

Most of you received a letter from me last week. To be sure we are all on the same page, I want to read it now and make some comments on it.

“To the Saints at Brandywine Valley Baptist Church

Carole and I want to share with you an important decision we have made. After more than a year of prayer and discussion, we believe it is time to prepare BVBC for the day I retire as Senior Pastor of BVBC.

I have asked the Board of Deacons to set in motion the board’s Succession Plan to find a new senior pastor. They have agreed to honor our wishes and will soon explain to you the path forward.

Setting that plan in motion at this time is good for BVBC. We have the opportunity to make an orderly transition to the next senior pastor.

The search process could possibly take more than a year. So, the board has asked me to continue my ministry for the foreseeable future. I know only one way to do ministry. In the words of Ecclesiastes 9:10: “Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might.”

Please pray for the Holy Spirit’s guidance in the months ahead. As BVBC goes forward together, we can sustain our Spirit-given momentum.

Carole and I love BVBC. 33 of our 48 years in pastoral ministry have been invested here. We have you in our heart. Let’s do what comes next really well together.

With deep affection, Pastor Bo Matthews”

The board left the decision to start the succession process up to me. The well being of BVBC is the reason I have asked the board to start the process. I do not have a retirement date. My day-to-day ministry is not likely to change for quite some time. But change will come, and with Isaiah’s help I’d like to set that change within the larger story of BVBC and within the wisdom and fatherly care of God.

The Power of Reconciliation

The birth of Brandywine Valley Baptist Church, like many births, caused great pain. The mother church was Immanuel Baptist Church, now Immanuel Church. Several hundred people left Immanuel over theological differences. Most of those who left formed this church and called it Baptist Fellowship Church.

Dorothy Taylor, who is now with the Lord and was part of this church from the start, spoke for many, when she said, “Leaving Immanuel was more painful than when I buried my husband.”

The new church met in members’ homes, started Bible studies, and in 1970 rented space at Friends’ School in Alapocas Woods for Sunday and Wednesday meetings. Two missionaries served one year each as the church’s first, interim pastors. The church called Dan Meier to be its first pastor in 1973. He left less than two years later.

The church approved a search committee that found an outstanding candidate. They agreed to be unanimous in presenting a candidate to the congregation. They voted, and the one woman on the committee, Alice Cochran, voted against the candidate. She was gentle, soft-spoken, very tough, and she did not change her mind.

The shine of being a start-up church had long since worn off. The failure to call the candidate precipitated a crisis. At a meeting of the Board of Deacons, a motion was made to disband this church, sell this Mount Lebanon Road property, and give the proceeds to missionaries. It was a dark moment. The motion was tabled. The board agreed to pray about it and talk about it at its next meeting.

God intervened. The board came to the conclusion that its problem was not the failure to call a pastor. Their troubles were due to lingering anger and hostility toward people at Immanuel Baptist. The only solution was reconciliation with Immanuel. It was a humble and a humbling decision. In an act of great magnanimity the board at Immanuel agreed to meet. It went well, and the outcome was to propose a meeting of reconciliation between the congregations.

I came into this story on a snowy, January night in Central New York. Howard Gerlach, the chairman of the Search Committee, visited Carole and me at our home. I was a potential candidate to be the pastor here. He told us about the meeting of reconciliation taking place the very weekend he was with us. We joined others in praying.

By all accounts the meeting of the two congregations was a frank, at times, painfully frank meeting. I can only judge the outcome of the reconciliation by what I found when we moved to Wilmington. The people of BVBC did not have a bad word to say to me about anyone at Immanuel. They acknowledged the heartache, but they said, "We are reconciled with each other, and we are moving on to our future." The church never looked back and 20 years of fruitful ministry ensued. So, when the future looks less certain and even dark, let us remember the word of the Lord through Isaiah:

**Why do you say, O Jacob,
and complain, O Israel,
"My way is hidden from the Lord:
my cause is disregarded by my God?"
Do you not know?
Have you not heard?
The Lord is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He will not grow tired or weary,
and his understanding no one can fathom.
He gives strength to the weary
and increases power to the weak.
Even youths grow tired and weary,
and young men stumble and fall;
but those who hope in the Lord
will renew their strength.
They will soar on wings like eagles;
they will run and not grow weary,
they will talk and not faint.**

A Divine Visitation

BVBC entered its own sanctuary and small East Wing in 1976. Two years later, the church added its first full-time and first part-time associate staff. A second morning

worship service began in 1982. In 1984 and 1985 two more people became part of the church staff. People became followers of Christ. Disciples grew. BVBC took its place among the respected churches of New Castle County.

