a response to an act of our will.
3. God enters our lives in the person of the Holy Spirit,

through an act of repentance and an acceptance of Jesus Christ as Savior, to convict, encourage and indwell. Subsequently, through an informed act of complete surrender, the power of God's Spirit is released, empowering us to love in the example of Christ. Gradually and increasingly, we are transformed more into his likeness through the Fruit of the Spirit, which reflect the image of God in which we were created.

4. Christian love is discerned through empathy, as defined by the golden rule and the example of Christ. These are summarized in His commandments, "DO TO OTHERS AS YOU WOULD HAVE THEM DO TO YOU," and "LOVE ONE ANOTHER AS I HAVE LOVED YOU."
5. Christian responsibility is focused through the two Great Commandments: "LOVE GOD WITH YOUR WHOLE HEART, SOUL, MIND AND STRENGTH," and "LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF."
6. Sin is failure to love, either in what we do or in what we fail to do, in thought, word or deed. Therefore, spiritual growth is measured by Christ-like love and failure measured against it.
7. The Good News as revealed in the life, teaching, and example of Jesus Christ, is that God wants us to experience his love in Christ, and to forever dwell with him. He wants to forgive us for the many times we have failed to love, and bring healing where we have been scarred by the failures of others. In response to this gift, we are commissioned as Christ's ambassadors to live, share, and promote his love, expanding his kingdom in our own *communities and to the uttermost regions of the earth.*

To help facilitate the understanding of these points, I held a series of Wednesday Night Bible studies on the subject of *hermeneutics*, or the science of interpretation. The following is a summary of those principles:

Hermeneutics: Methods of Interpreting Scripture.

All hermeneutics have a systematic theory. These theories act as templates that are placed over Scripture in order to help understand and harmonize them.

All good theology begins with *the character of God*. In response to every assertion we hear and every belief we consider we should ask, "*If I believe this to be true, what am I saying God is like.*"

So the first critical understanding in understanding the Bible is: *what is God like?*

Hebrews 1:1-3 says God is like Jesus. Jesus is the "radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being." According to this passage, all of the previous revelations of God "through the prophets" in "various ways" were

partial. Jesus is the exact and complete revelation of the nature of God. So, when it comes to understanding God, we cannot start at the front of the Bible and work forward to determine who he is; we must start at the back of the Bible and work backwards. The earlier revelations were partial. The personal revelation in Jesus is complete.

If we accept this, we find several things. First of all, there is great contradiction between the character of Christ and the character of the Old Testament God. In fact, there is considerable conflict between the image given in the Psalms and the one found in Genesis or Exodus. For those who see all Scripture as being equally relevant, this is a huge problem. For people who see it as a gradual revealing of who God is, this is nothing more than the accurate recording of God's people's journey with God, and their interpretations of his nature along the way. For many down through the ages, the conflict between these two images of God was so profound that it caused them to reject the OT altogether (Marcion for example).

So, the second critical understanding in interpreting Scripture is: *Scripture is the written record of God's self-revelation.*

Inherent in this project of reading about God's self-revelation (or interacting with God at all for that matter) is the aspect of *who we are*. A 1st century Jew is going to read and experience this book differently than a 21st century American. An 18th century North American Aboriginal is going to experience it differently again, as would an Oriental person, an African person, or an Aborigine. Whenever human beings interact with God, the translation of the material is always going to be a blending of "who God is" with "who we are." Because of this principle, early biblical characters as well as some tribal people today can have several wives and not consider it wrong, or principles of modesty can vary from culture to culture. Romans 14 is a necessary passage of Scripture because of the problems that will result when the lives of people intersect with the Spirit of God.

So, the third critical understanding in understanding Scripture is: *What are the people like to whom this section of Scripture is being written?*

As much as we would like it to do so, the Bible does not hand down wholly completed dictums a lot of the time. Often we are peering in on the process of developing a doctrine rather than seeing the handing down of a doctrine. According to the author of Genesis, *circumcision* was to be an "everlasting covenant in your flesh that will be for *all generations*." According to James in Acts, it was just something that made it *difficult for the Gentiles who (were) turning to God*. So James decided that it was only necessary for the Gentiles to do several things: (Acts 15:19-21).

