

THE NEW LIFE STORY

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THE NEW LIFE STORY

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LEONARD I. SWEET, PH.D

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TROY JONES

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PART 1

1920s: THE NEW LIFE STORY BEGINS

1926: The Burden of Two Sisters

In 1926 the New Life Story begins with two sisters, Edith Brandt and Ellen Brandt. They had a burden from God for a local church empowered by the Spirit and focused on the mission of God in the Renton community and the world (Matthew 28:18-20). In their Rainier Beach home this congregation—known today as New Life Church—was birthed; however, very soon the Brandt sisters felt the need for help to lead the new congregation. They contacted Margaret Finch (known as Grandma Finch), a widowed Assemblies of God minister living in Yakima, Washington, and asked her to help with this new church plant.¹ For her first twelve years, the New Life Story was led by the wisdom of Grandma Finch and the determination and burden of the two Brandt sisters.

As single, older “maiden ladies,” the Brandt sisters were the pillars of the church. The church’s first full-time pastor, William McNutt, recalled, “They had such a burning desire to see people find Jesus, and they worked unceasingly to bring children to the church. They were so liberal with their finances, and they were a great encouragement to me.”² During the first twelve

¹ Diana Kruger, “Building a Better Tomorrow Since 1926” (booklet, Renton Assembly, Renton, WA, 1996), 5.

² Report done by William McNutt called “Tell It Like It Is, William!” (report, Renton Assembly, Renton, WA, n.d.) 59.

years, New Life existed under the original name of Renton Gospel Light Mission and was not affiliated with any particular denomination or organization.³

September 26, 1926: Old and Shabby Storefront

The church immediately experienced the favor of God as described in Acts 2:47, “the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”⁴ Within a few months they quickly outgrew the Brandt home and needed a larger facility. On September 26, 1926, Mr. and Mrs. Hansen opened up their bicycle shop on Walla Walla Avenue.⁵ The congregation quickly outgrew the bicycle shop and moved into a storefront on the corner of Second and Burnett (where for years McLendon’s Hardware was located).⁶ The storefront was an old and shabby building; located by a train track and below an apartment building. The passing trains and the people living above the storefront were often a disturbance to the congregation. Walt Nelson began attending as a thirteen year old and has vivid memories of this place, describing the storefront as “not much bigger than my small house.”⁷ With a smile on his face, he recalls the noise from the train tracks, and how “the pastor would have to stop reading Scripture to tell the people upstairs to turn down their music.”⁸

³ Kruger, 5.

⁴ All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the New International Version.

⁵ Kruger, 5.

⁶ 75th Year Renton Assembly booklet.

⁷ Walt and Charlotte Nelsen, interview by author, Tukwila, WA, July 25, 2012.

⁸ Ibid.

PART 2

1930s: THE FIRST CONVERTS

1935: The First Sunday School Program

The passion for kids was not only in the heart of the Brandt Sisters; everyone who started attending soon caught the vision. Bill Cross, one of the first converts of this church, decided to do a Sunday school program.⁹ The church had limited space in their storefront, so this young congregation was forced to think outside of the box. They found a one-room schoolhouse in the Spring Glen area (near today's location of the Benson Fred Meyer), and in 1935 the first Sunday school program began. The leaders would arrive early to set up the one-room schoolhouse and build a fire, teach Sunday school for about twenty kids, and then dash back to the storefront to attend the eleven o'clock service.¹⁰ By May of 1939 the Sunday school program had grown to 75.¹¹

1937: The First Full Time Pastor—William McNutt

In 1935 Grandma Finch turned the work over to Reverend James McGahey, who served as interim until a permanent pastor could be secured.¹² Although the church had recently experienced some problems that practically closed their doors,¹³ the Brandt sisters felt deeply

⁹ Kruger, 5.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ellen Brandt, thank you letter to Renton Assembly, May 23, 1939.

¹² Kruger, 6.

¹³ McNutt, 57.

that this was a work from God and started looking for the first senior pastor of this church.¹⁴ In the early fall of 1937, the Brandt sisters went to the three-year-old Northwest Bible Institute in Kirkland, Washington, where the first crop of seniors had enrolled for their final year. They asked one of those seniors, twenty-four year old William McNutt, to come pastor even before his graduation in the early spring of 1938.

Pastor McNutt accepted the invitation of the Brandt sisters reluctantly, with the clear stipulation that the congregation join the Assemblies of God. Pastor McNutt recalls those days. “I went out to Renton reluctantly, but soon caught the vision. We held prayer meetings with people in their homes first, then we held services in the mission. The meetings increased in number until I was there on a regular basis three times a week.”¹⁵ Pastor McNutt quickly fell in love with this church. In a special meeting on August 6, 1940, he told the church “Even if I wasn’t pastor of this church, I could not be any more interested in another church than I am in this one. My whole interest is here.”¹⁶

Pastor McNutt was single when he started pastoring. On Sept 6, 1938, the church pianist resigned her position and the Brandt sisters asked Currie Marr if he thought his daughter, Priscilla, would play for the church. Priscilla fondly remembers her dad said “sure” without asking his daughter first.¹⁷ Pastor McNutt quickly took interest in this new piano player. He later recalled meeting his future wife. “As newly elected pastor, I began taking the young lady to her home after the morning services. Then, I began picking her up for the meetings, and before I knew it, I was over my head in love with her. We ’went together’ for three years, and on August

¹⁴ Violet Bliss, “The History of Renton Assembly as Seen by Violet Bliss,” (manuscript of tape recording, Renton Assembly Archives, Renton, WA: January 16, 1989) 6.

¹⁵ McNutt, 57.

¹⁶ Renton Assembly business meeting minutes, August 6, 1940.

¹⁷ Priscilla McNutt, interview by author, Spokane Valley, WA on July 18, 2012.

27, 1941, we were married.”¹⁸ He described his wife Priscilla as “my lovely wife, companion, and co-worker. She has been one of the finest help-mates a person could have.”¹⁹

Early 1938: A Deep Desire to See Souls Saved

Pastor McNutt organized an around the clock prayer chain to believe God for revival and spiritual awakening in the church.²⁰ Particularly on Sunday nights, the little meeting place in this storefront was filled. During a two-week meeting Pastor McNutt recalls, “The presence of God was so tangible, one could actually sense God moving in a special way. Renton was actually shaken for God, a number of souls were saved, and the church would never be the same again.”²¹

Priscilla McNutt says her husband was “a man with a deep desire to see souls saved.”²² This deep desire for souls became very evident in this young congregation. Pastor McNutt recalls the first conversion under his leadership. “The first conversion at the mission was a younger man, about thirty years old. This was a boost to this small congregation since the only man we had in the church was Dr. Gent, a chiropractor.”²³

Pastor McNutt recalls a story about a lady who lived in the apartment in back of the storefront.²⁴ When he invited them to church the boys came, but Mrs. Blankenship would not. However, she did listen through the wall to the preaching as she lay in bed or sat at the breakfast table on Sunday mornings. One day she became so angry she went into the service with the

¹⁸ McNutt, 65.

¹⁹ Kruger, 16.

²⁰ McNutt, 58.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Priscilla McNutt interview.

²³ McNutt, 58.

²⁴ Ibid., 60.

intent of stirring up trouble. “The message from God gripped her heart, and she was saved as she yielded to the gentle drawing of the Holy Spirit,” said Pastor McNutt.²⁵ Her boys had perfect Sunday School attendance for six years.²⁶

April 27, 1938: Joining the Assemblies of God

Even before he started, Pastor McNutt had been very clear that this congregation become a part of the Assemblies of God.²⁷ Pastor McNutt reflects, “I felt there wasn’t too much hope for a permanent work unless they would join with a good fellowship. They were unanimous in their consent.”²⁸

April 27, 1938, this congregation of forty people made a core decision that has proven to be providential throughout the coming decades. Brother P. S. Jones, the secretary-treasurer of the Northwest District came at Pastors McNutt’s invitation and helped this little group affiliate with the Assemblies of God.²⁹ On May 4, 1938 Pastor McNutt wrote, “By the help of the Lord we now have a church that is set in order and affiliated with the Assemblies of God, and our great desire now is to see the work go forward.”³⁰

It was at this time the church changed its name from Renton Gospel Light Mission to Assembly of God in Renton, known as Renton Assembly of God. On March 6, 1941 the church

²⁵ Ibid., 58.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 59.

²⁸ Bliss, 2.

²⁹ Official certificate dated May 9, 1938 from the General Council Assemblies of God in Springfield Missouri.