1985 was a transition year. Two staff resigned to take ministries elsewhere, and in the fall I accepted a call to be the Senior Pastor at Hinson Baptist Church in Portland, OR. Within six months of my leaving, the church had called a new Youth Pastor and a new Senior Pastor, Harry Killbride. They brought new energy and ideas. Pastor Killbride had a distinguished pulpit ministry and radio ministry. In 1990 I resigned as Senior Pastor in Oregon, and Pastor Killbride resigned here.

A yearlong process ensued and in the end I returned to BVBC as Senior Pastor. I had changed. BVBC had changed. The world was changing. The downsizing and outsourcing that now characterize American business affected Wilmington's chemical companies. It affected many people in this church. For that and many other reasons 1993 was the darkest year in all my years at BVBC.

BVBC licked its wounds throughout 1994. I am deeply grateful to Paul Chubb, who is now with the Lord. He provided stability for the whole church through that low point. Then on September 30, 1994 I received the following letter from Dot Taylor, by then Dot Simon.

"Last night I had a dream. Before going to bed I read several articles in *Decision* magazine – maybe this had something to do with my very vivid dream.

"I dreamed we had a large 'all Men's Rally' in our church. There was a men's quartet and trumpet duet. The congregational singing was wonderful. There was a very dynamic speaker (I did not know him). He spoke on:

"Daily walk with the Lord'

"Prayer life'

"How to cope with stress'

"Family values."

"As I looked over the audience I saw these men very clearly witnessing to others: Dave Cornett, Roland Burgess, Bob Hosan, Bob Wardell, Tom Schmelzer, Geoff Plazer, Howard Gerlach.

"I then woke with a start.

"I rarely dream. Does this dream have a meaning? Dot Simon"

I told Dot, "I don't know. We have to wait and see." No one thought 1995 would be a year of divine visitation to this congregation that more than fulfilled Dot Simon's dream. It happened Memorial Day, 1995. 130 men from this congregation went to RFK Stadium in Washington, D. C. to a Promise Keepers event. Events of that weekend reshaped BVBC. I remember Gene Ontjes asking several times, "What just happened in Washington?" We did not know it at the time, but those men came back and gave this church a new heart. A new unity and sense of purpose, which the church had not known for years, began to mark our life together. Men learned to care for each other. Ten Promise Keeper small groups formed, some of which meet to this day. God gave us a future. We haven't looked back. So, when the future looks less certain and even dark, let us remember the word of the Lord through Isaiah:

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and complain, O Israel,**

**“My way is hidden from the Lord:
 my cause is disregarded by my God?”
 Do you not know?
 Have you not heard?
 The Lord is the everlasting God,
 the Creator of the ends of the earth.
 He will not grow tired or weary,
 and his understanding no one can fathom.
 He gives strength to the weary
 and increases power to the weak.
 Even youths grow tired and weary,
 and young men stumble and fall;
 but those who hope in the Lord
 will renew their strength.
 They will soar on wings like eagles;
 they will run and not grow weary,
 they will talk and not faint.**

Until It Joins Some Larger Way

Once again, People became followers of Christ. Disciples grew. To accommodate them, the church added a full time Pastor of Worship and Music and a Teaching Pastor, a full time Church Administrator, and a full time Director of Missions. We saw several of our young men and women become career missionaries. Between 1999-2009 the church rebuilt its church facility. The past 7 years were dangerous as well as exciting. And 2013 was the most difficult, as we know.

And now, the church embarks on one of the most significant processes any larger church goes through: finding its next Senior Pastor. Doing what comes next really well together will grow out of one of the central powers of our souls that Christ has awakened. We can trust God to lead our church through this transition in a way that brings Him honor. Whatever emotions you feel about this transition are secondary to trusting God. So, when the future looks less certain and even dark, let us remember the word of the Lord through Isaiah:

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Take Aways

There are two ways you can show your trust in God by what you do. First of all, say to each other, whenever the topic of the next Senior Pastor comes up, “God has something good for this church. I can’t wait to see what it is.” If that message goes viral in the congregation, it will encourage our faith and lay a hopeful foundation for the pastor who comes after me.

Second, will you let me be your pastor until the day I leave? I have no intention to coast through the end of my ministry. The mission isn’t over until the shuttle has safely landed and rolled to a full stop on the tarmac. I am bursting with ideas and energy. Let’s do ministry. We can celebrate later.