The fourth critical understanding in interpreting Scripture is this: *God is concerned about human well being.*

Jesus revised significant Old Testament doctrines at various points in his teaching. Repeatedly in the Sermon on the Mount he said, "*You have heard in*

times past...but I tell you..." Those who hold a more literal view of Scripture would have to suggest that Jesus was talking out of both sides of his mouth, because he would have been the one doing the speaking *in times past* as well as *in the moment he was presently speaking*. Jesus made the distinction because *what was said in times past* did not line up with the will and intent of God, and it *never did*. At best it was a step along the way—an inadequate blending of *where the people were then* with *how they understood* God.

When Jesus revised these beliefs, he did so using a principle: *What is good for the human being?* A better way of describing that principle would be *the principle of love (agape)*. Jesus best illustrated this principle when he was challenged for allowing his disciples to pick grain to eat on the Sabbath. He said, "*The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath,*" meaning that the Sabbath was given because God values humanity. Man was not created because God needed someone to keep a bunch of arbitrary rules. It was better for humanity that they eat the grain on the Sabbath if they were hungry, even if that meant picking it, than it was to suffer unnecessarily just to keep a rule. Look at any Old Testament principle that Jesus challenged and you will find that *love* was the principle underneath the adjustment Jesus made—the principle of promoting human well being. In Jesus' mind, things are not right or wrong because *God says so*; God says so because certain things are *harmful to the human being*. Find what is good for the human beings involved, and more often than not, you will be sitting squarely on the will and purpose of God.

Finally, and certainly not exhaustively (because this is a two page response to what could be a 500 page book): **because the Bible is a record of God's self-revelation, one must find the trends (or movement) in Scripture in order to determine God's intended direction.** For instance, slavery was never abolished in Scripture. We find it going from tacit approval of slavery, to calls for leniency, to requests to free certain individuals on the basis of being brothers (Onesimus/Philemon). However, in that *movement*, we see a *trend toward freeing* slaves. If you combine human well being with the trend towards leniency, it is easy to make the jump to the place where slavery is seen as morally wrong, though Scripture never says so. The same can be said about the role and place of women in the bible. Women begin in Scripture as chattel—property. Men could divorce them for any reason for which they were displeased, and women could do nothing about it at all. They were property, nothing more. Jesus did not challenge that social construct (that would have become the focal point of his ministry if he had, and that was not his agenda), but he did raise the dignity of women incredibly in the way he taught and behaved. Jesus included them in his following and appeared to them first after his resurrection. Paul also went from suggesting that women would be saved in *bearing children* and forbidding them to speak in public, to *commending Phoebe, a deacon in the church* at Rome. Nowhere is it said that women can be pastors, priests and teachers, but the **trend** is definitely toward complete and utter equality in all aspects, ontologically and

practically.

Again, this is just one example of how a well conceived hermeneutic unlocks the meaning of the text for our day. In order to know what is right on issues that are not addressed in Scripture, one must look at human well being and identify any trends (movement) on such issues in Scripture.

Perhaps the most significant outcome of these emphases was the introduction of a series of sermons called *New Wineskins for New Wine*. During this series I applied the aforementioned hermeneutic and tried to demonstrate how previously problematic passages could be reframed. At the same time I published an article in the Penetanguishene Journal discussing some of the concerns I was having, dated August 13, 1991 and entitled, *The Wineskins Are Bursting*:

For years now the religious community has been reacting to the decline in spiritual interest in the western world with subdued alarm. We know we should be concerned, but it is easier to have faith that God will have his way in the end than it is to do anything constructive about it. Such an attitude, with its air of confidence and grace, is a gross misapplication of the meaning of faith, and perhaps the greatest threat the church faces.

There can be no doubt that there has been a trend away from organized religion, but I find it extremely hard to believe that God is the problem. It is my observation that most people still look to God (or to spirituality in some form) to provide answers to the complex questions of human existence. The church is another issue.

Why has the church been “eating the dust” of various secular alternatives in these recent years? Obviously it has failed to remain relevant in our changing culture, which has all but exploded in its reformation from repression to reckless expression in our century. Like the Pharisees before us, we vainly hold on to what can never again be, preferring to “go down with the ship” than build a better boat.