³⁰ William McNutt, letter to district superintendent Frank Gray, May 4 1938.

was officially incorporated.³¹

1938: The First Property

Pastor McNutt quickly realized that the storefront would not be big enough to fulfill the burden of this church. Not only was attendance beginning to outgrow the rented facilities, but the location had its drawbacks. “The train went by like clockwork every Sunday morning at 11:30,” said Priscilla McNutt. “Whoever was preaching had to stop and wait until it had passed.”³² The congregation was experiencing growth and the favor of God. “People lived in the apartment overhead,” recalled Rev. McGahey.³³ “Services were supposed to be over by 9:00 p.m. When we ran long, the people would beat on the floor.”³⁴

In 1938 the church met to discuss the possibility of building a church. It was agreed that something had to be done, and the members gave the board and pastor the initiative to procure some property. After much searching Pastor McNutt recalls, “The board and I found a good lot by the Cedar River on Williams Avenue.” He negotiated a purchase price of one thousand dollars;³⁵ the church would pay one hundred dollars down and ten dollars or more a month.³⁶ Still in the Great Depression, this was a great sacrifice for a young church; however, they immediately started to see financial miracles. About six months into the building project Pastor McNutt went down to the real estate office to make a payment on the lot. There he discovered that the indebtedness of nearly one thousand dollars had been paid off. He reflected on this time

³¹ Renton Assembly board meeting minutes, April 6, 1941

³² Kruger, 10.

³³ Highlights and Anecdotes.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ McNutt, 61.

³⁶ Ibid., 58.

saying, “I never knew who the good person was, but God keeps record.”³⁷

June 5, 1939: The First Pastor Receives Fifteen Dollars a Week

With the church only being eleven years in existence, there was very little money to pay the pastor, so he worked long hours at the West Seattle Safeway. This was very common for pastors of that day; however, Pastor McNutt and his new wife started to feel the strain on their ministry and family. Pastor McNutt knew it was time for him to step out in faith and quit his job. “We were in the middle of a building program, and I knew that it was time to devote full-time to this precious church the Lord was allowing us to serve,” he wrote.³⁸

In a business meeting he told the church, “Both he and Priscilla had become downhearted over the situation.”³⁹ Pastor McNutt was willing to quit his Safeway job even if the church could not pay him. Pastor McNutt describes the tension he felt: “I would put in eight hours at my job, drive to the church, and work until midnight almost every weeknight. What kept me going was the excitement in my heart to serve the Lord in this growing work, and the love of my wife who was expecting our first baby.”⁴⁰

The church called a business meeting and it was “agreed by all” that Pastor McNutt “quit his work as soon as possible and he give his employer two week notice.”⁴¹ Furthermore, it was decided to give him a salary of fifteen dollars per week (equaling his earnings at Safeway) and suggested that they finish the church basement so that the pastor could save on rent.⁴²

³⁷ Kruger, 14.

³⁸ McNutt, 71.

³⁹ Renton Assembly business meeting minutes, November 4, 1941.

⁴⁰ Kruger, 17.

⁴¹ Minutes, November 4, 1941.

⁴² Ibid.

PART 3

1940s: AN ANGEL IN DISGUISE

January 22, 1940: The First Youth Ministry

Fourteen years into the church's history there was a vision and burden for youth ministry. On January 22, 1940 the young people formed a society, which they named Christ's Ambassadors. "Shirley Cross became our first president and was a fine representative of our church," said Pastor McNutt.⁴³ "The youth group's treasurer was Walter Nelsen, and the secretary was Ruth Levensy" (who later became Ruth Emmert).⁴⁴ The youth ministry met on Sunday nights at 6:30 P.M.⁴⁵

1940: Pastor McNutt Picks Up a Shovel

Two years after buying the property on Williams Avenue, a committee was appointed to meet with an architect to sketch plans. The committee consisted of Bill Cross, Stephen Henderson, Ben Moore, and Pastor McNutt.⁴⁶ The first step was to excavate the land for the basement. Since the church had little money, Pastor McNutt finally had to begin digging the 32 x 48 foot basement himself with a shovel. As he told the story, "It was slow and hard work, but I was determined that even if I had to do this by hand, it would get done. After three days—

⁴³ Kruger, 15.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Kruger, 16.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 12.

digging nearly eight hours a day—I had a sizable hole.”⁴⁷ At this rate Pastor McNutt felt he would never get done with this basement.

One day a stranger in a truck stopped by and inquired what the pastor was doing. Pastor McNutt explained he was building a church; however, they had little money. The man offered to do the work with his dozer—if the pastor would buy the gas. Pastor McNutt recalls, “Of course I accepted the offer. He finished the basement within half a day and I handed him a small bill and asked for his address to send him the rest. He answered that he would see me later, disappeared, and I never saw him again. I have often wondered if the man was an angel in disguise.”⁴⁸

1940: Bricks from Heaven

The church was struggling to obtain building materials, due to its lack of funds and the scarcity of building materials during the Second World War. It was discovered that the Renton High School’s foundation was sinking; the building was condemned. Pastor McNutt recalls, “Bill Cross and I went to see the contractor who had the job of removing the building, and we bought enough brick and dimension lumber for the entire church building.” The church bought all the building materials for the Williams Avenue site at a tremendous savings. Pastor McNutt says, “The finest of materials, what would now cost many thousands of dollars, we purchased for less than \$1,000.”⁴⁹

The church borrowed a Dodge truck from Ben Moore, a recent convert, and hauled load after load of used brick from the high school. It seemed like everyone jumped in to help clean the bricks and lumber for the church’s new building. Pastor McNutt says, “Students from Northwest

⁴⁷ Ibid., 48-49.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 12.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

Bible Institute came and worked with me, and the building began to rise.”⁵⁰ Ben Moore also provided expertise and advice with the footings for the building and the forms for the concrete.

1940: Pay Me Only One Dollar

One of the miracles experienced by the congregation was the contractor for the building, Currie C. Marr (the father of Priscilla McNutt). He offered his professional services as contractor in charge, only billing the church one dollar for his work. “What an offer!” said Pastor McNutt. “He stood by us through the next two years of building. Without the wise counsel and help of C. C. Marr, the church would have had a struggle.”⁵¹ According to the November 4, 1941 board meeting minutes, C. C. Marr contacted a Mr. Perkins of the Pacific Car and Foundry Company in Renton, “and he said they would furnish us the steel. And seeing it was for a church, it would not cost us one cent more than it cost them, which would be around three cents per pound. Who could do this but God!”⁵²

Feb 1941: The First Giving to Missions

In 1940 Renton Assembly started to feel the need to increase their missionary support. The year before the congregation only gave \$20.75 to missionary offerings.⁵³ Although still dealing with the Great Depression and an aggressive building program, the congregation decided that giving to missions should be a high priority. At this point the church was receiving mission offerings only in Sunday School; however, in February of 1941, the congregation voted in an business meeting that “we would have a missionary offering in the church as well as Sunday

⁵⁰ McNutt, 73.

⁵¹ Kruger, 13-14.

⁵² Board meeting minutes, November 4, 1941.

⁵³ Renton Assembly, financial report, January 6, 1941.

school once a month. It was decided the third Sunday night offering of each month would go to missionary work.”⁵⁴ Then eighteen months later on July 6, 1942, the church decided to give 5 percent of their income to the missionary fund.⁵⁵ Seven months later they increased this commitment, stating 10 percent of all undesignated giving would go to the mission fund.⁵⁶

Summer of 1942: The First Building Completed

Four long years after buying a vacant lot and seeing many miracles—from an “angel in disguise” to “bricks from heaven”—the church was finally able to finish the basement of the Williams Avenue building. They decided to move first into the 32 x 48 foot basement with the upper auditorium not finished; finishing the auditorium would be no small task.

The church’s goal was to build this building debt free; however, the congregation’s financial realities made this difficult. Pastor McNutt said, “We wanted to build as God supplied the funds to pay the bills; however, this proved a bit hard to do.”⁵⁷ One possibility was to have the Hollywood Temple church in Seattle step in, bringing Renton Assembly under its structure and supervision.⁵⁸ First, though, Hollywood Temple recommended that it be discussed with Brother Frank Gray, the Assemblies of God district superintendent. After meeting with the district presbyters, the district agreed to guarantee payments on a loan to the church up to two thousand dollars. In other words, if the church would default the district would be “obliged” to take over the payments. The loan was with the Tacoma Savings and Loan Association; they

⁵⁴ Renton Assembly Special Business Meeting Minutes, Feb 11, 1941. (These should be treated as titles)

⁵⁵ Renton Assembly business meeting minutes, July 6, 1942.

⁵⁶ Renton Assembly business meeting minutes, Feb 2, 1943.

⁵⁷ McNutt, 75.

⁵⁸ Renton Assembly business meeting minutes, August 1941.

borrowed two thousand dollars to finish the job.⁵⁹ Later on the church found itself needing even more. With no banks willing to help the church, District Superintendent Frank Gray helped find two ladies to loan the church one thousand dollars. These ladies were Mrs. Mabel Reed of Centralia and Mrs. Emil Ericksen of Seattle.⁶⁰

Finally the upper auditorium was completed. Pastor McNutt describes the building as “a beautiful brick building that we loved and everyone admired.”⁶¹ They came together in unity and excitement during the summer of 1942 for its first building dedication. The building was packed and the people were grateful for the favor and goodness of God. The night before their first service in the upper auditorium, the church and Pastor McNutt worked all night building pews from good flooring and one-inch plywood.⁶² Those pews lasted for many years. Pastor McNutt recalls his emotions of this day: “Never will I forget the joy and pride we had in our new House of God. It was like Solomon’s Temple to us. We had worked and sacrificed to accomplish this. We were still a small church, but a little with God’s blessing is a mighty force.”⁶³

October 2, 1942: The First Ushers and Greeters

With the church now in their new building, the congregation felt a need to start a welcoming committee to greet all the new people showing up. A motion was made in their 1942 business meeting that a welcoming committee be organized and established.⁶⁴ The motion

⁵⁹ Renton Assembly board meeting minutes, Feb 11, 1941.

