



STORIES OF TRANSFORMATION

BECOMING AN AMBASSADOR OF RECONCILIATION

Today I want to share with you the Story of Transformation which led me, a young white boy from segregated south Chicagoland on a journey towards becoming an ambassador of racial reconciliation here in St. Paul and in the world (*My Story*). I also want to share with you my personal and pastoral response to the cry for racial justice in our country (*My Response*).



My wife Annette and I on 6/3/2020 led here in St. Paul in a silent march by our Twin Cities Black Clergy, bearing witness to the unjust death of George Floyd, walking with our police chief, mayor, other clergy, and people of all backgrounds.

MY STORY

I'm going to start at the very beginning of my journey because the work of reconciliation

has to start at the beginning. So my story begins over 60 years ago when I was born during Thanksgiving week, 1959, in Harvey Illinois, between Chicago and Gary, Indiana. I grew up in Homewood, Illinois, a block off of 183rd Street, in other words 183 blocks from the center of Chicago, in the south suburbs. It was a blue-collar suburb, lots of folks worked in the steel industry, my father was a die sinker and my mom was a nurse. It wasn't until my late elementary years, and into my Junior High and Senior High years from 1968 into the 70's that I began to realize just how segregated the environment I grew up in was, actually more than segregated, it was racist.

White flight from South Chicago in the 60s created strong white enclaves in the south suburbs that both resisted and resented any possible encroachment from Black citizens. I clearly remember lines of demarcation that you did not cross, lines that were enforced both implicitly and explicitly. Though I was too young and unformed to fully articulate my experience, nevertheless I was aware that a vast gulf existed between my experience and the experience of "those" people, people I did not know, nor did I understand.

After graduating from Homewood-Flossmoor High School in 1977, a school that had 4,000 students of which perhaps a handful were people of color, I went off to attend Wheaton College in Wheaton, Illinois, the far western suburbs of Chicago. Wheaton too was an almost exclusively white suburb, and the college too was predominantly white. It was there that I had my first significant interactions with people from different backgrounds and cultures than my own. It was also there that this conservative baptist boy was first introduced to the charismatic movement as well as other broader expressions of the Christian faith.

After college, I returned home briefly to Homewood, began dating my wife Annette whom I had known since I was 5 years old, having grown up in the same church, and in 1983 got married to her in the church we were attending at that time, Homewood Full Gospel Church. It was there in that church that I was first immersed in a truly multiracial congregation, a forerunner church, a large and growing church that was about 50% White, 40% African-American, and 10% from other backgrounds. There I saw a picture of Kingdom reality that I had not seen before and that was tremendously attractive to me.

After our wedding and honeymoon my wife and I moved here to the Twin Cities in July of 1983. We came so that I could pursue my Masters of Divinity at Bethel Seminary and Annette went off to work at 3M as a Systems Analyst. We got involved at a local church here in St. Paul, Bethel Temple (now Bethel Christian Fellowship) where I did a ministry internship for a year before moving up to Central Minnesota to pastor Westside Church in Kettle River, 5 miles outside of a town of 174 people. There I discovered that I had a great deal to learn from people that were quite different from me. It was a lovely time, graced by the favor of the Lord. Both the church and we grew tremendously, and after five and a half years we moved back to Saint Paul when I became the senior pastor of Bethel Christian Fellowship in 1990.

In 1994 God spoke very clearly to us from Isaiah 56 and Isaiah 35 that we were called to "Radiate Life and Joy as a House of Prayer for All Nations." At the time, there were only a small handful of people of color in the church. We weren't sure just what to do next so we prayed more and began to prepare ourselves to receive whomever God might bring us. Soon he brought us our first refugee family, a family from Haiti. Then another family from Haiti joined us, then others from various places and backgrounds began to come, and over the next 15 years our church family grew to embrace folks from over 25 different nations and members from multiple American cultures. Then starting in 2010 we began to welcome whole people groups and our All Nations Family of Churches was established, now encompassing eight congregations with services in 7 different languages. Over those years my constant prayer was, *"Lord, we don't know what to do, but our eyes are on you."* 2 Chronicles 20:12.

Along the way, I went back to get my Doctorate of Ministry in Global and Contextual Leadership from Bethel University from 2006 - 2010. Through my lived experience and that season of study, over and over again I was confronted with my privilege and myopic perspective. I clearly remember one day when I was speaking to the Lord about my gratitude that He had brought all "these foreigners" into our congregation (Isaiah 56) who had enriched our life together so much. And then I heard His gentle but clear rebuke, *"Jim, don't you know that you are a foreigner too?"* That day marked a major step on my

journey of transformation.

In 2016, I accepted the invitation of the Spirit (through the voice of Molly Rouner) to lead the Pilgrim Center. This beautiful work has only served to bring me to a deeper place of humility and dependence on the Lord. Like the Apostle Peter in Acts 10 - 11, I have been on a journey all these years, first becoming aware of my cultural biases and prejudices, then beginning a learning process about other cultures and the necessity for me to adapt my perspectives to come into alignment with His. Along the way, God began to reveal the specific actions that I needed to take to begin to build bridges and walk in the way of reconciliation. And now I find myself leaning into the work of becoming an advocate for those whose voices need to be heard, whose stories need to be told, who's lives need to be valued. All preparation for becoming an "ambassador of reconciliation."