Will we never learn that “the hand having written moves on,” or that the “toothpaste,” once liberated, will not return “to the tube?” Rather than hanging on, trying to drag this raging freight train back into an old mold, it’s high time the church began laying new tracks that will guide our culture in the celebration of the values that have long been our Judeo-Christian heritage.

The needs have not changed today. The great unknowns of life are as real as they ever were, and the answers, be they religious or scientific, continue to require the faith of the believer. But people have changed, along with their ideas and expectations, and the church must not fail to journey with them. Jesus warned that “new wine” must not be stored in “old wineskins,” because fermentation would stretch them to the point of bursting. New wine requires new wineskins that are strong, but elastic.

Probably most of us in the church are comfortable doing what we are doing, or we wouldn't be doing it; but if we are so selfish as to refuse to change one iota to better relate to our world, we deserve the cruel fate we are destined to know.

Let's open our eyes, folks! The wineskins are bursting. And God help us all if others are not soon found.

Perhaps I was a bit dramatic, and perhaps the newspaper was not the best venue for letting off some steam, but it did spark quite an interesting discussion at ministerial!

It was about that time that we decided that Covenant needed a name change. The name "brethren" did not communicate well in this context or for this time, but we wanted to keep the intent of the name *Brethren in Christ* evident in the name. Most BIC churches that were opting for a modernized name used the term *community church*, but we did not believe this communicated adequately our intent. The handle "*Christian community*" better described that the community being emphasized is the community within, as *Brethren in Christ* suggests, rather than being a church *for the community* (although we certainly wanted to be that as well). It was decided that *Covenant Christian Community Church* would be the new name, in the spirit of being relevant to our community and out of respect for the Brethren in Christ.

One other item of note was the formation of *Discovery Group* as an active Wednesday night program. For a period of time late in my tenure the normal bible study transitioned to an encounter group format. The goal of the event was to work at issues of personal healing in a supportive way. For those who came it was a meaningful and necessary emphasis. It was my feeling that spiritual growth could be hindered if emotional healing did not occur in those for whom emotional healing was required. Since it was not possible to offer focused groups on individual issues, like addiction or codependency, I designed a format where multiple issues could be addressed in a spiritual way. Eventually the Wednesday night bible study ran concurrently.

It is not easy changing paradigms. It is possible that I was too focused on the agenda for change and missed some of the signals that I was getting to move more slowly. For whatever reason, following the New Wineskins series, Debi and I began to strongly sense that our time at Covenant was coming to a close. I had seen Covenant rise from humble beginnings to a strong congregation of approximately 115. I had seen it develop meaningful programming at every level—for adults, children, and for the community. I had seen it go from a makeshift sanctuary in a school library to a fully modern and beautiful worship centre. I had had the joy and privilege of working with the most enthusiastic group of people one could ever imagine. But almost as clear as the call to begin was the call to move on to another ministry.

When I first sensed a call to the Ashland congregation in Ashland, Ohio, I resisted it thinking, "I have been called to Canada. If God wants me in Ashland, Ashland will have to call me." When the call came from Bishop Dale Shaw advising me that the Ashland congregation was checking on my availability, my heart sank. I knew what that meant. In one sense I knew it was time for me to leave the ministry to another set of

hands, but it was very difficult to let go of what had been one of the most meaningful experiences of my life. Again, a dream gave me a peek into my conflict. I was standing in an airport waiting to board a plane to some destination. Just as the boarding call was given I noticed a crying baby in a car seat left unattended. I looked around for the parents, only to realize that the baby was left entirely alone. I made the decision to stay with the baby. As I cared for the child and watched my plane leave without me, I felt a deep sadness—like I had just missed out on a great opportunity. I realized then that my conflict had more to do with my own difficulty in letting go than it did about the ability of Covenant to carry on. Covenant was not my baby anymore. It was time to move on.

My final act of pastoral responsibility was to organize the boards and committees at Covenant to function without a pastor. By the time I left it was pretty well decided that Brian Bell would be my replacement, but with a year to go before he finished his Master of Divinity at Regent Seminary, Covenant would have to function on its own without a pastor. In spite of the fact that Covenant dropped in attendance from the low 100's to the low 80's during that period, most of the individuals who were part of the church at that time would agree that it was a healthy decision to have an interim period between leaders. By the time Brian and Lori arrived, Covenant was more than ready for a new pastor.

