

History of All Souls Presbyterian Church

(recollections of a “planting” pastor)

The Call of a church planter

Dave Thomas was raised in the Plymouth Brethren Assemblies, churches that had no individual pastor, rather elders that shared the preaching ministry. Young men were encouraged to preach and develop our gifts. In very early years, I received feedback from fellow church members that I might be a preacher someday. After high school, I went off to Temple University to pursue a Business degree in Accounting. I was in college during the Vietnam War era and was made eligible for the draft near the end of my studies but before I could graduate. So, I began to consider volunteer service that would give me some choice among military service options. I joined the Navy Reserve and after 2 years active duty, returned to Pennsylvania to work for Armstrong World Ind.

While working in Armstrong’s Flooring Division, I took an MBA at Shippensburg (PA) U, 1978. I would learn only later that the PCA has found that the combination of advanced business training and ministry training/education has been very effective preparation for success in church planting. During this time, we also served a coffee house ministry next to the campus of Villanova University and saw a number of young folks come to faith in Christ. I was an elder in the coffee house church.

Still feeling a call to ministry, in 1979 I applied and was accepted to both Westminster and Biblical Seminaries in Philadelphia. Based on what we knew about the two seminaries, we then began making plans to go to Westminster including giving notice to Armstrong that I would be leaving for seminary. But then we found that we were expecting our 4th child. So, we wondered, is this a test of our resolve or is God intervening in our plans? We thought the wisest counsel came from our former pastor who advised, “unless you can say, not only is this the right plan this is the right time, it must be now...maybe you should consider whether God is intervening at least in the timing of this idea.”

In the interim Armstrong had offered me a position at our floor tile plant in Kankakee, IL. So, when I went back to say that we would not be leaving for seminary, they said we’re delighted that you are staying but you know that Kankakee is where we would like to have you serve. This is important to the history of All Souls because of how it introduced easterners like ourselves to life in the Midwest. One grad student said it well as I drove him to the airport after his graduation. “I’m really going to miss this area and its ‘salt-of-the-earth people’” referring to the native mid-westerners in and around Urbana, IL and at All Souls. While in Kankakee, we attended a Bible Church that was calling a new pastor. Pastor Jim had his training at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, IL and was very reformed in his thinking and preaching, teaching Calvinism by name from the pulpit. One of the elders had a Dutch Reformed background and the other was sympathetic to reformed doctrine. I was finding reformed doctrine to be truer to the entire scope of the scripture and began meeting weekly with Pastor Jim to learn more. I was soon asked to serve as a ruling elder and would preach on occasion in place of the pastor.

Pursuing the Call

We were in Kankakee for 8 years before Armstrong moved us back to Lancaster headquarters in 1989 to serve International Operations where I traveled the world for the next 5 years. Because of Pastor Jim's gift of reformed instruction, we were looking for a different church than we had attended previously and landed at Westminster PCA. An Armstrong friend who had been similarly introduced to the reformed faith saw us at church and exclaimed "I thought we would find you here." After returning to Lancaster and serving the local church, at a certain point I began to feel that the Lord was still calling us to a deeper involvement in ministry. As I told Michael Rogers, pastor of Westminster PCA, Lancaster, PA of my desire, he said "Well, Dave, if this is going to happen, it needs to happen soon!" (I was 54 years old by this time). Michael had another item of importance to share with me as he added further, "I know you have been accepted to a couple of seminaries, but I have been 25 years in the ministry, interviewing pastoral candidates, the best ones come from Covenant Seminary in St. Louis, so you owe it to yourself to check them out". Michael still thought we were going to one of the other seminaries, but as an applicant to Covenant Seminary, I began to receive emails from the Covenant faculty that demonstrated their heart for the gospel ministry and for ministry preparation. The more we learned about Covenant the more we were drawn to the school as the place for us to prepare. The seminary proved to be everything we expected and more. One of the features of campus life was the ministry lunch, a time to meet ministry leaders and others from a variety of vocational ministry pursuits. Several of the leaders in church planting were ministering in the Midwest. Covenant Seminary professor, Dr. Philip Douglass, a national leader for church planting in the PCA was a major encouragement to us.

Some of the denominational leaders in the greater northern IL area were also leaders of the church planting movement within the PCA, including Ted Powers MNA Church Planting Coordinator. As we listened to their presentations on the ministry of church planting we were led to consider whether God was calling us to this vocation. After discussion with my wife Sherry, we made our thoughts known to the leaders and they recommended that we go to church planting assessment and see what the Lord might have in mind.