⁶⁰ Renton Assembly special business meeting minutes, Dec 8, 1941.

⁶¹ McNutt, 71.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid, 75.

⁶⁴ Renton Assembly business meeting minutes, Oct 2, 1942.

became a foundation for the church, creating a warmth and friendliness that has lasted for decades. Walt Nelson served as one of the first ushers when he was nineteen. For the next sixty years Walt stood in the lobby and made everyone feel welcomed, loved and a part of the church. He had an uncanny ability to remember each person. People would return weeks later and Walt Nelson would call them by name. He said, “It’s easier to win a person with a simple hello than a ‘hey sinner.’”⁶⁵

1943: John Clement becomes Senior Pastor

Pastor McNutt felt his time with Renton Assembly had come to a close. On October 30, 1943, the church offered the senior pastor position to John J. Clement. Pastor Clement had been a missionary to Japan from 1933 to 1941. He and his wife returned for their first furlough after seven years, planning to visit the United States on their way home to England. However, before they had a chance to continue on to their homeland, Japan attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 and suddenly transportation became unavailable. The Clements settled in the United States for the duration of World War II.⁶⁶

Pastor Clement, thirty-seven years of age, began his ministry at Renton Assembly on January 2, 1944. While he loved this young congregation, his heart continued to burn for Japan. As World War II was ending, Pastor Clement knew where he had to return; he submitted his letter of resignation on April 14, 1946.⁶⁷ Then He and his wife received an appointment from the Foreign Missions Department to return to Japan after the war.

While Pastor Clement was only a part of this congregation’s story for two years, in the

⁶⁵ Walt and Charlotte Nelsen interview.

⁶⁶ Kruger, 20.

⁶⁷ John Clement, resignation letter, April 14, 1946.

providence of God he had a great influence on this church. He taught commitment and preached about his burden for world missions. Records indicate he may have been one of the first missionaries this church supported on a monthly basis.⁶⁸

May 23, 1946: Edward John Morgan becomes Senior Pastor⁶⁹

Pastor Clement remained to help until a new pastor was chosen. Six weeks after his resignation, the church offered the senior pastor position to forty-nine year old Edward John Morgan on May 23, 1946. A farewell gathering was held for the Clements on June 11, 1946.

Pastor Morgan (also known as “Bud”) and his wife, Irene, served this church for four years. Violet Bliss recalled fond memories of the Morgan’s pastorate: “Pastor Morgan loved to sing and lead music. Irene was a registered nurse who took care of private patients. She was also a wonderful counselor.”⁷⁰

One of the significant things that happened under Pastor Morgan occurred on September 3, 1946, when the board voted to purchase an Army surplus bus for \$1,270.⁷¹ This decision served as the seed for a thriving bus ministry in the 1970s; at one point, Renton Assembly owned ten buses, weekly transporting upwards of five hundred kids to church.

September 1946: Thirty-Two Kids in a Station Wagon

The heart for Sunday school and winning kids to Jesus continued to define every decision Renton Assembly made. In 1946 Walt and Charlotte Nelsen began an extension Sunday school in an old grade school in Newcastle. “A lot of families came,” recalled Charlotte, “and a lot of

⁶⁸ Kruger, 21.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Bliss.

⁷¹ Renton Assembly board meeting minutes, 1946.

people were saved.”⁷² After Sunday school, Walt and Charlotte drove kids to church at Renton. “One time I remember driving thirty-two kids in our old Hudson station wagon,” she said. “The tires rubbed the fenders! They wouldn’t let us get away with this today” Charlotte says with a smile.⁷³ The army surplus bus the church had bought proved very helpful to Walt and Charlotte.

September 23, 1949: The Church Experiences Rough Waters

In 1949 the church faced some very rough waters. Pastor Morgan was legalistic and had a harsh tone in his communication style. While preaching about women (make-up and the way they should dress), he strongly stated that the church “needed to kick the devil’s furniture out.”⁷⁴ That precipitated a call for a vote of confidence for Pastor Morgan on Sept 23, 1949; he only received a 61 percent approval vote.⁷⁵

The membership finally initiated a petition requesting a special business meeting dealing with the conflict between the pastor and the board. (This petition still remains in the historical records of the church today; with 22 member’s signatures.)⁷⁶ On October 12, 1949, superintendent Frank Gray was called in to lead a special business meeting. At this meeting the following board members submitted their resignation: the treasurer (Ellen Brandt), Sunday school superintendent (Edith Brandt), financial secretary, secretary, and two trustees.⁷⁷ Only two board members remained. Edith Brandt’s handwritten letter reads, “With deep regret I feel it is

⁷² Kruger, 21.

⁷³ Walt and Charlotte Nelsen interview

⁷⁴ Pat Artholony, interview by author, Renton, WA, July 22, 2012.

⁷⁵ Renton Assembly business meeting minutes, September 23, 1949.

⁷⁶ Petition found in historical documents of Renton Assembly of God.

⁷⁷ Renton Assembly special business meeting minutes, October 12, 1949.

necessary to submit my resignation as Sunday School Superintendent, effective immediately.”⁷⁸

Fifteen days later, twenty-six year old Walt Nelson was elected, along with two other people, as trustees on the board.⁷⁹ Walt continued to serve faithfully on the board for the next thirty-seven years. Walt and Charlotte Nelson remember these as sad days for the church. Charlotte felt God keeping them. She believes, “When you have pastor problems, you pray. Don’t leave a church because of trouble.”⁸⁰

Paul and Barnabas had such a disagreement that they parted company (Acts 15:39). Yet, out of this disagreement the gospel spread. That was the case in this church’s disagreement. Many of these people, including the Brandt sisters, joined the Sunday school in Spring Glen and established Village Chapel, another independent church. According to Violet Bliss, “Our church split while they were here. A large group left and started the Village Chapel.”⁸¹

⁷⁸ Edith Brandt, letter, October 11, 1949.

⁷⁹ Renton Assembly business meeting minutes, October 27, 1949

⁸⁰ Walt and Charlotte Nelsen interview.

⁸¹ Bliss, 7.

PART 4

1950s: GOD WAKES UP A CHURCH

1950: Lincoln Wyman becomes Senior Pastor

In October, 1950, one year after the resignation of the board members, Pastor Morgan resigned, leaving a struggling church. On November 21, 1950, at the age of forty-nine, Lincoln Wyman was elected as the pastor of Renton Assembly. Helen Moses, the church secretary, sent him a handwritten letter saying the church has “instructed me to write to you, that you may know that we have invited you to be with us as pastor of our church.”⁸²

When Pastor Wyman came, the church was facing many obstacles and people told him not to come. Years later he would say, “When I came to Renton, the church was rather small, but everyone in the church desired revival. I remember how kindly people received me and how lovely they were.”⁸³ The church offered Pastor Wyman the parsonage, which was in bad shape. One day while expressing frustration over a leaking oil stove, someone said to him, “You might as well leave Renton. This is a Catholic town, and you won’t get anywhere.”⁸⁴ Pastor Wyman simply said that God had sent them.

The board also could not offer him any money. The church finances had dwindled in light of the recent resignations of the board members. However, there was such a blessing upon the

⁸² Helen Moses, letter, November 22, 1950.

⁸³ Kruger, 22.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

church during his ministry that Pastor Wyman went only one week without being paid.⁸⁵ A fresh wind of the Spirit hit the congregation under his leadership. Revival came to the church in answer to the congregation's prayers, and it came through the youth group. Prayer around the altar on Sunday nights often lasted until two in the morning! The youth would head for the prayer rooms beside the platform where they prayed loudly and were not ashamed of it. Pastor Wyman said this "cheered our hearts!"⁸⁶

Pastor Wyman was a pastor at heart and loved this congregation. Pastor Don Duncan would later say, "Pastor Wyman spoke with passion and was a tender hearted man."⁸⁷ "I don't know any man I respected more," said long-time member Ruth (Levensy) Emmert.⁸⁸ "He was always so faithful in visiting the folks at the nursing home. One time, one of them said to me, 'Pastor Wyman always makes sure to stop by every single bed to pray with people.' He was such a precious man."⁸⁹

1950: The Friendly Church

The church was experiencing a move of God and—at the same time—a heart for the Renton community. There was a spirit of unity and everyone caught the vision of being real and friendly. Charlotte Nelson recalls, "People were so friendly, outgoing and meeting people. I can't remember anyone that wasn't friendly."⁹⁰ Pastor Wyman and the board, trying to capture the

⁸⁵ Bliss, 7.