I had no idea when I left Penetanguishene in 1993 that I would ever be a part of Covenant again. In many ways it is strange and difficult to be sitting on the other side of the platform; but I cannot deny that God has been gracious to Covenant where pastoral leadership is concerned, and that God's hand is on this congregation. Covenant has found its "new wineskin," its place in the fabric of Huronia, and has changed the face of Penetanguishene. It has gone from an annoyance to a curiosity to a powerful force in the community, meeting people where they are and walking with them into a deepened relationship with God.

In the final analysis, that is what it has always been about.

God does inspire his people to perform his will upon the earth. It has been said that all great ideas are God's ideas, and human beings are the agents through which God moves to bless the world. The how and the why of this are more difficult to establish, particularly as they relate to the inspiration process: Is it that some people are more open to hearing from God or more open to taking risks, or does God simply move as he sees fit leaving humanity to debate the particulars of the process? I can honestly say that I have no answer to that question. What I can say is, in a wonderful and remarkable way, God moved to establish a strong witness to his faithfulness in Covenant Christian Community Church.

To God, now and in the days to come, be all the glory. Great things he has done.

Glenn A. Robitaille
June 2005

Appendix One

Some Random Reflections on Life at Covenant

By Brian and Lori Bell

August 1994

Covenant was a great spot for us to begin our time of pastoral ministry after 10 years of life in the world of business. Here then are a few reflections on the nine years that followed.

Early Memories:

Random thoughts come my way as I think back. Even before we arrived in Penetang we received letters of welcome and introduction from some of the Covenant folk. The people of God at Covenant welcomed us with open arms, helped us move into our new home and were anxious to connect with their new pastor. Pastor Glenn Robitaille had concluded his time at Covenant one year earlier and so our coming was anticipated by both the congregation and by us.

I had early on decided to start my time at Covenant with a series of messages from the book of Ephesians in light of my sense that this book spoke so clearly to my passion for the church. It is always great to hear how people respond to your messages and it seems to me sermons are like our meals. We can't often remember specifically what we ate two or three weeks ago but it was essential for our life and health. In our series of moves over the last two years I have looked at the box of messages that I gave at Covenant and couldn't help but be thankful for the Lord's direction in the weekly task of preparing those talks.

The first few months I remember sensing God's presence as I learned the ropes of the pastoral ministry. I made a special effort to know people's names and to visit them in a variety of settings. I do remember being given lots of room to try some new things and to also fail in doing them. Thanks so much to all those who provided lots of room for me to experiment during those early days.

One of the significant changes that took place at Covenant fairly early on was the introduction of Community Time (CT), popularly known as Coffee Break (as much as I tried not to let it be called that). The initial trial version of Community Time was an effort to create a welcoming atmosphere for our summer guests to our services. It seemed so well received we decided to run with CT all year long and never looked back. One of my fondest memories at CT was Clare Kiss, as shy as Clare is, having an extended conversation with another person during CT – truly a community building moment.

We can't forget the first Vacation Bible School at Covenant either. Seems we had tons of creativity come forth from our people with the advent of Kids Club and even from those who didn't attend Covenant. We always prayed for new people to find their way to Covenant out of this week of ministry. There were lots of fun things that happened and the music was very cool as each year the children learned more about Jesus simply through the truths wrapped into the songs.

It was so delightful to watch as Covenant became more and more known in the community – and that we were not some weirdo group from a cult. Floats in the parades, concerts and Christmas pageants at the Museum, visits with Mayor Klug, connections at the inaugurals of town council members and lots of good word getting out and about concerning the ministry of the church.

Who can forget the campaigns at Covenant? The spirit of cooperation just continued from what had started in the early days when the building was first built. First, there was Renovate '98 with a goal of \$10,000 and then discovering that over \$14,000 was pledged. The changes helped to get us a few years out until the next wave would come. The Flavour of Freedom Campaign came along as we asked the Lord to help us clear off the mortgage in 2001 and what a great day it was when we paid off the remaining mortgage with over \$64,000 coming in. The Third Wave struck just after I completed my time with Covenant and another \$80,000 was given to help with some needed updating. What a generous response to the vision being placed before God's people. Two portable classrooms provided needed additional space to allow for more effective service.

