

Flight from Fear, Pathway to a New Song

by

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In early March, 2005 I had surgery to remove my thyroid. In the process not only was my parathyroid inadvertently removed, my vocal cords were traumatized. As a result I could not speak above a whisper. I could not sing. This was especially difficult since I love to sing Sunday morning hymns, contemporary or traditional. As time passed and I did not recover quickly, I was emotionally and spiritually unsettled when my doctor said I may never sing again. I was afraid. So I prayed and God blessed me with a creative answer to my dilemma. Whistle! So I began whistling the hymns during Sunday morning worship services. I was delighted to find a unique way to offer up my praise.

It was ironic that the theme of the Lilly Endowment Inc.'s Clergy Renewal Grant was “What Will Make Your Heart Sing?” What would make my heart sing? I asked

myself. It came quickly. A new, unique journey with God. I desperately needed to replenish my faith, renew my soul, reconsider my fears, and rebuild my trust in God, in the church and in myself. I began to think about ways in which not only my heart could sing a new song to God but the church could sing a new song as well.

Bethel United Methodist Church in Indianapolis, Indiana, the church I had had the privilege of serving for five years at the time in 2005, was having its own trouble singing a new song. I was appointed as the first female senior pastor in 164 years. I followed a pastor who had served for ten years. There were those who felt he had been unfairly moved so the waters were troubled when I walked in the door.

In addition, Bethel was located in the most culturally diverse township in the state of Indiana. One report stated that 47 different languages were being spoken in our geographic area. With so much diversity we were unable to clearly define our primary population with whom we could minister. We felt we had a responsibility to all in our community, not just some.

Also the population growth had flat lined. Many families, including at least fifteen of our own, had moved west. While we were doing business as usual the people of our township were not.

With an old church building situated on a curve across from a cemetery on a road no one traveled unless they were on their way somewhere else, we were invisible except for the fact that our nursery school had been in existence for nearly 50 years. Although our school was a first-rate program, changes in our geographic population meant that most families needed all day childcare, not a two to four hour Nursery School. And so we experienced a steady decline during the last 15 of those years.

The collapse of a plan to build a Family Life Center, new classrooms, and other facilities caused disappointment and mistrust. With an aging congregation, the birthing of two very large non-denominational African American churches in our area, the closing of five mainline churches and the advent of new apartment complexes being built and many first-time buyer homes, it was difficult to draw families to our church.

The handwriting was on the wall. We needed to make necessary changes soon or the church would falter and die.

Change was inevitable. Clearly, we were stuck not knowing which direction to take. With so many dramatic changes happening in our nation since 9/11, the thought of change in our church was frightening to many. Events in the world, in our nation, in our community and in our church joined together to create a spirit of fear leading to intense conflict in our community of faith for three long years. Old wounds were reopened. Lines were drawn. Members fled. We went through a very rough time. There were losses and hard feelings. It felt as if an angry, threatening gray cloud had taken up permanent residence in our church.

But then with some courageous member leadership, three caring experts who aided us in our helplessness and a divine word that literally came in the night, we shifted our focus. We wanted to begin reporting what was good among us, not what was wrong with us. We recruited an enthusiastic member to access good news. Calling herself Ms. Good News, every Sunday morning she stood in the narthex before, between and after the worship services awaiting persons to share good news with her. She penned the valuable information and reported it in the weekly bulletin and monthly newsletter. Valid good news was anything we could celebrate such as an answer to prayer, the birth of a new baby, an award at school, a new job, a healing, first-time visitors to our worship services, a successful mission project, growth in the choir, new members, anything we could celebrate together.

After weeks and months of sharing, the tide began to change. We slowly began to rebuild trust, to initiate friendships, and to care for one another. We laid down our weapons and started trusting God to help us regain a sense of community. We started cautiously moving forward. It was about 18 months later that we decided to apply for a Lilly Clergy Renewal Grant. Perhaps, we thought, we could find our own song to sing after all.

As I considered my own exhausting journey over the past five years and that of the church, I drew in visionary people to help give shape to a renewal proposal, a grand opportunity to renew, restore and revitalize us for creative ministry. We knew we needed the refreshment of the Holy Spirit to sustain our fledgling hope, to diminish our paralyzing fears, to give us new direction and to provide us with the ability to learn and sing a new song.

The purpose of the 14-week renewal program entitled, A Journey with God, was four-fold:

- 1) experience personal and spiritual renewal,
- 2) strengthen relationships with God and others,
- 3) undergo inner healing, and,
- 4) discover God and learn ways to communicate Christ’s love through diverse experiences and cultures.