⁸⁶ Kruger, 23

⁸⁷ Don Duncan, interview by author, Renton, WA, July 9, 2012.

⁸⁸ Kruger, 23

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Walt and Charlotte Nelson interview.

spirit of the congregation, coined the phrase “the friendly church.”⁹¹ This phrase was made into a song in the eighties and still rings true in the heart of the church today.

November 21, 1950: Walt Nelsen’s Panel Truck

The Sunday school outgrew the Williams Avenue building under the leadership of Pastor Wyman. The congregation had to scramble and think of creative locations to hold Sunday school. It was at this time the church purchased a big house on Second Avenue North that belonged to Mayor George Beanblossom. After moving it to the back of the church, they sold the run down parsonage on Park Avenue.⁹² In this large new home for the Wymans, the church put Sunday school classes upstairs and one class in the living room. Everywhere anyone could imagine a Sunday school class might fit was soon stuffed with kids, including Velma Hurtgen’s living room, the church bus, and Walt Nelsen’s panel truck. Even an old coal bin was turned into a classroom!⁹³

1955: Walt Nelson Interim Pastor

The church had only been in the Williams Avenue location for twelve years, but it was evident to Pastor Wyman and the congregation they needed to relocate; the building on Williams was no longer big enough. He said, “God moved in a wonderful way and we began to be crowded out.”⁹⁴ However, Pastor Wyman also knew he was not a builder and would limit the church’s mission and growth. Expressing his feelings he said, “The church needed a pastor who was a builder, so, with the consent of the people, I resigned.”⁹⁵ In his resignation letter, talking

⁹¹ See the churches letter head in 1950.

⁹² Bliss, 7.

⁹⁴ Kruger, 22.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

about the need for the church to find a new building, he wrote, “By faith we have, and are, claiming this (the new building) for God and this congregation.”⁹⁶ The church board voted to award one month’s pay to Pastor Wyman for his good work with this congregation.⁹⁷

When Pastor Wyman resigned, the church board gave Walt Nelsen—now thirty-two years old—the responsibility to “carry on duties as pastor when Brother Wyman leaves until the succeeding pastor comes to take charge.”⁹⁸ This turned out to be a period of about three months (This was a natural step in that Walt Nelsen was active on the board and he had previously taken charge of the church while Pastor Wyman was on vacation).⁹⁹ Walt Nelsen was considered and nominated as pastor of the church, but he had no desire to let his name be considered.¹⁰⁰

June 1955: Orland E. Marr Becomes Senior Pastor

The church was looking for a visionary pastor, one who could lead their next move and address the issues of growth they were experiencing. The church met in June 1955 and elected forty-six year old Orland E. Marr (the brother-in-law of Pastor McNutt) and his wife, Alma, as their pastors.¹⁰¹ Immediately the church’s congregation grew, since the Marrs came with eight kids! In the middle of the business meeting Pastor Marr was called on the phone and informed that they would like him to come and serve.¹⁰²

⁹⁶ Lincoln Wyman, resignation letter, May 13, 1955.

⁹⁷ Renton Assembly board meeting minutes, June 6, 1955.

⁹⁸ Kruger, 24.

⁹⁹ Renton Assembly board meeting minutes, July 13, 1953.

¹⁰⁰ Renton Assembly annual business meeting minutes, June 25, 1955.

¹⁰¹ Kruger, 24-25.

¹⁰² Meeting minutes, June 25, 1955.

Pastor Marr's daughter, Priscilla Marr (named after her aunt Priscilla McNutt, the first pastor's wife), said, "My dad could see what no one else could see."¹⁰³ She recalls with a smile on her face, "My dad loved life and loved people."¹⁰⁴ Walt Nelson says, "Pastor Marr was a business man and understood how to get things done."¹⁰⁵ Pastor Don Duncan would later comment that Pastor Marr was "very innovative and progressive—bold in his leadership style."¹⁰⁶

Pastor Marr had a deep heart not only for the congregation, but also for people who were unsaved and lived in the community. He encouraged the members to continue to be the "friendly church." He said at a business meeting on February 10, 1956 that they need to "make them feel as one of us."¹⁰⁷ He felt we should welcome people in such a way that they felt like they belonged.

October 1955: Prayer Walks Shake a City

Pastor Marr felt led to walk around a lot located on Hardie Avenue, just west of the Renton Airport, and claim it for the Lord. Violet Bliss remembers, "He (Pastor Marr) walked the streets of Renton at night and pled with God for finances."¹⁰⁸ The site was filled with blackberry brambles and had an old house on it that had once been used as a restaurant. Very few people could see a church located on Hardie Avenue, including many of the neighbors who initially

¹⁰³ Priscilla McNutt interview.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Walt and Charlotte Nelson interview.

¹⁰⁶ Don Duncan interview.

¹⁰⁷ Renton Assembly annual business meeting minutes, February 10, 1957.

¹⁰⁸ Bliss, 9.

opposed having a church on this site. But Pastor Marr, as he walked the streets of Renton and prayed, carried a heavy burden for the Hardie campus and his vision for the church. He prayed and trusted God for a miracle. Within two months of moving to Renton, Pastor Marr arranged a meeting with an architect regarding the construction of a new building.¹⁰⁹

December 31, 1956: Approve purchased of Hardie Avenue

The church came together on New Year's Eve of 1956 to discuss the possibility of purchasing the Hardie Ave. property. Pastor Marr brought in maps to show the members exactly where the property was located. He described the Hardie property being located "on the outskirts of Renton just off of Rainier Ave." It was unanimously voted to buy the property.¹¹⁰

1957: Church Rents American Legion Hall

Because Pastor Marr's large family took up the entire parsonage, it no longer could accommodate Sunday school classes. To provide for the needed classrooms, the congregation rented the American Legion Hall next door for sixty dollars a month.¹¹¹ In order to pay this, the Williams Avenue auditorium was rented to a Seventh Day Adventist group for sixty dollars a month. The church rejoiced at God's providence.¹¹² Walt Nelson said, "Then things started humming in the mornings in a very real way. Every nook and cranny of the church was used, plus the parsonage, the buses, and the American Legion Hall."¹¹³ Records indicate that Sunday

¹⁰⁹ Renton Assembly business meeting minutes, October 3, 1955.

¹¹⁰ Renton Assembly special business meeting minutes, December 31, 1956.

¹¹¹ 75th Anniversary Booklet.

¹¹² Renton Assembly board meeting minutes, October 4, 1957.

¹¹³ Walt Nelson, "The History According to Walt Nelson" (1980).

school was running over 325 people at this time.¹¹⁴ Ruth Emmert not only began the Missionettes program during this time; she also drove a Sunday School bus.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ Bliss, 8.

¹¹⁵ On the past History Wall.

PART 5

THE 1960s: THE WHITE ELEPHANT

November 5, 1960: First Service at Hardie Avenue

The dream of moving to the Hardie campus was bigger than anyone ever imagined. Many pastors from nearby cities and people in the community referred to the building on Hardie Avenue as the “The White Elephant.”¹¹⁶ Don Hoffman explained the skepticism behind the nickname: “Most people, both local residents and in other churches, felt the Hardie dream was so big that the small church would never pay it off or fill it up with people.”¹¹⁷

No doubt it would take a miracle for a congregation of this size to buy and build a church on the site. However, Pastor Marr carried the burden of building Hardie Avenue and would not let the naysayers distract him. A groundbreaking service was held in December of 1959; Irwin Krueger of Bellevue was named contractor.¹¹⁸ For financing, the church sold bonds and secured loans. Pastor Marr even gave a lot of his own money for this Hardie campus; using his rental business and farm business income to help fund the dream of Hardie Avenue.¹¹⁹ The sanctuary and the education wing were built first. The people moved furnishings in on Saturday, November 5, 1960 and held the first service the next day on Sunday, November 6. The dedication service was held on January 9, 1961. Violet Bliss remembers these days with both the joy and the pain of this move. “Many people received the Lord. Then we lost quite a few members, but the church

¹¹⁶ John Tappero, interviewed by author, Renton, WA, July 12, 2012.

¹¹⁷ John Hoole and Don Hoffman, interviewed by author, Renton, WA, July 23, 2012.

¹¹⁸ Kruger, 25.

¹¹⁹ Bliss, 8.

went on and grew.”¹²⁰ The total cost to build Hardie Avenue was \$236,000; the church took out loans totaling \$211,000.¹²¹ In 1967, the church sold the Williams Avenue building to the Salvation Army for \$60,000.¹²²

1967: John Tappero becomes Senior Pastor

Pastor Marr felt as if his work was done with the congregation; furthermore, he was experiencing health problems due to the pressures of the building.¹²³ He gave his resignation on January 8, 1967. Just weeks after Pastor Marr’s resignation (January 26), Walt Nelson made a motion to establish the week of January 30 through February 4 as a week of prayer prior to the selection of a new pastor.¹²⁴ With that heart of prayer, the church diligently started looking for a new pastor and leader. John Tappero and his wife, Evelyn, were recommended by Pastor Marr to be the new pastor of Renton Assembly.