MY RESPONSE

And what does that mean right now, in this pivotal moment? What is God requiring of me, of you, of the Pilgrim Center? There are three words that I have been hearing Him speak to my soul:

LAMENT: PSALM 10



Former Child Soldiers in Lira, Uganda lamenting. 1/31/2019

It was five years ago this week, June 17th, 2015, that another horrible tragedy took place in our country, the shooting of 9 African-American parishioners at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston South Carolina at the hands of a young white man who had joined them in Bible study before taking out a gun and opening fire. As a pastor, as a human, my heart was shredded open when I heard the news. As I went to the Lord to seek wisdom, understanding, and a way to respond He brought me to Psalm 10, a Psalm of lament. Please click and read it now and listen carefully to what the psalmist says.

The first invitation from the Spirit is to respond to the injustice and the resulting brokenness that we see all around us with lament. Lament is a very common biblical posture. It is when we, as God's people, unflinchingly face the reality of the way things are broken, divided, and not working. We bring our own, as well as others grief, suffering, and pain to the Lord, focusing not only on "the issues," but placing those issues before the Lord and asking Him to help us repair where things have been broken, reconcile where things have been divided, and restore where things are not working. Everywhere God has brought us in our Pilgrim Center work there have been rivers of tears, sometimes with words, more

often with just groans. God stores up those liquid prayers and pours them back in healing and hope.

REPENT: [Nehemiah 1:5-11](#), [Daniel 9:4-19](#)



Pastor Jim repenting at International Christian Fellowship 5/31/20

[CLICK HERE TO LISTEN TO PASTOR JIM'S MESSAGE AT INTERNATIONAL CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP \(starts at 17 minute mark\)](#)

The next step that comes out of our lament, is to repent. As we face the injustice and brokenness we see around us, the Spirit invites us to take responsibility for our part in how things are as opposed to how they ought to be. Not only our sins of commission but also our sins of omission. Not only our personal sin, but, as Nehemiah and Daniel did, we identify with the sins of our people. Not only the sins of the present, but also the sins of the past. Please click and read the Nehemiah and Daniel passages.

In the Pilgrim Center, we have an amazing example of the prophetic power of this type of repentance. When our founders Dr. Arthur and Molly Rouser first went to Rwanda immediately following the genocide there, Molly asked the Lord why it was that He had brought her there. His answer was profound, *"I have brought you here to go to your knees before them, to ask the forgiveness of these people for what your own people of the West did, to divide them from each other."* Everywhere she went, Molly got down on her knees, and the door for reconciliation was opened.

In the Pilgrim Center we still enter this holy work on our knees, both literally and figuratively. Many times, in many places, I have followed Mama Molly's example and gone to my knees in repentance, asking for forgiveness. We have an opportunity to come in that same posture now, repenting and seeking forgiveness, for ourselves, for our people, for the past, and for the present. All so that we might begin to write a new story for the future, a story of repair, of restoration, of reconciliation, of shalom.

FOMENT: Isaiah 42:1-4



A stop along the Sankofa Journey to Harmony tour 5/1/2018

After we have done the deep work of lamenting and repenting, I hear the Spirit's invitation to foment. But what does that mean? I searched for an answer to a concept I do not fully understand.

I started in Noah Webster's 1828 dictionary where I found the definition of foment means to apply warm lotions in order to ease pain. So, I discovered, our first responsibility in fomenting is to come alongside to comfort and care for those who have been afflicted. Our Pilgrim Center work has always been a work of comfort and healing, bringing a balm to those who have been deeply wounded and traumatized. Starting in Rwanda, with leaders whose lives, families, and communities had been shattered by genocide PCR has come alongside all these years to encourage the "bruised reed" and empower the "smoldering wick." Please click and read Isaiah 42:1-4.

Another meaning of fomenting is to rouse, to instigate, to catalyze for change. I have lived here in the US my whole life and have also traveled to many parts of the world, and I have found that every culture and system has both beauty and brokenness in various ways. I have also discovered that there is a Kingdom culture that transcends and transforms all these earthly cultures and systems. The Pilgrim Center is called to follow the King, serving as Ambassadors of Reconciliation to catalyze Kingdom transformation in lives, relationships, and communities, until we see His justice established on the earth.

I am committed to continuing to walk together with you on this journey of becoming Ambassadors of Reconciliation. As a next step, please join me at the upcoming Living Reconciliation Evening - *Engaging the Powers: A Principled Approach* on Thursday, July 30. Please click below to find out more information or visit our website www.pilgrimcenter.org for ongoing updates and additional opportunities. My confident hope and prayer is that together as Ambassadors we might see God's shalom here in our world. Maranatha, even so come, Lord!

On the journey,
Jim Olson

UPCOMING EVENTS:

Living Reconciliation Evening:

ENGAGING THE POWERS: A PRINCIPLED APPROACH

Thursday, July 30, 7:00-9:00pm, In-person or virtual via Facebook Live

Becoming a Reconciler Course:

Thursday Evenings, August 6-September 10

Heart of Reconciliation Retreat:

Saturday, August 22

Visit www.pilgrimcenter.org for more information on these events!