Since our envisioning committee understood the importance of the pastor and congregation journeying together while apart, activities were planned with that in mind. On selected Sundays during the renewal as I experienced four diverse cultural worship experiences in New Mexico, France, Italy and Ghana, at Bethel, diverse pastors preached and cultural music was sung by the congregation. When I worshipped in a Hispanic congregation in New Mexico, a Hispanic preacher gave the morning message and the Bethel congregation sang all Spanish music. As I searched for God with my husband in a retreat experience in

Assisi, Italy, a couples retreat was held for spouses to journey with God in faith together.

As I wrote a daily letter to God on my renewal blog site: ajourneywithgod.blogspot.com outlining my spiritual insights and illuminations, interested church participants read along and joined in a weekly Journey with God class led by two lay women in the congregation. The class shared their own inspirations with each other and engaged in similar activities. For example, as I walked the labyrinth in Chartres, France, they set up and walked a temporary labyrinth in our Upper Room and later shared their own reflections in class. While I served as a volunteer chaplain in a bush hospital in West Africa, the class watched a video on the AIDs mission work in Africa and then took up an offering to help in the effort.

Upon my return and nearly a year later we held a three-day Future Search Conference underwritten by renewal funds. Attended by more than 50 members of the congregation, an experienced national leader provided a comprehensive demographic study of our geographic area and led us to consider the needs of our community, to look at needed changes in our focus, to adopt new goals and to march forward with new joy and resolve. We were ready for action. Every event and activity was planned with our five goals in mind.

A new excitement and enthusiasm stirred within the congregation. Our good news increased as we discovered God more and more through our sharing and caring, our worship, programs, outreach, service and mission. Our fears were fading replaced by an indomitable faith in Christ, in the church and in each other. We had discovered our song and we were singing it to God, to one another and to our neighbors.

While our adults were joyfully singing, we began to teach our children to sing. One bold move we made was to jettison our long established children and youth Sunday School program where attendance had been on the decline for more than two decades. We hired a devoted, talented former elementary school teacher, a member of the congregation, to write a new curriculum entitled “Catch the Spirit,” a hands-on weekly journey with God introducing students to biblical characters with first-person storytelling, a question and answer period, crafts, activities and music. The Catch the Spirit Director and I created themes using the same scripture, sometimes six weeks long, three weeks or a whole summer, which connected the worship experience and our Catch the Spirit program making it possible for parents and children to share insights learned together.

When the summer theme consisted of Fruits of the Spirit, each Sunday morning as I preached on a selected fruit the children explored the same fruit in Catch the Spirit. To further bring the point home, while the numerous adult volunteers were tending to the garden of our children’s souls, our kids were planting a vegetable

garden, pulling weeds, watering and harvesting the vegetables. It was thrilling to have our children happily singing in the church’s outdoor garden.

While more and more of us were singing by catching the spirit as we journeyed with God together, the children were helping create a new song for families in need. One Sunday they decided to sell their produce after the worship services. As their earnings continued to increase each Sunday, they voted to give their total amount in the fall to a local mission meal program in downtown Indianapolis which our church had supported for a number of years. By the end of the first year of Catch the Spirit, more than 50 adults had volunteered one or more times in the program and our kids participation was growing. Needless to say people inside and outside our church were singing our song. As a congregation we were singing God’s song together.

I will never forget the day I learned to sing my own song. My covenant group had joined me on my renewal journey to France as we looked for God among the saints such as St. Bernadette in Lourdes and St. Terese in Lisieux.

While we were in Taize, France, a diverse peace and reconciliation community of world people gathered together for common worship, work, study and reflection, I decided to live in silence except for worship. I ambled alone down the winding road and came upon a small cemetery where many Taize brothers had been buried. Brother Roger, founder of the Taize community, had been murdered in the sanctuary just three weeks before by a deranged woman. I sat by his fresh grave and wept, giving thanks to God for his life.

It was during the Nazi occupation when Brother Roger was inspired by God’s Spirit to move beyond fear to hide Jewish families. His courageous act saved the lives of hundreds of Jews. Following that tragic period in our history he discerned the need for a place where people from all over the world could come together to make for peace and reconciliation. Out of that calling he created the Taize community where all peoples were welcome to gather, learn, respect, share and love one another in an accepting community of faith.

As I was flooded with my own fears I thought of Brother Roger and how his faith had conquered fear making a dramatic witness in the world for more than 70 years. I thought of all the fear in the world and even the fear lingering in our church. I remembered how faith had helped me overcome breast cancer and broken family relationships. I reflected upon the way that faith had restored Good News to our community of faith.