At a special business meeting in March of 1967, the fifty-two year old Pastor Tappero and Evelyn were elected as the next senior pastors.¹²⁵ He was immediately called by telephone. At the next board meeting Walt Nelson made a motion that Pastor Tappero’s salary be established at \$550 a month plus his social security payment, along with \$150 a month for living expenses and two weeks of vacation.¹²⁶

Pastor Tappero had a vision for people outside of the faith. He told a local newspaper,

¹²⁰ Ibid., 9.

¹²¹ Renton Assembly annual business meeting, pastor report, 1964.

¹²² Renton Assembly special board meeting minutes, January 26, 1967.

¹²³ Bliss, 9.

¹²⁴ Board meeting minutes, January 26, 1967.

¹²⁵ Renton Assembly special board meeting minutes, March 25, 1967.

¹²⁶ Renton Assembly special board meeting minutes, April 23, 1967.

“It’s a well-known fact that the State of Washington has the lowest church attendance in the United States. Maybe only 25 per cent of the Rentonites are in church on Sundays. We have a message for everyone. We want outsiders to be ‘rightly related’ to Jesus Christ—a nominal experience in not enough—we want everyone one to have that personal rebirth.”¹²⁷ Pastor Troy Jones often says, “Pastor Tappero was the Ronald Reagan to our church. He provided hope and morale.”¹²⁸

The local newspaper best describes Pastor Tappero: “Pastor Tappero is a man on fire. His eyes gaze distantly upward and he gets that Elmer Gantry grin on his Italian face when he talks of his church and his calling.”¹²⁹ One of Pastor Tappero’s first tasks was to finish phase one of Hardie Avenue. This included paving the main parking lot, modernizing the kitchen, finishing the lower auditorium, laying tile, and installing light fixtures for the sanctuary and classrooms and so much more.¹³⁰ Pastor Tappero would later comment: “Evelyn and I look back on thirteen and a half wonderful years of service and loving ministry to the Body of Christ. Those were great years of exciting numerical and spiritual growth in all departments of the church. Evelyn, my gracious wife, has been an integral part of my ministry as well as being a model pastor’s wife.”¹³¹

1967: Missions Giving and Sending Increases

The heart for world missions caught fire under the days of Pastor Tappero. Under his leadership the mission giving grew from five thousand dollars a year to over sixty-two thousand

¹²⁷ Renton Chronicle article, 1974.

¹²⁸ Quote by author, current pastor of New Life Church, Troy Jones.

¹²⁹ Renton Chronicle article, 1974.

¹³⁰ Kruger, 28.

¹³¹ Ibid.

dollars annually by 1980.¹³² Pastor Tappero is the one who created and organized the “Faith Promise” concept at this church in 1967. He determined that October 20 through 27, 1967 should be set aside as “Missionary Emphasis” week, with the expectation that this would increase missionary commitments.¹³³

1969: Walt Nelson Makes a Motion about Starting a Christian School

In 1969 Walt Nelson made a motion that Pastor Tappero “appoint a Christian education committee to look into the feasibility of our church starting a Christian school.”¹³⁴ Three years later, in 1972, Walt made another motion for a committee to study the need for a day school, kindergarten or a Christian education.¹³⁵ This was the beginning of the church’s thinking and dreaming about what one day would become Renton Christian School.

May 16, 1969: The White Elephant Critics were Silenced

Nine years after moving into the “White Elephant,” on May 16, 1969 the church paid off its current debt and held a mortgage burning celebration. This “man on fire” named John Tappero literally burned the current mortgage papers; the “White Elephant” was paid off in full and the critics were silenced!

¹³² Ibid. 53.

¹³³ Renton Assembly board meeting minutes, September 5, 1967.

¹³⁴ Renton Assembly board meeting minutes, March 4, 1969.

¹³⁵ Renton Assembly board meeting minutes, December 30, 1972.

PART 6

THE 1970s: A MAN ON FIRE

1970: Only Thirty-Five Spaces in the Main Lot

The growth and momentum under Pastor Tappero was unprecedented. The church knew God was doing something that would outlive everyone involved. The church needed more room for Sunday school and parking. The main parking lot only held thirty-five parking spaces, bus ministry was exploding and Sunday school grew to “over 1,000 people at times.”¹³⁶ Pastor Tappero knew the first priority had to be more parking, so the church purchased three additional pieces of property that adjoined the church: The Morris place on Taylor Avenue in February 1970; The Fisler lot north of the Morris place in September 1970; and The Lissman property north of the gym in October 1972.¹³⁷

1973: Ministry to Senior Adults

In 1973 a ministry to the senior citizens was birthed under the leader of Dale and Ruby Emry and later carried on by Dick and Martha Hahn. Pastor Tappero comments, “This beautiful ministry has met a great need and has been a blessing to all.”¹³⁸

1974: Babies to Ninety Years Old

With the bus ministry growing, the church needed a place to maintain and take care of the buses; the kids also needed more space for ministry and growth. Pastor Tappero’s desired to

¹³⁶ Kruger, 28.

¹³⁷ Ibid. 30.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

remove all the hindrances to reach more kids with the gospel. In 1974 he and the board began the plan to add an additional 14,200 square feet to the Hardie Avenue campus, at a cost of four hundred thousand dollars. Beckwith, Spangler and Davis of Bellevue was named as the architectural firm.¹³⁹ The church served as its own general contractor. The people united behind this dream. Not only did they give, but many would come to the church after work and donate their labor. Darrell Smith remembers, "I would come to the church after work and pull wire and do whatever I needed to make this happen."¹⁴⁰

The church built a two-story addition of 12,200 square feet that contained a 50 x 80 foot gymnasium and stage that was used for gym nights and kids' church on Sunday, restrooms with showers, and more Sunday School rooms. A 2,000 square foot bus garage was also built and some much needed additional parking was provided. According to Pastor Tappero, "Now we had room for another 300 people in Sunday School!!"¹⁴¹ He proudly said we now "have activities for everyone from babies to 90 years old."¹⁴²

1975: The Explosion of Bus Ministry

With the additional space at Hardie Ave all the ministries started to explode. One that most impacted the community was the bus ministry. In 1975, Paul Tappero (Pastor Tappero's son) became director of the bus ministry; the bus ministry had grown to ten buses. Captains would go out on their routes on Saturdays to remind the regulars they will be picked up the next

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Darrell Smith, comment at "Day to Remember" event, Renton, WA, July 22, 2012.

¹⁴¹ Highlites and Anecdotes, 12.

¹⁴² Renton Chronicle article, 1974.

morning and to make new calls or check recent absentees.¹⁴³

On Palm Sunday of 1976 the bus captains went door to door inviting everyone to church. Paul Tappero remembers this Palm Sunday. “Our goal was to bring in 100 children on each of our ten buses.”¹⁴⁴ The church rented five additional buses plus two eight-door Checker limos to bring in adults. Paul Tappero remembers, “As a result, we brought in 765 kids on the buses and 1375 people were in attendance that morning!”¹⁴⁵ One of the routes, Don and Sue Hoffman’s Royal Hills route—a low income area near Cascade Vista—needed two buses that day for over 100 kids and parents.

In the late seventies a bus captain knocked on the door of one young man’s house— Troy Jones. The first time Troy Jones walked into the doors of this church he had been brought on a bus.

April 21, 1979: The Young Turks

The church had recently finished the additional space of the gym and classrooms at Hardie Avenue. But still needing more room, they put together plans to build, filling in the courtyard area to add more space. The plans for this space are still located in the church archives and included more nursery space, classrooms, and office space for the pastor.¹⁴⁶ In a board meeting on April 21, 1979, they were ready to approve the plans to build again. Then one of the board members, Darrell Jones, raised his hand and said, “We are not thinking big enough. Before we build more classrooms and nursery in the courtyard—should we pause and take a look

¹⁴³ Kruger, 32.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid

¹⁴⁶ Drawn out sketch of courtyard plans at Hardie Avenue located in church archives.

at our growth over the last decade and ask if this building can facilitate future growth?”¹⁴⁷

At first, Pastor Tappero, at the age of sixty-four, was very reluctant to this proposal; however, the board had several young leaders from the ages of twenty-six to forty who saw the future and the potential of this church. Pastor Tappero fondly called these board members the “Young Turks,” meaning these young leaders pushed the envelope of growth and evangelism. According to Pastor Tappero, this was a board that had a “willingness to try new ideas,” and they “anticipated growth.”¹⁴⁸ These “Young Turks” are John Hoole, Darrell Jones, Don Hoffman, Dennis Palmer, Larry Hardy, and Darrell Smith.

