

## A Tale of Two Churches

On a cold Sunday in February 1955, a new congregation gathered in an elementary school. It was the first official worship service as the Congregational Christian Church of Fairfax County, Virginia. During the previous year, worshipers had been meeting in homes, engaging in Bible study, prayer, and discernment. How would they be church? What would be their mission?

After several meetings, one woman began to speak: I want a church that includes anyone who wants to walk in the way of Jesus. I do not want to belong to any church that perpetuates segregation. Others echoed her conviction. The mission of the new church had become clear.

There was just one problem. What they proposed – a worship service in which blacks and whites could sit together in school property—that was illegal in Virginia. Their gathering that February was less than a year after *Brown v. Board*. Separate but equal educational facilities were now unconstitutional. But in Virginia, the General Assembly began a movement called Massive Resistance. Leaders wrote laws designed to defy the Supreme Court’s ruling.

By the end of 1955, the new church in Virginia had voted to work to defeat those laws. But, the laws were passed. Massive Resistance lasted until 1959. One county closed all schools for five years. White students enrolled in expensive private academies. Most black students had to stay home.

That was the atmosphere in which the new church persisted. There were obstacles and threats. The Sheriff tried to close down one worship service that included honored guests from black churches. Finally, in 1959, the church bought land, built a sanctuary, and opened its building. Now we’re known as Little River UCC. This is where I worship these days.

That purchase of land was a prophetic action, a belief in God’s future. Hope that instead of the segregated order, a new society might take its place. An action of profound hope. We could say they had listened to Jeremiah: “Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.” There shall be a harvest of the kind of community God has planted in our hearts.

But here’s the thing: From 1955 until about 1970, we didn’t have any black members. We did have constant advocacy for change, constant invitations to black guest preachers, and constant bridge-building. Now, because of that risk-taking, African-Americans people from other ethnic groups, and LGBT folks are active members.

Today we are deeply concerned, as I’m sure you are, about the racism being played out in our country. So Little River is now focusing on the school to prison pipeline, and how we might advocate for changes around that issue.

But we also have other work to do. Our community needs to deepen. Our membership is diverse, but we're still mostly Northern European. We are learning how to speak honestly with each other. Learning how to go beyond "passing the peace," on Sunday morning. Our prophetic actions need rooting in deep community. A community of those who listen and learn what it's like to be a brown person among mostly Northern European members.

Now ... those who witnessed Jeremiah's action must have wondered. Why was the silver weighed so carefully? Why bother with every legal requirement: two copies of the deed? Witnesses? Why make sure the scrolls would be preserved? What fool buys land when the city will be overrun? What idiot places hope in a future when the whole society is about to crumble?

What church declares its goal to be integrated, when Senator Byrd, the Governor, and the General Assembly all work for segregation?

In another time, in a different place, here in Morningside, this church also declared its hope in the future by purchasing some land. There was excitement about the new community outside of Minneapolis. But in the distance, there was the conflict which led to WWI, and came here to rest in young men who died, and in the first Red Scare. Not everything was wonderful.

Edina-Morningside church had also begun in prayer meetings, which my Great-Grandfather Rev. Henry William Parsons had helped to gather and lead. I've sometimes wondered what they prayed for. Was it to receive the blessings of church growth? Healing for a sick child? To understand Scripture more fully? We can only guess.

But I'm sure that Henry William's past experience had given shape to those Bible studies and prayers. He had been a preacher for Temperance in England. In 1876—for a few months—he worked in North Carolina, to form Temperance Lodges among African-Americans. The Civil War was over, but Reconstruction was under siege. So he ran into trouble. In Charlotte, NC, a mob woke him up one night—it was led by the mayor. Henry William fled to hide in the woods. An African-American family named Dudley took him in and sheltered him. That's why his son, my grandfather, was named Dudley, and after him, my Dad. And then one of my brothers.

So I wonder: did the Morningside prayer meetings include petitions for the well being of African-Americans? He devoutly believed that "those who follow Christ must believe in freedom for all." He devoutly believed that in a new neighborhood, such as Morningside, there must be genuine community. A place where neighbor knew neighbor. Where the sick were visited. Where children were noticed, and nurtured in the faith.

And community did take hold!

Edina Morningside church began with a growing Sunday School which led to a building, and another building—this expanded building. Community has been characteristic of the church ever since. My church in Virginia could learn from this church!

When I was confirmed, a church elder—who was probably about thirty years old—approached me on that night, and said, “Welcome to the church, Janet.” I’ve never forgotten those simple, kind words, and how important it is to mentor young people.

We know how significant is the nursery school, which fosters community among preschoolers and their families. I remember how this church expanded its love to support the Kims, a refugee family from Cambodia. My parents were part of that. There’s been the tradition of putting on plays, and now there’s a theatre camp. I’ve heard about Morningside U. I’ve read about Morningside After Dark. I’ve seen that you support the new agency for homeless youth. There’s a rich legacy in this place. Your caring for each other, and for the neighborhood, is a caring with depth.

And because of that, you’re in a strong position to care for others beyond the circle of this place. A caring with strength.

Helping others one-on-one is good, because it teaches us what others face. It helps us become educated about every day racism, about white privilege in our time. And it can lead us to the next step. We can begin to advocate for laws and policies that will make real in the future our present hopes. And you know best what those might be for this church.

It’s okay if our prayers run ahead of our actions. It’s okay if our advocacy runs ahead of today’s reality. And here we remember Jeremiah. When we worry about our country, when we see injustice at work, then purchase the field! That means acting as though a different future **will take hold**. It means our commitment to a just society we might never see.

For thus says the Lord: the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land. May it be so here. Amen.