I want to recall some of the special events that transpired in the life of the congregation but first a word about people. Our commitment to evangelism was always clear but we didn't usually do the overt kind of thing. It was much more relational and indirect. More like – “come and see what is happening” or, “look and see what is happening in my life and do you want to see what the connection is with Covenant Church?” We had many people say how much the ministry had affected them - some who came only occasionally, some who came and found their childhood faith renewed and others who came to Christ for the very first time.

Then there were the efforts to provide support for people through a variety of means, all with the intention of inviting people to follow Jesus personally more clearly, more dearly. Things like the Untangling Relationships Course which lead to Freedom Seekers. I lost about 13 lbs. with WeighDown (something I need to do again) and a whole host of small group gatherings to nurture people in the faith. The Alpha Course, Women's and Men's Bible Study and many other groups were offered.

Back to the events – here is a list that Lori and I compiled by memory alone: Dunk Tanks, Big Tent Sunday service (which the wind blew down and ripped the big top later that day), Apple Cider Days, Winter Ski Days, the Covenant Mobile, Pool Parties for

every VBS student, 40th Birthday parties for Lori and I, Huge Picnics, (remember the 100 + people at the Ens cottage when the little girl nearly floated unknowingly away in a raft), Seder Meal on Maundy Thursday, Good Friday services with All Saints Anglican and the Presbyterians, Christmas Eve services, Souper Sundays, Newcomer BBQ's, Happy Feet, Super Jail Chapels, Gift from the Heart Dinners, Verse for the Year, Penetanguishene Cooperative Nursery School, Corn Roasts at the Fosters, building cardboard houses on the church lawn, our first off-site Sunday Service at Canadian Martyrs' School, using carrier pigeons in a Christmas service (the test run failed hilariously thankfully the day before) and many more wonderful memories.

It became obvious that we were running out of seating capacity at one point in 2002 and the logical thing seemed to be to add a second service. We were so pleased with the transition to two services and they continue in 2005 with pressure mounting to consider yet a third service.

I loved the development of what we called Celebration Sundays when we attempted to have an intergenerational service every two months for all ages. Some worked well and others didn't but I would hope that children in particular will remember our efforts to include them in the worship experience.

Many, many people served in a variety of places over the nine years we were at Covenant. Special recognition goes to the Admin. Staff who worked alongside of me and learned what the pastor was really like: Marie Hamelin, Wayne Harrison, Jack Dixon, Sharon Rozitis, Joan Dusome, and Elise Robitaille. Thanks to the Church Board for being willing to take a flyer with me in allowing us to expand the staffing complement ahead of our actual growth –this made a significant difference, I believe.

It was with a clear sense of God's Spirit leading that I called Paul Kiss to consider coming up to Penetanguishene and to think about ministry opportunities at Covenant. I am so glad that the Kisses have landed at Covenant – may they know many more years of service in the community.

Elise Robitaille must receive a few comments as well. She was a delight to work with and I always said she made me a better pastor. Not only was she a very capable administrator and ministry coordinator she always asked good questions about my next crazy idea. Thanks Elise and it is such an encouragement to me to see you in your current ministry position and the growth that I see happening now.

One area that I look back on and recognize that Covenant got a great deal when they hired me was my amazing wife Lori. Lori really was used of the Lord as she planned and coordinated the worship area of our ministry time for so many years. She was so good at this that I just let her run with it virtually not worrying about this aspect at all. It was such a pleasure to see her serve us in this way. You are a great person Lor and I deeply appreciate your gifts and love for the Lord.

"We all matter to God" struck me as a good way to let anyone know that God cares. It was one of many little phrases we tried to use to connect with others. I still remember the night laying in my bed on Veil Street thinking that the words Authentic Biblical Community would really describe my vision for the ministry at Covenant. I am very honoured that this description of the ministry at Covenant is living beyond my time with you. (I just checked the website and ABC is right there!)