John Hoole, one of the “Young Turks,” reflecting back on the success of this church over the years says, “By and large the board and the pastor were on the same page. Even in disagreements and conflict the board stands with the pastor.”¹⁴⁹

With some hesitation, Pastor Tappero agreed to “push pause” on building the courtyard addition. He appointed Darrell Smith to lead a study committee to research the present and future development plan. Pastor Tappero would often remind them, “You ‘Young Turks’ got us into this—you have to get us out.”¹⁵⁰ The study committee came to the conclusion that the church would reach their saturation point in three years if they continued to keep growing even at half the rate they were growing at this time (the church was averaging 8 percent growth each year).¹⁵¹ This study committee came back with three strong recommendations: (1) that we plan this September to have two morning services, 8:30 and 11:00 a.m., (2) that we immediately seek out

¹⁴⁷ Darrell Jones, interviewed by author, Renton, WA, July 11, 2012.

¹⁴⁸ John Tappero interview.

¹⁴⁹ John Hoole and Don Hoffman interview.

¹⁵⁰ Darrell Jones interview.

¹⁵¹ Renton Assembly board meeting minutes, April 21, 1979.

available property in order to relocate Renton Assembly—at least fifteen acres, and (3) that we do a minimum of refurbishing to our present building in the hope that within three years we could be completely relocated in a new and adequate church complex.¹⁵²

April 22, 1979: The Founding of Renton Christian School.

The morning after the “Young Turks” board meeting, another significant meeting was held. The church called a special business meeting to vote on launching a new Christian school; the membership authorized the beginning of Renton Christian School to start that fall (1979).¹⁵³

May 1979: Twenty Dollars and a Handshake

In May of 1979 Dean Bitney (of Bitney Realty), Darrell Jones, and Frank Huebner knocked on the door of Dr. Heilpern’s house located on Maple Valley Highway. Dean Bitney was a realtor who belonged to the church and he knew that although Dr. Heilpern had the property on the market, he did not want to sell his homestead for a housing development.¹⁵⁴ Over a cup of coffee and a handshake, the church members agreed in principle to buy the property from Dr. Heilpern for \$855,000. Dr. Heilpern asked about earnest money. Darrell Jones reached into his pocket and said, “Will twenty dollars do?” Dr. Heilpern accepted that handshake and the twenty dollars as earnest money.¹⁵⁵ In July of 1979, Darrell Jones updated the board on the

¹⁵² John Tappero, letter to Renton Assembly of God, April 24, 1979.

¹⁵³ Renton Assembly special business meeting minutes, April 22, 1979.

¹⁵⁴ Darrell Jones interview.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

negotiations with Dr. Heilpern and indicated the asking price would be \$15,000 per acre – \$855,000.¹⁵⁶

November 18, 1979: Should the Church Relocate?

In November of 1979, the church had a specially called business meeting to purchase 57.37 acres from Dr. Rudolph and Anne-Marie Heilpern for the price of \$855,000. The church was asked two questions: (1) Should the church relocate? (2) Should we purchase the Heilpern Maple Valley property? The vote was an overwhelming yes on both questions.¹⁵⁷ Pastor Tappero knew he would not be the one to build the new building, as he and the board were having honest conversations around the fact he would be turning sixty-five in the fall of 1980. Even with the knowledge that he would never be the pastor to build the new building, Pastor Tappero still had the strength and courage to purchase this raw land.

¹⁵⁶ Renton Assembly board meeting minutes, July 17, 1979.

¹⁵⁷ Renton Assembly special business meeting minutes, November 18, 1979.

PART 7

THE 1980s: THE WAITING YEARS

August 2, 1980: Don Duncan Becomes Senior Pastor

The conversations with the board members continued about how long Pastor Tappero should remain the senior pastor. Don Hoffman said, “The board did everything possible for Pastor Tappero to lead as long as possible.”¹⁵⁸ On April 17, 1980, Pastor Tappero officially communicated his intent to step down as senior pastor in the fall.¹⁵⁹

Don Duncan had joined the staff two years earlier as both Christian education director and music director. Pastor Duncan and his wife, Allison, were elected as senior pastors on August 2, 1980, at a special business meeting.¹⁶⁰ His first official act as senior pastor was to sign the papers for the purchase of the Heilpern property on Highway 169.¹⁶¹ Under the leadership of Pastor Don Duncan, the Singing Christmas Tree was started in December of 1979, Renton Christian School began and grew, Discipleship Dynamics—a training and witnessing program—was developed, a counseling ministry was started, and the youth Bible quiz team gained national acclaim as one of the top teams in the country.¹⁶²

One of the most meaningful accomplishments during Pastor Duncan’s ministry “is all the

¹⁵⁸ John Hoole and Don Hoffman interview.

¹⁵⁹ Darrell Smith, letter, April 17, 1980.

¹⁶⁰ Renton Assembly business meeting minutes, August 2, 1980.

¹⁶¹ Kruger, 34.

¹⁶² Don Duncan interview.

young men that entered into full time ministry during his eight and half years of leadership.”¹⁶³

They include Horace and Karen Franklin, Al and Lynette Johnson, Mike and Robin Bingaman, Dave and Donna Brown, Mark and Linda Minaker, Les and Marita Thelander, Dan and Lorraine Williams, Steve Mandeville, Tom Colby, Russ Barrans, and Bob McKigney, and Troy Jones.

October 2, 1981: Tent Crusades Begin

On Saturday, October 3, 1981, an Anniversary/Dedication service was held during a ten-day tent revival at the new property.¹⁶⁴ The fifty-seven acres were dedicated, and the church’s fifty-fifth anniversary was held at the same time. Former pastors William McNutt, John J. Clement, Lincoln Wyman, Orland E. Marr, and John Tappero were present and involved.

Over the next few years the Maple Valley property was used for tent crusades; churches from all over the area would participate. The tent crusades were one of the highlights of Pastor Duncan’s tenure. “We had great times,” he recalled, “with excellent preaching by guest evangelists from all over the world. Many people were saved, healed, filled with the Spirit. One year, the tent even blew down!”¹⁶⁵

1982: The Missionary House

The heart for world missions continued to burn in the church during Pastor Duncan’s leadership. Pastor Duncan recalls the passion and commitment the board had for missions. “The board would never say no to a missionary.”¹⁶⁶ There was an old house located on the Maple Valley property that the locals of the community referred to as the “Mercer House” (Mr. Mercer,

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Kruger, 35.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 36.

¹⁶⁶ Don Duncan interview.

a native of Seattle, bought this property and built the house in 1989). The church renamed this house, calling it “The Missionary House.” During the next ten years the Missionary House provided a home for missionaries on furlough from Costa Rica, Thailand, and Portugal. It also served as a shelter called “Women at the Well,” a ministry of Teen Challenge, as a residence for a pastor of a Spanish church in West Seattle, and occasionally as short-term housing for staff members and interns of the church.¹⁶⁷ The church used the Maple Valley property during this time for a Rainbow Ranch Day Camp, Royal Ranger activities, church picnics and church sports, as well as for the tent crusade.

1983 through 1988: Years of Disappointments and Setbacks

The next season of this church was filled with disappointments and setbacks. The challenge and hurdles that were presented were ones that many felt the church would never overcome and that the building on Maple Valley would never become a reality. Pastor Duncan says, “One of my greatest disappointments is I never was able to build the church.”¹⁶⁸ The church received a building permit in January of 1985. There was a groundbreaking ceremony on February 9, 1986 with various district and government leaders, neighbors, and representatives from our architectural and construction firms. The building project was expected to be completed by the summer of 1987; however, this never became a reality.¹⁶⁹

The challenges of relocation were almost unprecedented.¹⁷⁰ First, the church had to obtain a source of suitable water. In 1983, the church worked with its new neighbors to form a Utility Local Improvement District (ULID) to obtain a source of suitable water. This began a

¹⁶⁷ Kruger, 50.

¹⁶⁸ Don Duncan interview.

¹⁶⁹ Kruger, 36.

¹⁷⁰ Kruger, 35-38.

long process which included forming committees, selecting an architect, undertaking the ULID sewer and water project, securing a building permit, demolishing an old barn and a small house, excavating the property, and driving foundational pilings at the building site.

The second challenge occurred when King County required the church to post \$450,000 worth of landscape and civil bonds. This was money the church did not have. After months of negotiations, the amount was reduced to an attainable \$150,000. The third challenge was the sale of the Hardie Avenue campus. The church voted to put Hardie Avenue up for sale in 1984; however, it did not sell as expected. Without the sale of the Hardie Avenue property, there was not enough money to continue construction. The church waited for a buyer and prayed. The fourth challenge was a traffic analysis report. Unexpectedly, King County demanded a traffic analysis report before it would approve the building permit for that phase. The church was forced to hire traffic consultants to do the analysis.

The final challenge came when the King County building department said that the pilings—already approved by the their own county inspectors—were not acceptable as the building’s structural base. They also raised objections due to perceived “landslide hazards” of the hill behind the church site. All of these challenges led the church to begin questioning if relocating to Maple Valley was something that God really had in mind.