The PCA has been very successful in the ministry of church planting. A key component of that success has been the assessment process for prospective planters. Other denominations have made this same connection and the PCA has unselfishly shared the details with these groups. The process is very thorough. At any one point, there were 14 assessors seated around the periphery of the room listening and observing the training interaction. The process is very demanding and by the end of the week we still felt called to plant a church, but were uncertain we would be approved. The members of the MNA Committee for Church planting stayed up until 2am praying and deliberating over who should be offered approval to seek a call to plant a church. We were stunned and grateful to the Lord to receive full approval from the committee to plant a church.

Realizing that we also felt drawn to the Midwest, we let that be known to the leaders of the Northern Illinois Presbytery. Ted Powers, indicated to us at the end of Church Planting Assessment that he hoped we would be planting in the Midwest. So, it was not too long after this that the call came for us to plant a church

Early days on the ground in Champaign-Urbana

Westminster (PCA) Church in Paxton, IL had long nourished a desire and vision, praying for a church to be planted in Champaign-Urbana at or near the University of Illinois. So, when we moved to Champaign in 2006, we

worshipped at Westminster and began to get to know the folks who shared the vision and would plan to be part of the new church. Some of these folks lived in and around Champaign-Urbana (CU) and were traveling the 20-30 miles to Paxton for church on a Sunday morning. Early in our time in CU we met with Westminster Pastor Mark Diedrich and his elders and others interested in the CU project to pray that the Lord might be pleased to use us to plant a church in our city. Pastor Mark came down weekly to CU to lead a Bible study seeking to support the group that would eventually be used by the Lord to plant the church.

David Keithley is a friend that I met on the first day of Greek Class at Covenant Seminary. We had walked a similar path through the Master of Divinity program at Covenant Seminary. By the time Sherry and I were ready to move to CU, David had become an assistant pastor at Christ Church, PCA, Bloomington-Normal, IL, about 60 miles west of CU. David and I met regularly to pray for one another's newly-minted ministry positions. Christ Church was a wonderful partner in the early days of exploring the ground in CU and eventually planting the church. Their support was felt not only financially but also in the form of encouragement, advice, prayer and, from time to time, preaching in my place.

The University began each semester with an event they called Quad Day. The event took place on the massive quad at the center of the campus and, due to intense and expansive interest spilled over onto the streets surrounding the Quad. The purpose of the day was to give students an opportunity to meet the staff of key organizations that would enhance student life on campus as well as provide connection with groups that increased the comfort and peace of mind of parents who had brought their students to campus.

Dozens of participating organizations, in addition to key University departments and administrative offices related to student life on campus included social organizations such as fraternities and sororities as well as churches, campus ministries and other religious organizations. Each organization was given a booth, about 15' x 15' with a table on which to display brochures and provide a conversation center for the many passersby. The event was attended by literally thousands of students and their friends and family members. All Souls had a table at Quad Day each of the years of our ministry here.

The divine appointments of meeting students from St. Louis at the very first Quad Day who became part of the church in the earliest days and regularly at future Quad Days were distinct blessings. There were also key members of the community who showed interest very early in the life of our fledgling church.

When he heard of our work, future All Souls elder David Thies sent me an email that said in part "My wife and I are lifelong residents of Champaign-Urbana and we have been interested to hear of your work planting a PCA church in our community and wonder if you are presently conducting services or bible studies to which the community is invited." David and his wife Jodie also have a son Daniel who studied at Yale where he worshipped at a PCA church, and was part of Yale's chapter of Reformed University Fellowship. Their daughter, Stephanie, had become a participant in a PCA church plant during her graduate studies at the University of Chicago. All of this gave David further exposure to the PCA, a key factor in his interest in our church. Born and raised in Urbana, David attended the U of I for both undergrad and law school. He married a Champaign native, Jodie, and together they have raised their four children. Today, David continues his 37-year practice of law as well as his involvement in the Champaign-Urbana community.

From my perspective, the Lord's hand was so evident in the strategic connection with David since he has a Presbyterian (PCUSA) background and was an established Teaching Leader of the interdenominational bible study, Bible Study Fellowship (BSF), serving in that capacity for 14 years. Through his teaching role, David had come to appreciate the preaching ministry of James Montgomery Boice, the late Pastor of the Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia who was a national leader in both the PCA and BSF. (An interesting additional connection here is that Luke Herche, the Teaching Elder called by the All Souls Congregation to serve after my departure, came to faith under the preaching of Dr. Boice while attending college in Philadelphia.)

We had begun worship preview services on Sunday afternoons on the edge of campus at the home of Math Professor Rob Ghrist and his wife Debbie to let interested community members visit and get a feel for our church without the need to miss their own church service and David came to one of those services. David attended one of our worship preview meetings, after which he met me for coffee and for 2 hours spoke with me about how the University and the town of CU really needed what has now become All Souls Presbyterian Church. David later reported to me that "with this initial exchange of emails between Dave and me, Jodie and I began our relationship with you and with the All Souls "adventure".