Some may wonder what happened in that things were going so well and we were thinking about possible expansion steps at Covenant when suddenly I am announcing my resignation in the spring of 2003 and leaving for another ministry opportunity at the Meeting House in Toronto. Looking back I believe it was the hand of the Lord preparing me for the Bishop's role. Little did I think that I would be the Canadian Conference Bishop within 12 months of leaving Covenant. One thing I did know however was that I was free to leave Covenant and that it would continue to go well without me. Somehow the Holy Spirit lead me to believe this and I am overwhelmed with God's timing since I too had thought I would be at Covenant for a long time.

Now it is really hard not to want to send all kinds of money and personnel Covenant's way from the Conference offices...(just kidding!) I feel really thankful for the opportunity to serve as Bishop and I am looking forward to many great times of connection with the people of God at Covenant.

A final word to Jessica, our beautiful daughter, who is now working her way through college. It seems like only a few days ago I saw her talking to Bob Robitaille in the foyer of the church the weekend we interviewed back in December of 1993 when Jess was only 8 years old. Lori and I saw her grow up in Penetanguishene and we have often agreed that it was a perfect spot for our daughter to grow up in. Jessica – we love you and look towards the future that God has in store for you.

So these are some reflections on our time at Covenant. Lori will add some thoughts as well and then I will try to close off these notes after her comments.

For some reason, many of my memories focus on our times of worship together. How grateful I am for Covenant's openness to try new things and to stay relevant. Highlights include the times of baptism and dedications, testimonies, new members being welcomed into fellowship, weddings, guest speakers and musicians. I loved working with Covenant's many gifted musicians, actors, artists, decorators and communicators that shared in our services. Singing "Breath of Heaven" while Mary danced was a special moment for me.

The people of Covenant truly felt like family and I hope that newcomers were welcomed with acceptance and love. Our times of prayer and worship and service and fun bound us

together. When some left it felt like a piece of the body was leaving with them. It took some years of being in the ministry for this to get easier and to become a natural part of the ebb and flow of church life.

I took on an administrative role for a while and I remember Wayne Harrison painting the office in my choice of a bright and hideous yellow. When we realized it was a big mistake, he graciously painted over it in something more neutral. As the organizer of the Hope For Life Centre's annual garage sale, I relied heavily on the church and the people of the church to carry it off. I hope you know how much I appreciated your help. The list of those that helped with VBS is endless, sewing puppets, painting murals, driving kids, emptying garbage, teaching lessons. A cleaning crew that mopped up after the basement flooded (more than once), spring clean-up gangs that washed windows, weeded gardens and ate donuts, everyone that joined in to put together Christmas nativities at the Museum and Gift From The Heart Christmas dinners. Oh, so many times of service when people gave so much of themselves and seemed to laugh and enjoy themselves while doing it. These occasions usually provided opportunities for some tension, too, but they always seemed to get worked out.

Covenant will always be a special place for us, like our first love. I am thankful for our days in Penetanguishene and I'm thankful for my pastor, Brian, who was (and is) so creative and fun and wise. I think he led well and as at Covenant, I continue to learn a lot from him. Thank you for caring for him as you did. Thank you, too, for caring for Jessica all those years. Watching her perform with the children and youth in drama and music are cherished memories. Finally, thank you for the many ways you cared for me. When I was flat on my back with Sciatica, your generosity helped us through. There were so many words of support and love throughout our nine years - I have a file of notes and cards written to encourage us. God bless you and keep you in the next 25 years of your ministry through Covenant Christian Community Church. Brian concludes with the following thought.

Might there be room for a “*Verse for 25 Years*” in the historical records from a former pastor? Well consider these words from the Word of God, Isaiah 41:10:

***So do not fear, for I am with you;
Do not be dismayed, for I am your God.
I will strengthen you and help you;
I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.***

Be Bold, Be Strong for the Lord is with you Covenant!

Blessings

Brian, Lori and Jessica Bell

In April 2000 Claire and I were at our home in London, ON wondering what we were going to do next. We were finished our ministry at the church in London and we were in rough shape. We had no idea that within 6 weeks I would already be working in the Penetang area with our move to follow at the end of May. From mid April until our move, things were a whirlwind and this perhaps best describes our introduction to Covenant and the Huronia region.