March 19, 1989: Rick Ross Becomes Senior Pastor

Pastor Duncan announced his resignation on Sunday, July 24, 1988; his last Sunday would be October 30. The church immediately began praying for God’s direction and wisdom. They knew that the next leader needed to be a visionary; one who would determine the future of this church. In October 1988, the church voted in their new senior pastor, James Hoogenboom, a charismatic leader and pastor from Minnesota. Instead of taking his new position in Renton in

January, 1989, as had been planned, Pastor Hoogenboom notified the board that he could not accept this new church. The full story behind this refusal remains unknown; nevertheless, the church resumed praying, bounced back, and started their search again.

Before accepting the invitation to come to Renton Assembly, a thirty-six year old D. Rick Ross, the youngest pastor since Pastor Clement, was pastoring a church in Richland, Washington. He remembers a time when he visited the church years before and felt like one day God would lead him to Renton.¹⁷¹ He was elected at a special business meeting in March of 1989, and for the next fifteen years Pastor Rick, his wife Susan, and their children, Derrick and Karissa, gave their hearts and lives to this congregation (Pastor Rick was the first pastor where people used his first name instead of last name when calling him pastor).

Pastor Rick immediately felt the need for the church to return to “the main thing” as he made a bold decision, asking the church, “Let’s take the next season and focus on reaching people for Jesus.”¹⁷² He recalls, “The church had lost their focus. I felt a need for the people to get back to doing church instead of worrying about the building.”¹⁷³ He knew the church was about people, not buildings. According to Pastor Rick, “buildings only facilitate vision; they are not the vision themselves.”¹⁷⁴ His ministry philosophy was “Remove the obstacles and the church by its very nature will grow.”¹⁷⁵ Removing the obstacles is exactly what Pastor Rick did. With high energy and focus like very few leaders have, he began leading and growing this congregation.

¹⁷¹ Rick Ross, interviewed by author, phone, July 26, 2012.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Pastor Troy remembers Pastor Rick Ross’s philosophy.

Pastor Rick first updated the Hardie campus to better draw in young families and people who needed Christ. The church received a facelift: new paint, new carpet, and updated bathrooms. In the fall of 1989, just a few months into his leadership, he initiated “shuttle parking,” utilizing a lot at nearby Renton High School so that the onsite parking crunch could be alleviated. The church started to explode with growth and enthusiasm under the leadership of Pastor Rick. Young families started to show up. He said, “This wasn’t simply people church-hopping, we were seeing real souls come to Christ.”¹⁷⁶ Pastor Rick recalls these as being some of the most rewarding days of his ministry.

One of his first actions concerning the new property was to attack the \$103,788 debt the church still owed on the \$141,515 ULID project. Interest had added another \$130,194 to the total. Pastor Rick organized the Miracle Sunday fundraiser on August 20, 1989, with the goal of paying off the debt so the church could “be financially prepared for future growth.”¹⁷⁷

May 1989: Troy Jones becomes Full-Time Youth Pastor

Troy Jones first rode the bus to this church in 1979. He came from a broken family. Pastor Tappero immediately took an interest in this young man, visiting his home and encouraging his mom and brothers to become a part of this church family. In 1980 the church offered him a fifty-five dollar scholarship, paying his way to summer camp. Troy went and his life was transformed by the power of the Gospel. Immediately he felt called into ministry. Pastor Duncan baptized him in water in the fall of 1980 and was his pastor as a teenager.

In February of 1988, Troy Jones, who was still an undergraduate student at Northwest University, became part-time interim youth pastor. He led the youth ministry and finished his

¹⁷⁶ Rick Ross interview.

¹⁷⁷ Kruger, 40.

studies at Northwest in May of 1989. Also that May, Troy was married to Jana, graduated from Northwest College, and received his ministerial license. Pastor Rick then named Troy as his full-time youth pastor, soon becoming both his mentor and his spiritual father, teaching him leadership and how to be a pastor. Over the next nine years the youth ministry exploded with Friday Night Hangout, an internship program, discipleship ministries, developing a heart for missions, and other ministries.

PART 8

THE 1990s: DECADE OF GROWTH

January 13, 1990: The Constitution and Bylaws Revised

One of the things the board knew needed to be accomplished was a revision of the constitution and bylaws. Following Pastor Rick's first year as senior pastor seemed the perfect time to present the changes. On January 13, 1990 the church voted on a total revision of the constitution and bylaws. These updates created a council of elders as the governing board of the church; this allowed the deacons and trustees to carry out their duties of spiritual care and facilities upkeep.

June 24, 1990: Pastor Tappero Returns

On December 1, 1990 Pastor Tappero returned to active staff participation as Pastor Emeritus, working with pastoral care. On June 24, 1990 the church had honored Pastor John and Evelyn Tappero for a triple anniversary—fifty years of marriage, fifty years in the ministry, and fifty years since his graduation from Northwest Bible Institute. Pastor Tappero maintains his membership, attendance, and faithful support of the church to this day.

June 11, 1991: God has Called Us to Relocate

Every part of the church started growing, and new enthusiasm was birthed into the congregation. The youth ministry was growing, the music ministry was presenting outreaches drawing in thousands of people, the kids ministry exploded, Renton Christian School was growing, and missions' giving was increasing by significant numbers. That meant the church

was forced to squeeze every ministry into the space it had—being creative at every turn. At one point the church rented a storefront building on Rainier Avenue North and named it the youth center. This storefront was also used for Sunday school, Friday Night Hangout, and Renton Christian School classrooms. On Sunday March 13, 1994, the church added a third morning worship service at 8:00 a.m. in order to free up parking space and seating room at later services.

After two years of tremendous growth, Pastor Rick came to the place where he knew the church was again ready to discuss building. On June 11, 1991, he called together forty church leaders, including pastors, elders, deacons, and trustees, to discuss the next step in church relocation. “It was clear that our previous vision was still correct,” said Pastor Rick. “God had called us to relocate.”¹⁷⁸ After this historic meeting, the architectural firm of Dennis Batty and Associates was chosen, and Urban Design, Inc. was hired as consultant. In September, the “Toward 2000: Preparing for the Harvest” campaign was initiated and new building plans were unveiled on August 20, 1991. The plan was composed of three phases: phase one included a multipurpose building with classrooms, phase two included a 2500-seat sanctuary plus offices, and phase three was an additional classroom wing.¹⁷⁹

Sunday, October 17, 1993: Permit Finally Arrives

The process of receiving another building permit from King County was very complicated and drawn out. This process included environmental determination, the post and appeal period, departmental review, revisions, and the final review and approval period.¹⁸⁰ Pastor Rick directed the people to pray for the permit to come by April 1, 1993 and for good weather

¹⁷⁸ Kruger, 42.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

and good subcontracting prices. The hope was to be in the new building by Easter of 1994.¹⁸¹ The building permit did not arrive in April as hoped, but Pastor Rick would not allow this setback to distract them. During this time, he continued to keep the church on its mission—focused on winning people to Christ.

On Sunday, October 17, 1993, the building permit finally arrived. Tom Nishimura of Urban Design delivered the long-awaited building permit amid a celebration of praise. “We’ve spent a lot of time and money trying to get this piece of paper,” Pastor Rick said to the congregation. “What it does is give us permission to build. The work is really just starting.”¹⁸² A week and a day later, the land-clearing and grading contractor was at the site with equipment.

June 1993: Construction on Phase One Begins “Multipurpose Building”

In April, Crownover Construction was awarded the general building contract. By June the walls began to go up. “After so many years, it is hard to grasp that we are actually building!” said Pastor Rick. “God has given us tremendous miracles this past year, and everything is right on schedule.”¹⁸³ A plea went out to the congregation for volunteer labor.

April 2, 1995: Church Moves to New Campus

After fifteen years of waiting, the church finally moved into their new campus. Pastor Rick recalls April 2, 1995 as “one of the greatest days of my life.”¹⁸⁴ For over fifteen years, the church had been waiting and praying for this dream to become a reality, and now it was here. Two weeks later, on April 16, the church held its first Easter services in the new church. The

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 43.

¹⁸² Ibid., 44.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Rick Ross interview.

place was packed, buzzing with excitement and energy for what God had done. Pastor Rick recalls running out of chairs, there were so many people.

Now free of former room and parking restraints, the church began to see record-breaking attendance. For the 1995 Singing Christmas Tree performances, 4,200 attended—an increase of 1,100 over the previous year. The Glory of Easter musical performances in 1996 brought in 3,565, over 1,365 more than the previous year. Other special outreaches also saw record-breaking attendance. “The Day After the Rapture” performance in April of 1996 brought 1,150 people to a single service; the “Heaven’s Gates and Hell’s Flames” drama saw a combined attendance of over 2,350 people for four performances.¹⁸⁵

May 9, 1997: Hardie Avenue Finally Sells

In April of 1995 the church entered into a lease/purchase agreement for \$1.5 million with the King of Glory Church of God in Christ; they purchased the building May 9, 1997.¹⁸⁶ Ultimately, King of Glory lost this building and it went into foreclosure. After several years and many negotiations there were two groups, a Muslim group and a Ukrainian Church negotiating for this building (The Ukrainian church started at Renton Assembly’s Hardie Avenue campus in the early nineties. The church provided Ukrainian translation during a morning service using headphones). Many years later, that same Ukraine church was able to buy the Hardie Avenue campus, and today it is an amazing place of worship for a vibrant, growing congregation.