Another BSF leader, Scott Morrison, also a member of the PCUSA, learned of All Souls through David and joined us with his wife, Cindy, and family, eventually becoming the 2nd Ruling Elder of All Souls. I was so blessed since these brothers are among the best Ruling Elders I have known.

Another key ministry connection was with Min Chung, Pastor of Covenant Fellowship Church. CFC was a ministry to Asians (mostly Koreans) on the UI campus a church of several hundred members. Min reached out to us and viewed us as ministry partners to CU and the campus. He asked me to speak to their campus ministry group and at one point also extended financial support to our ministry. Min was a great blessing to us personally and professionally. We had no shortage of Asian students joining our church, owing in part to the PCA's and other reformed churches' missionary efforts in the students' home countries. We had one student whose pastor singled out our church as the one his young student member should attend. This spoke well to us of the PCA's worldwide reputation.

Financial Provision

The very first contribution to our ministry came after I spoke at an adult Sunday school class I was teaching at our home church, Westminster Presbyterian Church (PCA), Lancaster, PA of our plan to go to seminary and enter the ministry. Later that same week I went to the mailbox to find a note from a senior saint in the church that read, "God bless you for taking this step to serve him" and in the envelope, was a check for \$250. I remember standing by the mailbox for a few minutes stunned by the call of God being encouraged in this way. The giver would later speak dismissively of how small the contribution was but it was huge in its encouragement to us.

This was always a very humbling part of the experience of planting the church. The generosity and the close attention to the prompting of the Holy Spirit by so many of the Lord's people were key factors in encouraging the Lord's call. Our home church Westminster, Lancaster, PA would continue to be a financial resource for years to come.

I had a friend at the very beginning of exploring CU for the possibility of planting a church. This man was a young physician and his family who had a PCA background from his youth in the Midwest. He was connected professionally to the University and gave \$29,000 anonymously to All Souls thru the PCA's Mission to North America. He would neither confirm nor deny knowledge of such a gift, to which I responded that if he should meet the giver, please convey our deepest thanks to him/her.

Some support, however, came from very unexpected sources. An individual of some means who was associated with one of our elders asked to make a donation to the Elder's "favorite charity". The Elder mentioned All Souls Presbyterian Church, expecting a modest contribution. However, his friend stunned us all by handing the church a check for \$40,000.

My mentors in church planting cautioned us against a preoccupation with counting "nickels and noses" (size of offerings and headcount in the membership rolls and Sunday morning attendance). But planting a church by sending the planter and family alone to the new city, affectionately called by Church planting leaders, a parachute jump, was significantly encouraged by such generosity and faithfulness on the part of God's people.

Connection

For everyone seeking to have a ministry among students on campus, the need to make connections was universal. The University of IL was highly favored in a number of ways to make such connection.

Pastors' prayer network

This was a group of local CU pastors founded by Pastor Gary Grogan, Stone Creek Church, Urbana that met monthly for prayer. The first meeting I attended was held at a small African American church in north Urbana. I had a little trouble finding the address since I was new in town, but I arrived and walked in to find there were 82 people there gathered to pray for the advance of the gospel in CU and for the needs of one another's ministries!

Campus Ministry Workers

Religious Workers Association – this was the effort by the University of Illinois to speak with one voice to all campus ministers and associated ministry workers on its campus. Regular meetings of the group were held for prayer and information sharing. The openness and willingness to share information and suggestions was unmatched in other groups of which I have been a part.

Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship

Illinois was an important campus for Inter-Varsity. The ministry had several sub-chapters on campus: undergraduate I-V, Grad I-V, I-V for the Arts, among others. The UI campus was also the venue for the triennial Urbana Missions Conference. I attended the last conference, 16,000 attended in the basketball arena but live video in 2 other locations around the campus was needed to accommodate the crowd. As a consequence, the Urbana conference has moved to a conference center in St. Louis, where I understand 30,000 students attended a recent Urbana Conference. The purpose of this conference was to provide the education and information exchange with college students to broaden their perspective as churchmen and to challenge all attendees to adopt a missional lifestyle and, for a few, to answer the call to be career missionaries.

Other ministry groups

Campus Crusade for Christ has a very active ministry on campus.

Covenant Fellowship Church – Under the direction of Pastor Min Chung, CFC has ministered to hundreds of mostly Asian students over the years. Pastor Min, himself a UI graduate was a strong encourager of our fledgling work in the early years. This was a providentially wonderful provision since All Souls would also attract many Asian students in subsequent years. Pastor Min was a strong encourager of our ministry and All Souls Church. Pastor Dave preached at Covenant Fellowship Campus ministry occasionally

Campus ministry thrived as well by the presence of a spirit of cooperation rather than one of competition as is evident in other ministry situations at times

Church launch - Worship preview

Several times in the days and months leading up to the launch of public worship, we met on Sunday afternoon at the home of the Ghrist, just 2 blocks off the campus for an event we called Worship Preview. It was designed to introduce folks to our church, its worship, its theology, and its people. It was an excellent way to make connections with potential future members without asking them to miss the worship services in their own congregations.