Early in April, Brian Bell called me with a proposal to come to Penetang and since we weren't clear on anything else we pursued that option. The one thing that we really appreciated about the offer from Covenant to come and do ministry was the desire to care for us. Claire and I had a difficult pastorate during our twenty months in London and had also suffered the trauma of losing Claire's sister and her husband along with their two boys in a car accident. Moving to Penetang would allow me time to continue doing ministry, though not full time, (which was very healing for me) and also allow Claire to be within forty-five minutes of her family (which was very healing for her). God had led us to Covenant but we could not have pointed out "why" at the time. We simply trusted Him and went where we thought conditions would be best for us. We would know "why" in a very short time.

The very day that I had come up to begin looking for work and dropping off resumes I saw God providing. I had dropped off a resume at Optimum Furniture in Elmvale and received a phone call to meet the owners that same day. The next day I drove to Elmvale and before I could comprehend what was happening I was already working for them that afternoon. God had provided a job for me and that furniture store would become a tremendous blessing to me, my family and the church over the next 3 years.

Our first year at Covenant consisted mostly of working at Optimum and attending church on Sundays. Brian's offer to come to Penetang was with the hopes that we would start some youth ministry on a voluntary basis and that somehow it could become a part-time position. He and I began meeting on Wednesday mornings to pray. Our first year was a time of healing for us and getting a feel for the church and the area. We were beginning to "fall in love" with the people and the area.

Within a short time we had begun a ministry to Jr High students and resurrected the name "Rockade." I have no idea where that name came from originally but we used it. Our youth had something, (even if the name was a bit uncool). I was still doing ministry, Claire was spending a lot of time with her family and the church was working hard to care for us. It was a good year.

Somewhere in the course of that year a friend of Covenant was impressed to donate some money to the church. Brian and I had been scheming how I could start doing ministry part-time, maybe one day per week to begin and move from there. I

should mention that the furniture store was being very gracious to me in my time, with the understanding that I would likely leave to do ministry again at some point. Back to the friend of Covenant. This friend offered the church a small gift to help with the youth ministry. A small gift of \$35,000 to go towards hiring a part-time youth pastor. God once again was at work. By the end of the year, almost to the day that we moved up to Penetang from London, I began working at the church three days per week. Even more of a blessing is the fact that the furniture store allowed me to continue working for them two days a week. I didn't have to quit there and go looking for other work. Coincidence or God's answer to our prayers?

With the advent of my beginning work three days per week, I used the summer to plan a strategy for youth ministry and meet with as many youth and other people as I possibly could. That fall a ministry to Jr High and Sr High students began which we called The Gathering. I have since come to the conclusion that the best name for a youth ministry is Sr High and Jr High because that is usually how students refer to the ministry anyway. The Gathering began as an experimental process of figuring out how best to do ministry among students in this area. It would not take long to develop it into a Wednesday night meeting that happened twice a month. Before long, with some great volunteer staff, hard work, a lot of prayers and creativity we were averaging 40 or more students regularly.

After my second year of ministry with the youth, I explored the possibility of serving at the High School, P.S.S., on a more involved basis. I had already been coaching Jr Boys Volleyball and hanging around at lunch times. Once again God provided. In September of 2002 I had raised enough support from the community and a few other people to spend 8 hours per week at PSS. I was now three days at the church, one day at PSS and Optimum Furniture was even more gracious to allow me to work there only one day per week. Throughout our time of living in Penetang, Yvette and Rejean (Rejean died of cancer in 2003) Caron, who owned the store, were extremely gracious and generous to Claire and I. God used them to be a blessing to us. Thanks Yvette and Rejean. My time at PSS was very successful because I was able to influence students. I did not go there to proselytize them. I went to serve and am so glad that I had the opportunity to do so. Over time the staff became more accepting of my presence to the point that I now play hockey with them on Fridays.