¹⁸⁵ Kruger, 46.

¹⁸⁶ King County, <http://www.kingcounty.gov/operations/GIS/PropResearch/ParcelViewer.aspx> (accessed July 10, 2012).

PART 9

THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: THE MISSION CONTINUES

September 2002: Completion of Renton Christian School (Phase Two)

The church made a strategic and bold decision to finish the Christian education wing and the building of the Renton Christian School addition before completing the new auditorium for the church. This was a tough and emotional decision. The church desperately needed a new auditorium; however, the church had a commitment to the growth of Renton Christian School and the kids. Pastor Rick knew the adults of the church could wait a few more years.

In the fall of 1997, over four hundred students were enrolled in Renton Christian School's pre-school to eighth grade classes. Pastor Rick said, "We are getting to point we are using every room every day."¹⁸⁷ With the growth and momentum of the school, the church needed to add four modular classroom units and remodel a hallway to provide extra classrooms and a lunchroom between the years of 1997 and 2002. Then in September 2002—twenty-two years after starting the school—the church finished the building of Renton Christian School; a three-story addition on the east side of the property totally 38,680 square feet.

January 21, 2003: Church Changes Name

Pastor Rick and the board of elders officially started talking about changing the name of Renton Assembly January 8, 1993. They knew with the change of location the name of the church might need to change one day. The board started brainstorming names: Church in the

¹⁸⁷ "Renton Assembly Expands School Facilities" *Renton Reporter*, June 18, 1998, 5.

Valley,¹⁸⁸ The Living Water Life Center, and Cornerstone Assembly.¹⁸⁹ The board of elders understood that one day, when they move into the new building, the church would begin to have a regional impact, so having a city's name (Renton) did not make sense. Also, occasionally the church office would get phone calls asking, "What kind of 'assembly' plant are you? What do you 'assemble'? Are you hiring?" Pastor Rick and the board felt the name Renton Assembly limited the church from reaching people outside of the faith, and confusing to the community. After ten years of prayer and discussion, on January 21, 2003, Pastor Rick and the elders felt it was time to propose changing the name.

One of Pastor Rick's favorite verses is John 10:10: "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." Pastor Rick wanted a name that represents the "new" life Jesus gives. The name he felt strongly about was New Life Church. On January 21, 2003, the church voted to change the name Renton Assembly to New Life Church. This business meeting was filled with robust debate and conversation. At one point Pastor Rick wanted to table the discussion for a future date. He recalls one of the young leaders of the church, Tom Metcalf, standing up and saying, "Let's not put this off. Let's vote now!"¹⁹⁰ Pastor Rick believed it was the voice of this young leader that gave the church the courage to vote for this name change.

December 2003: Troy Jones becomes Senior Pastor

Pastor Rick received a call to pastor a church in North Carolina that was in dire need of strong leadership due to recent struggles. Uniquely gifted as one who knows how to remove

¹⁸⁸ Don Hoffman and John Hoole interview.

¹⁸⁹ Renton Assembly board meeting minutes, January 8, 1993.

¹⁹⁰ Rick Ross interview.

obstacles, he felt led to go to North Carolina and resigned in the fall of 2003. Even in 2002, it had been felt in the hearts of Pastor Rick and the elders that Pastor Troy Jones was called by God to someday lead New Life Church. He was a homegrown leader and not only knew the culture of this church but also had a heart and passion for the congregation. Pastor Rick recommended Pastor Troy as the next senior pastor of this church saying, “Of all the great things we could say about Troy and Jana, let’s just pick one: they are known for their pure hearts! We are thrilled to recommend our friends to you as the next Senior Pastor.”¹⁹¹ At the age of thirty-seven, Troy Jones, his wife Jana, and their two girls, Kaylee and Chelsey, were elected as senior pastors on November 9, 2003.

Pastor Troy knows the vision and heart of this church. He is known for straightforward biblical teaching, innovation, and reaching people who are checking out Jesus for the first time. Pastor Troy is uniquely gifted to honor the pillars of the church and at the same time create change for the future. He believes the church should “love the younger brother and lead the older brother.” With his unique gifts, love for the pillars of the church and his heart for lost people, Pastor Troy took on one of the greatest challenges of his life.

The first message series that Pastor Troy preached was called “The House That God Built.” During this series, he shared his passion and heart for the church. Pastor Troy believes, “The church is a hospital for sinners not a museum for saints.” This sermon series ended with a “Vision Night” in 2004 when Pastor Troy cast a new vision to reach people who are far from God, and to reach young families. Just like his predecessors, Pastor Tappero and Pastor Rick, Pastor Troy immediately made major improvements to the building: painting, adding new carpet, updating kids ministry, enlarging the lobby of the auditorium, and adding a new espresso stand called “Hebrews Café.”

¹⁹¹ New Life Church booklet given to congregation December 2003.

December 5, 2004: Starting Softer Sundays

Pastor Troy knew the church had to make some radical changes if we would continue to reach people for Christ. Understanding that one of the fundamental issues that divides churches is music style, he felt the need to start a traditional style service. In order to make this happen he needed to ask an adult Sunday school class to change both rooms and the hour they were meeting—they agreed. December 5, 2004 marked the launch of “Softer Sundays.” This service had timeless music and hymns and the congregates watched the message on a large screen TV, utilizing a broadcast quality DVR player.

January 2005: The Sticker Shock

Within his first year of being the pastor of New Life Church, Pastor Troy formed a building committee to begin plans for the long waited auditorium/worship center. The building team included Pastor Troy, Don Hoffman, John Hoole, Randy McMillan, architect Pat Morgan and church building consultant Kathi Bressler. For the next two years, this team met and designed a sixteen hundred seat auditorium, three hundred seat auditorium, coffee shop, and a large lobby for people to build community. Eventually the Donovan Brothers was chosen to be the general contractor.

King County would not allow the church to build the auditorium west of the building (its current location) because of the hillside, the wetlands, and other environmental issues. Therefore, the first architectural plans the building team designed had the building at the far end of the parking lot, closer to the highway. However, because of needed underground work and the rebuilding of all kids’ facilities, the church suffered “sticker shock” at the bid: over twenty-two million dollars! That sitting came to an immediate stop.

Following more research and further discussion, the church learned the city of Renton would allow the auditorium to be built west of the building, but the property needed to be annexed into the city in order for this to happen. With that in mind, the church decided to pause the project for one year, while they led the annexation process for the area. Following the completion of the annexation, the church was allowed to proceed with its plan to build the building in its current location; building the auditorium adjacent to the current building saved the church millions of dollars.

November 2, 2008: Ground Breaking for New Auditorium (Phase Three)

On November 2, 2008, the church had the groundbreaking ceremony for the long-awaited auditorium. The church was hoping to have the permits in hand by this day but again the process drug out. The permit finally arrived on February 17, 2009, and building started immediately after this date.

March 28, 2010: Moving into New Auditorium (Phase Three)

In 1980 the property on Maple Valley Highway had been purchased. After thirty years of prayer and waiting, the church finally moved into their new auditorium on March 28, 2010—the first service had 3,254 people! It was a day of God’s favor on the church; for people who had been around for those thirty years, it was miraculous. One of the unforgettable moments of that opening service occurred when Pastor Troy brought Pastor Tappero on stage. As they walked out, the congregation gave Pastor Tappero a standing aviation. In 1979 Pastor Tappero and the “Young Turks” dreamed of this day, and after thirty years the dream became a reality.

On April 4, 2010 the church celebrated the first Easter in this new auditorium with 4,337 people. On April 25 Pastor Rick returned to help celebrate the new building, and 3,571 people

came. After all the dust had settled, the church began to average 3,000 people each Sunday. The church grew by 800 people from Sunday, March 21, to Sunday, March 28, 2010.

2011 +: The Mission Continues

On January 16, 2011, just ten months after building the new auditorium, the church started their first multi-site campus in the Maple Valley/Covington area. It was at this time the church started to use the phrase, “One church, two campuses.” So many people were coming to the church that on August 21, 2011 over one hundred people were baptized in one day! On February 12, 2012, the church launched an initiative called “ Everything Changes.” It was on this weekend that the church finished the kids’ environments, changed its logo and church web site, added a new Saturday night service and changed the service times for Sunday morning to 9:30 and 11:15. Now in 2012, the church has six gatherings with over 3,800 people in attendance every weekend (Saturday night, Softer Sundays, two services at Maple Valley campus, and two main services on the Renton campus).

For almost nine decades methods have changed, music styles have morphed, and the culture has transformed from an agricultural age, where families sat on the porch and worked all day in the fields, to a digital age, where families communicate by email, text, Facebook and twitter. This church has survived the Great Depression and has seen the rise and fall of the economy. But for over nine decades, one thing has remained at the heart of this church—the burden and passion of two maiden ladies who had a “burning desire to see people find Jesus” and who “worked unceasingly to bring children to the church.”¹⁹²

¹⁹² McNutt, 59.

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