While my tears continued to flow, I had a sudden urge to enter the tiny chapel adjacent to the cemetery. I sat down in one of the wooden pews and quietly listened for God’s voice. As I gazed upon the light beaming through the stained glass window, I felt an incredible loving presence as I considered the many gifts

of the Almighty. Faith welled up within me and I was led to pray. With tears staining my face, I stood, and moved to the center of the small sacred space. There I opened my mouth and began to sing my love song to God.

**“O Lord my God, When I in awesome wonder,
Consider all the worlds Thy Hands have made;
I see the stars; I hear the rolling thunder,
Thy power throughout the universe displayed.**

**Then sings my soul, My Savior God, to Thee.
How great Thou art, How great Thou art.
Then sings my soul, My Savior God, to Thee.
How great Thou art, How great Thou art!”**

How many times across the years had I sung this magnificent hymn of faith, “How Great Thou Art?” More importantly, how many thousand times had the church sung it? Penned in 1886 by Swedish pastor Rev. Carl G Boberg following his experience of a sudden thunderstorm, in my mind it was the perfect song I had longed to sing once again. Not only was my voice strong, I sang my heart’s song with no crackles or breaks in my voice. At long last my own song of faith had returned.

In a number of ways fear had distracted our congregation and me away from our song. We had allowed our changing environment to dissuade us from the Source that fed and nourished us. We were blinded by our problems and our inability to resolve them easily. We moved to judgment and blame rather than address our common fears. It was only when we turned back to the real source of our faith and acknowledged the good news of Christ that we were able to unite, celebrate, change and move forward to assist our community with their very real fears.

What was the congregation afraid of? Perhaps they were afraid that change would rock their faith or in some way exclude them from the community of faith. Maybe they were fearful of losing the only perceived control in their ever-changing lives. I know they were frightened of losing the value of their past and what that would mean for our future. I am sure they were scared that someone would notice their vulnerability and take advantage of it. Perchance their greatest fear was that the church would cease to exist leaving them with little meaning in their lives.

What was I afraid of? Honestly, I was afraid of being inadequate for the challenging tasks. I feared failure, letting the congregation down, hurting the church. At a deeper level I feared letting God down and not having enough faith, trust, energy and skills to do the ministry I was called to do by rallying the people in faith, leading and assisting them in their fears, challenging them to trust in God and modeling courage for the days, weeks and months ahead.

The truth is fear nearly killed our church. It certainly robbed us of our joy. As I look back upon those early days, I realize that fear was/is the great enemy of faith. Fear can steal our vision, our power, our strength, our courage, our resolve and most of all, our peace. Fear, we discovered at Bethel, can nearly destroy our song.

Our nation is full of fear. Fear of scarcity. Fear of loss. Fear of abandonment. Fear of rejection. Fear of failure. Fear of change. Fear of death. The ways in which we handle our fear is as frightening as fear itself. Addictions. Abuse. Violence. War. The list is long.

9/11 serves to remind us that life is very, very fragile. And if we are not equipped to deal with things that terrorize us then fear will take a permanent hold on our being and its tentacles will squeeze the life right out of us.

When St. Paul stood in the midst of his fear and said, “I can do all things through Christ which strengthens me,” (Philippians 4:13 KJV) he was not only speaking out of faith, he was singing God’s song. As our community of faith began to tread the slippery slope of change like St. Paul in his world, we found God peeking out at us. In the faint distance we heard the saints of old singing God’s song. We recognized God’s love for us and God’s desire to renew, restore and revitalize us. We commenced to trust again and to draw strength from one another. We discovered new ways to worship, to study, to reflect, to share and to serve.

What Bethel United Methodist Church and I learned during our renewal is that we needed to let fear move us to faith again instead of getting stuck in our fear. We needed to treat fear as an invitation of God to move beyond where we were to where God wanted us to be. We needed to climb out of our self-made boxes in order to seek a fresh perspective of God. Like looking for the great pearl, as we trusted God and each other more, we stretched beyond our own comfort zone of familiar beliefs, adopted faith practices and predictable ways of doing things so we could catch a much greater glimpse of God’s greatness, power and strength. We came to understand that there was more to God, to the church and to ministry than what we knew and practiced.

We began to anticipate the revealing of God’s presence daily in our personal lives and in our corporate life together. In experiencing the fullness of God’s gracious mercy for us in our changing time, we stepped out, grew our faith, expanded our ministry and touched lives anew.

What I personally learned in my own journey of faith was that I too was desperate for a fresh life-giving experience of faith. Just as our Roman Catholic friends believe that the Eucharist is the real presence of God, during my renewal I went

on a hunt for that same sacred treasure. In my heart of hearts I knew there was more to God than we were experiencing in the life of the church. I knew that God had more to say and to reveal to us.