Year two had gone by quickly. Near the end of my second year at Covenant, the church had grown quite a bit and began two services. We also were very deep into discussions about a plan for growth and building. God was continuing to weave together the lives of the Kiss family with the story of Covenant Church. I am still amazed even while I write this paragraph at how He can orchestrate and choreograph events and people into the pages of his story for us all. In the winter of 2003 we were preparing for a move to expand the building and ministry of Covenant. It was at this point that the leadership realized that we were not ready to act yet because of various issues. A short

while later we received the surprising news that Brian was resigning to move on to ministry with the Meeting House in Oakville. God was at work, writing his story for us and we? were all trying to figure out what the next chapter would be.

Like many of the people, I was upset. I didn't need that kind of uncertainty in my life and I made sure Brian knew about it. (Thanks for being understanding Brian). The Sunday after Brian resigned I spoke to the church and really sensed that God would lead us and provide. At that point I really wasn't sure that he would do it with me. Over the coming weeks I would spend a lot of time speaking with the Lord about this situation. I wasn't very comfortable with the idea of another Sr Pastor coming in and deciding if they could work with me. On the other hand, was I ready to lead this church. Thoughts of London kept coming back to haunt me. That work hadn't gone so well. What made me think that this would be any different? I would characterize the weeks between Brian's resigning and my decision to apply for the position of Sr Pastor as an intense spiritual struggle for Claire and I. It was also a rollercoaster ride of emotions.

That June Claire and I interviewed with the Church Board and Darrell Winger, as Bishop, and once again placed our ministry in God's hands. I remember speaking with God one day and simply saying, "whatever." "Whatever happens, happens. I can only trust you." It had helped that I could reflect back on how we came to Covenant and all the things that had happened since. I had peace with God about our future here at the church. He had led us from an extremely difficult period in our lives to a place of comfort, caring and authentic love for one another and God. We were not prepared to consider any other fact than we knew that we loved being here and didn't have leaving as an option.

For some strange reason the board and Bishop Winger decided that I should be the next Sr Pastor of Covenant and it was announced on Sunday, June, ?. I still remember how emotional it was for me to hear so many of you applaud the decision. For one of those rare moments, I didn't know what to say. I was shocked at this fact as were likely many of you. I began working full-time at the church that July and my new role as Lead Pastor would begin officially in September of that year. 2003. A new chapter would begin. Under Glenn's leadership the church has prospered to the point that Glenn led them through a building campaign on the current site. Under Brian's leadership the church continued to grow with an increase in attendance and the addition of staff people such as Elise and myself. I wondered what, if anything, God would do with me. I am still not sure what the answer to that question is.

For the last two years, almost, I have had the privilege of leading this church as its pastor and things have not been inactive. In January, following my hiring, we hired Elise Robitaille full-time as our Administrative Pastor. I think this was another great move because of her gifting and how they augment mine. It has been a great opportunity to

have so many wonderful gifted people to work with - staff people like Jamie and Elise and many others in the church who seem to spend a lot of time serving.

With Elise's hiring it meant that we still needed to fill the role of Youth Pastor. This would prove to be much more challenging simply because you don't get people beating down your door for a job that is only for 14 hours per week. We interviewed a few people and ended up choosing to hire Jamie Weber to begin ministry in May of 2004. Jamie and Paige and their boys had been attending Covenant for about a year at that point. Jamie has had the fun ride of doing Youth Ministry on a professional level for the first time though he has been involved in Youth Ministry in some degree for many years.

In the two years that I have had the privilege of pastoring this church, we have continued to grow in attendance and in maturity. October of 2003 became a launching pad for our current House Churches. Up to that point there was no real effective means of gathering people together apart from Sunday. When we launched the groups we had 14 initially. That number has settled at 12 official groups, with some unofficial groups also meeting. I think that the House Church movement which has begun at Covenant is going to be a very powerful tool for ministry in the coming years.

As I reflect back on the past five years of my time at Covenant I see repeatedly the hand of God at work. I see his provision and his skill at taking the lives of our family and penning them into the amazing saga of Covenant Christian Community Church. I have had the privilege of seeing people come to Christ, seeing other mature in their faith, doing weddings, funerals, baptisms, and many other special events. The church has grown and we have fallen in love with all of you. And as I consider the past 25 years, of which I have had only a few to enjoy, I must confess that Psalm 115:1 rings loud and true for me. "Not to us. Not to us, O Lord, but to your Name be the glory because of your love and faithfulness."

Paul Kiss