Prayer

From the earliest days when the men of All Souls met weekly at 6am on our knees asking the Lord to do a work thru us, right up to the present, prayer has been an integral item of strategy in the life of All Souls Church. Soon after I came to town, an experienced pastor who had launched a work similar to ours said, “Dave, be sure prayer is central to all you do as a church. We’ve found that those groups who pray, succeed and those who don’t pray don’t make it.” I never forgot that advice and it has proven to be true in our experience as well.

Public Worship

As mentioned previously, by the summer of 2007, we believed we had reached the point that we could launch public worship. We had a strong cadre of students, graduate and undergrads, University staff and CU community members and felt it was timely to begin. I was aware that the University YMCA building, located in the center of the University of Illinois Campus, had hosted a number of church “plants” over the years and might be available. Coincidentally, David Thies was on the Board of the Y, providing an additional connection to this very active center of campus activity. We reached out and found that the most recent church user of the Y had recently moved to another location. The building was available and we agreed to a Sunday morning rental beginning in the fall of 2007. On Sunday, September 23, 2007 All Souls Presbyterian Church began formal worship. My sermon that day was entitled “Can I Believe the Bible” and was based upon Psalm 19:6-11 and Psalm 119:1-11 with additional reference to 2 Timothy 3:14-17.

Soon after beginning formal worship, we instituted a 9 am Adult Education Hour (All Souls title for the Sunday School). This time was followed by a fellowship time (good for welcoming visitors and new attendees) and then the morning worship at 10:30. One of the practical ways that we facilitated the process of getting to know new folks was to make a nametag for each attendee, encouraging each person to wear it during the service and mealtimes but to leave it on the back table so we could take responsibility to see that it was available for their use the next Sunday. Another way we sought to serve the students and other members was to serve lunch at our home after the morning services. My wife Sherry worked tirelessly to see that this activity took place each week. Sherry was also instrumental in encouraging and then facilitating the creation of a women's fellowship group within the church.

So, on September 23, 2007, the first public worship service of ASPC was held at the University YMCA on the University of Illinois campus. As the church grew, we were "particularized", with commissioning services taking place on October 23, 2011. Our session was made up of 3 elders: myself as Teaching Elder and David Thies and Scott Morrison as Ruling Elders.

Several aspects of the way the Lord provided in the early days of All Souls were very marking as follows.

Music

For a small start-up church, we were extraordinarily blessed by the number of musicians who had joined us. Part of the reason for this is that the University of Illinois, which has a top engineering program and a business school, in the top 5, also has a music program in the top 6 or 7! Our music director, Joe Madden, was an accomplished violinist and also the Executive Director of the Champaign-Urbana Symphony Orchestra. Joe has served the church in this capacity since soon after we began weekly worship and always was appreciated by me and the other elders for his quiet and consistent commitment to excellence in the planning of our services. At one point, we had 5 pianists who could play for Sunday worship. In addition, one young woman was quite accomplished on the piano and had performed in Carnegie Hall. When she played at an event on campus we attended faithfully, assuming that she would soon be playing in venues we could not reach. In addition to the pianists and violinist, we enjoyed the music of 2 harpists, several guitarists, a bass player, a trumpet, french horn, flute, 2 clarinets and many others.

Discipleship

A quarterly invitation to coffee and prayer kept me in touch with the need for prayer in the lives of our members. It also helped focus the preaching by listening in on needs and also how well the teaching was "getting thru" to hearts of our friends and members. At a certain point of growth in numbers, and after much prayer, the time had come to launch a more formal teaching time. We shied away from the title of Sunday School in our university setting choosing rather to call it the Education Hour. This has proven to be a wonderful addition to All Souls ministry.

Women's Ministry

Very early in our church life, a few of the students and Sherry met at IHOP on campus for breakfast and prayer time. Wonderful memories of those times together! We also started meeting Saturday mornings as women to either study a book of the Bible or another book that would help us in our walk with Jesus.)

Later on Women's Bible Study met at the Thomas' on a Saturday morning with study, prayer and lots of good fellowship.

Epilog – by Dave Thomas

Since pastoring All Souls Church was to be the role that all my life pointed to and prepared me to carry out, I am eternally grateful to the Lord for the wonderful years that I served the church. So many people were part of that journey and only a small number of them are mentioned here. And I hesitate to try to write that list here, because I am sure to miss a number of names but the one name I must mention is my dear wife Sherry. She worked tirelessly for All Souls, often during a time when she worked full time as a nurse. Thank you so much, my love, the Lord will surely reward your efforts!