And so every day for three and a half months of renewal time, like Sherlock Holmes with a magnifying glass, I looked through the lens to find God’s real presence. And that’s what I wrote about in my intimate daily letter to God. In hotel lobbies, bars and coffee houses, Internet cafes, dusty basements and office space, libraries, monasteries and in my 200 year-old home, I simply wrote how and where I had found signs of God’s living presence. I wrote my prayers of gratitude and thanksgiving. When the renewal leave concluded, I continued to write for a year. When someone asked when I planned to stop writing because I would eventually run out of things to say, I told him that my search was leading me to great gems of faith. At the end of that first year I created a new blog entitled, ajourneywithgodcontinued.blogspot.com. In late October 2009 I will pen my 1500th letter to God continuing to reveal the wonders of God who wants us to move beyond our fears to faith that will help us move mountains.

As pastors and teachers we need to talk openly and honestly about fear. With faith we need to help allay the fears of our people even as we tackle our own. If not, we will soon be caught up in mind-numbing fear which can lead to anxiety, negativity, blame, judgment, paralysis and more fear. The more we hide our fears, the more they will creep up, rob and steal.

Several years ago when I talked with a physician friend, he shared that 70% of his patients visited him with anxiety/fear related illnesses. As a church we need to create safe, loving environments wherein we can share our fears, personal or otherwise. In so doing we will remove the sting of fear and celebrate the realization that we are not alone in our life pursuits. We are together with God. As we tackle our problems and the fears associated with them, we will strengthen our faith and our church. We will create steely spines of faith that will raise up the moment a problem or fear arises. As we recognize fear for what it is and not the giant monster we believe it to be lurking in our minds, together we can grab hold of faith much like David took hold of a slingshot and a few pebbles and went out to slay Goliath. Focusing on faith can lead us to hope, confidence, courage, strength and power.

Today, Bethel United Methodist Church enjoys a rich fellowship together. Dedicated to growing faith, ministry and mission, we are not afraid to try new ideas. We laugh easily together and cry in each other’s sorrow. With a commitment to diversity we have hired a Brazilian jazz musician as the director of music. As a teaching congregation in partnership with Christian Theological Seminary, we have enjoyed the benefits of student pastors from India and Puerto Rico. Our mission outreach support has more than tripled in the last three years helping us to underwrite thousands of dollars of financial support for three

church members to participate in a mission trip to Peru and more than 20 youth and adults for mission projects in Colorado and Virginia. These would have been impossible before the renewal. Catch the Spirit is in its third year with many regular adult volunteers. Plans are in the works this fall for a capital funds campaign to build the Family Life Center. And after five years our own Ms. Good News continues to report good news.

When we began our renewal on September 5, 2005, we did not know what God would reveal to us. Our fears were still present; our church was fragile, our hope shaky. All we could do was trust and pray as we stepped onto a moving path that we believed would lead us to God.

On Sunday, November 13, 2005, we traveled over pitted dirt roads from our small village of Ankaase, Ghana, to the large city of Kumasi where my clergy husband had been invited to preach at Wesley Cathedral. As we pulled up out front, our driver pointed to the prison next to the church. I thought of how our church and I had been imprisoned by fear and I wondered for the first time how our church was faring in their renewal.

All during my own personal renewal time I had avoided participating in a United Methodist Church because I was committed to experiencing God in refreshing new ways. But on this Sunday we had returned to our beloved Methodist community in West Africa. I prayed for my own community of faith back home and I asked God for a sign, a bridge to be built as we began to prepare for a reunion during Advent and a movement of Spirit in ministry together.

As we were escorted into worship and seated in red velvet chairs looking out over the congregation, I was overwhelmed with a deep sense of awe at the amazing work of God. When the congregation stood to sing, I thought about the prisoners next door whose windows were open. Like a dry, weary congregation in Indianapolis, Indiana, USA, they too were hungry for a fresh word of God. And then the English-speaking liturgist announced the first hymn, page 607 of the Methodist Hymn Book with Offices and we began to sing.

**“O God of Bethel, by whose hand
Thy people still are fed;
Who through this weary pilgrimage
Hast all our fathers led.**

**Our vows, our prayers, we now present
Before Thy throne of grace;
God of our fathers, be the God
Of their succeeding race.**

Through each perplexing path of life

**Our wandering footsteps guide,
Give us each day our daily bread,
And raiment fit provide.**

**O spread Thy covering wings around,
Till all our wanderings cease.
And at our Father’s loved abode
Our souls arrive in peace.**

**Such blessings from Thy gracious hand
Our humble prayers implore;
And thou shalt be our chosen God
And portion evermore.**