

History moment #7

St Paul fellowship: Phoenix from the ashes

A song has been stuck in my head for a couple of weeks now, that old gospel song: “I love to tell the story”; it just won’t let me go! I do love to tell the stories. But I also have an anxiety every time I write one of these; that obligation to “get it right”: to tell the authentic story which is true and fair to those who actually lived it, not to just tell the story that is neat and tidy and that I would like to be true. So it is again with some trepidation that I approach today’s story of the St Paul Mennonite Fellowship: our sister congregation, the only church plant of Faith Mennonite church.

Years ago, Helen O’Brien (then Helen Wells Quintela) preached a memorable sermon here at Faith about the phoenix of her new home rising from the ashes. The story of the St Paul Mennonite Fellowship can similarly be told as the story of the phoenix: hope continually raising her head through adversity.

St. Paul’s west side is a racially diverse neighborhood with a history of attracting immigrants and refugees, from eastern European Jews a century ago to Somali Muslims today. A traditionally vibrant Latino community, in the early 1980’s, the influx of Central American refugees fueled racial tensions brewing in the community. Faith Mennonite members Helen and Alberto Quintela, a young professional couple, relocated to this neighborhood in 1980. There, they became subject to racist violence and harassment targeting them as an interracial couple. They invited Faith Mennonite to join them in their home for prayer services and then round-the-clock vigils as the hostility escalated. In the summer of 1981, this culminated in a frightening night when arsonists burned their garage to the ground.

Alberto and Helen were committed, however, to bringing the distinctly Mennonite view of the gospel of peacemaking and justice into this neighborhood in violent strife. Northern District conference funded a mission worker Apolinar Nava who gave leadership to a liberation theology-style of bible study on Wednesday nights at the Neighborhood house, a community center. Justice moments were broadcast in Spanish over the local Hispanic radio station

Apolinar left after experiencing his first brutal winter. Helen Quintela, her second son a newborn, had recently left her teaching job. Alberto encouraged her to give thought to leadership of the developing congregation.

She writes,

“Like Sarah, when she heard the angel say that she would bear a son in her old age, I almost laughed aloud. But something stopped the laughter even as it bubbled up. As I gazed at Alberto’s face, I knew how much this witness meant to him. I decided that I would consider the position, if only for the hope it gave to him.”

And so, with Helen as the leader, in the summer of 1984 the St Paul Mennonite fellowship was officially born. They worked with an advisory committee from Faith Mennonite including pastor Myron Schrag, and invited those who had come to the bible study to participate in the newly organized fellowship. On August 14, they prepared for their first official fellowship meeting, in the Quintela’s home. Three people were present, Helen, Alberto, and Terry Gerber. They prayed that God would make this little group of three into a viable witness on the St. Paul’s west side. Days later, a more encouraging 50 showed up for a potluck to kick off the start of the fellowship. Faith Mennonite members helped in door knocking to invite neighbors. A number of Faith Mennonite members, among them Karen Wiebe of our congregation, became part of a core group of eight.

Not long after, in the winter of 1988, at Canada’s Conrad Grebel College, a group of 8 graduating seniors were looking for a unique opportunity: to find a host congregation which would support them in starting a new Voluntary Service unit—together. They sought out two possibilities: Washington, DC and St. Paul. Ultimately, the DC arrangements fell through and with only a few weeks notice, St. Paul was asked whether they could host the new unit. SPMF scrambled to find housing and work placements in the west side. Their presence nearly doubled the young congregation. But with them also came deepening ties and commitment to the needs of the neighborhood, with volunteers serving in programs serving the needs of immigrants, battered women, the poor, and others.

On September 11, 1988, SPMF gathered with Faith Mennonite for an official commissioning as an independent sister congregation, and began Sunday worship services. Helen completed studies at United Theological seminary and on February 26, 1989 was ordained at Faith Mennonite Church.

Under Helen's leadership, the community grew as a body with an emphasis on hospitality and welcome. They started a summer vacation Bible school which attracted a number of local Hispanic families. Nine of these children and their parents became a regular part of the St. Paul Mennonite family. They were hosts for Israel Molina, a political refugee from El Salvador who arrived here on the overground railroad. Peace and justice continued to be at the center of the mission of the fellowship, which led the community to actively support and receive the gifts of women called to ministry and to publicly work for the inclusion of LGBT people in the Mennonite church. In the early 90's the church went through a stormy time of discernment, and a number of people left over this and other issues.

As a direct result of SPMF welcoming stance, the Mennonite conferences chose to stop funding the fellowship as a church plant. The SPMF response illustrates their theme of resilience response to bad news: they dressed up and held a "prom" celebration of their "graduation" from conference support. Two direct fallouts from this decision were: financial hardship, and that the VS unit was no longer going to be supported. Faith Mennonite was brought back in as a co-sponsor of the MCC unit.

Within a year, they found themselves hurting again. Six year old Mark, a beloved child of the community, was diagnosed with a brain tumor. Those who had watched him overcome the odds as a 26-week preemie and had witnessed him thrive in life despite his cerebral palsy, now accompanied him through illness and death. Mark's evident joy in spite of adversity continues to be a guiding light for the SPMF community.

In 1997, Helen left for a sabbatical to pursue chaplaincy. Lisa Pierce, an SPMF member and licensed pastor in the church of the brethren, provided leadership through this time of discernment and transition into a new model of lay leadership. This continues to function well for them 13 years later.

Over the years, the fellowship's role in central plans conference has deteriorated from a beloved conference mission site to a lightning rod for conflict over the politics of sexuality and gender in the Mennonite church. For over 5 years, SPMF has been a provisional nonvoting member of Central Plains. This year they have sought a new relationship within the Central District Conference, and expect to finalize that membership next year.

SPMF has been in existence for 27 years. In that span of time, hundreds of people have made it their church home. Many of these also have counted Faith congregation as home. At certain times we have each been a place of refuge for those leaving the other.

I confess that I am conflicted about SPMF' decision to leave Central Plains —although happy for the fellowship that they are finding a more supportive home within a different conference, we have lost our most logical ally within the Central Plains. But unfortunately, the relationship with Faith Mennonite has been somewhat rocky through the years. Although FMC went through our own time of discernment, vote, and church split over LGBT welcoming in 1995, solidarity between the two congregations has never been as natural as we might have hoped. Discussion of these factors is outside the scope of my words today (although I have my list!).

To close: May we continue to seek ways to see each other as sisters: separate but joined by the history of a joyful birthing 27 years ago; still joined as sister congregations with a similar missions within our respective cities. It is my hope that we find ways to forge our bonds, and to joyfully support the St Paul Fellowship in their new venture: in their words, as they “reach toward a fresh start. We are full of prayers and hope.”

The phoenix rises.