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Church of the Second Incarnation

RUBEL SHELLY

It was my great good fortune to have the opportunity to serve the same church in Nashville, Tennessee, for twenty-seven years. Called the Ashwood Church of Christ when my wife, three children, and I moved to Nashville in 1978, the church is known now as the Woodmont Hills Church of Christ and the Family of God at Woodmont Hills.

On a very personal level, my arrival was utterly inauspicious and unpromising. I moved to Nashville to pursue graduate study in philosophy at Vanderbilt University and was the church's second choice of someone to work in a limited, part-time preaching role. In retrospect, the Ashwood Church was in a housekeeping or maintenance mode at the time. Life had been rocky after a merger of the University and Waverly-Belmont congregations, and the former preacher had been released after a nine-month presence.

Several member families had abandoned the congregation—meeting then in the building once owned by the Hillsboro Church of Christ where the likes of J. P. Sanders, B. C. Goodpasture and Batsell Barrett Baxter had ministered—during that unsettled time. My presence was to be a one- or two-year interim ministry that would give the leadership time to decide about future options. My most important contribution to the life of the church for the first year or so was simply to establish the fact that Sunday assemblies would be held with continuity and a predictable preaching presence. It was a minimal task. Mine was a very modest contribution. But the winds of the spirit of God began to blow from unlikely sources. And a church gradually came to understand how to be the family of God in a particular setting for specific purposes—whose work God could bless.

Doug Varnado was the initial catalyst for the church's discovery of its identity. He grasped the vision of an insulated church learning how to make contact with its immediate environment. Moving out from a Saturday School (i.e., a one-day per week VBS-type program for neighborhood children) beginning, Doug conceived two ideas that would reform the church's presence and mission.

First, he insisted that the church could establish a winsome presence in the community through what he called a Good Neighbor Policy. So door-hangers were printed and distributed on a couple of consecutive Saturday walking tours through several blocks adjacent to the church property. There was an apology for the church's existence in the community without being an immediate blessing to it. There was an invitation for persons with needs such as grief counseling, marriage problems, or spiritual concerns to contact us at a phone number on the hanger. Far more important, there was a promise that the church would move through the same area periodically to offer free services to the then-in-decline neighborhood.

There were predictably few phone calls with requests. There had been no good faith in the past! The neighbors were watching and waiting. And the first thing Doug organized as a community service were consecutive weekend days to go through announced routes to haul off trash the city would not collect, to help elderly citizens with gutter cleaning or similar projects, and to schedule college students and teens for free help with yard work. A pattern was set that would give the church credibility with its neighbors across the years. Ministries of the most practical nature have been created for persons and families in crisis—free car

washes, repair to houses, counsel for troubled marriages, parenting classes, financial management classes, recovery groups for alcohol and drug abusers, ministries to persons with sexual addictions, support groups for persons physically and/or sexually abused, life skills mentoring for persons in low-income housing areas, etc. The list of hands-on ministries is practically endless—and still growing.

Second, Doug created out of construction paper what would become a logo for the Ashwood/Woodmont Hills Church. The language he led the church to use at every turn was “family” and “family of God.” That term and variants of the original logo continue to be used to this day. It was not terribly surprising that some local Churches of Christ were critical of what they perceived to be a name change from the official, denominational name “Church of Christ” to a non-denominational description of the church’s evolving nature.

It is precisely at this juncture that the chief trait which allowed one local church to move from institutional to relational, from internally focused to missional, took place. The beginning of misunderstanding from “the outside” and the criticisms generated by those misunderstandings morphing into misrepresentations created an initial leadership crisis. Elders who had functioned in a maintenance model for doing church were challenged to move toward and embrace a kingdom model for being church. Some could not make the move away from fixed and inflexible visions of church as always known to church as Christ’s incarnational presence. The great contribution those few persons made was to leave gracefully and without creating division.

In the earliest days of transition from one model of church to another, names such as Willis Owens, Franklin Jones, and Harvey Rochell stand out. In retrospect, it is clear that they formed five important commitments that helped guide the church to a healthier corporate life.

First, they resolved the *commit-vs.-flee issue* for a church in mid-city Nashville during a time of neighborhood decline. Against the easier possibility of relocating a spiritually health church generating rapid growth to the suburbs of Nashville, a conscious choice was made to remain in an area that had identifiable needs that could be met by a church committed to unselfish service with no strings attached.

Second, they became *permission-granting leaders*. Almost two decades ago, Lyle Schaller commented that Churches of Christ had no future unless elders gave up a false view of leadership he saw as pervasive among us: Elders function to keep their feet on the brakes of congregational life rather than as permission-granters. Someone “from the outside” made an observation that was so obviously true that most of us “on the inside” of Churches of Christ either did not see, had come to accept without question, or had no heart to try to change. Schaller’s comment explored by the elders of the Ashwood Church of Christ was revolutionary in its outcome. The leaders of the church gave themselves over to empowering people for service—resisting the temptation to micromanage, criticize, or take personal control.

Third, the elders adopted a *flexible mindset* about the church’s ministry functions. Against the common notion of the time that there are certain things that simply must be done in the life of a church (e.g., a spring and fall “gospel meeting” or a summer Vacation Bible School), they asked practical questions about effectiveness. Why continue week-long or three-day preaching sessions that so conflict with member lives and family schedules in an urban environment that nobody comes? Why continue as “outreach events” programs that now serve only our own members? Realizing that many things on our church calendar were like the image in Nebuchadnezzar’s dream—golden ideas that had become silver and now had degenerated into bronze memories or muddy duties—things that no longer seemed helpful to communicate the gospel to our neighbors were given up for the sake of trying new ideas that seemed to have possibilities.

Fourth, they created *freedom to fail* without blame or shame. When a church commits itself to trying new ideas that *appear* to have possibilities for reaching the lost, some of those ideas will succeed. As many or more will not. The elders of this church committed themselves to a policy of making the effort. Experimenting. Empowering people who believed in the new idea. And they affirmed those same people for their effort if the idea ran into unanticipated problems or simply turned out to be a bad idea.

Fifth, and this term has been deliberately avoided until now, the church elders became its *shepherds*. The term “elder,” in fact, is hardly ever used nowadays—nor has it been for the past fifteen to twenty years. As they committed themselves to involvement with people over programs, they adopted a vocabulary change to try to communicate their perspective to the body. The biblical metaphor of “shepherd” now dominates their self-image and role in the body.

Again, with the perspective now of hindsight, it seems clear that the shepherd families of the larger Family of God at Woodmont Hills have made the changes that both allowed and precipitated spiritual health in a local church. Yes, there has been significant growth. But the goal of the church’s leadership has never, never been growth. It has been health. Organic wholeness as the body of Christ. Biblical *shalom* (i.e., wholeness, well-being, soundness in faith) for the church.

The things that have been done well under their shepherd-leadership are community connections, a clear presentation of the Christ-message that is relational rather than institutional, and the ability of a church to receive and nurture marginalized persons. Key things that have been done poorly are a failure to reflect the racial diversity of our community and a failure to teach in such a way to produce the depth of authentic commitment to discipleship that would be hoped for throughout the church.

Two other names that need to be mentioned in this process are Jim Samuels and Randy Harris. Both of these bright and perceptive men were members at the Ashwood Church for a brief period of time at the end of the 1980s and/or beginning of the 1990s. As the movement from institutional lethargy to relational health was gaining momentum, they had unusual depth of insight to help see and frame what was happening in theological context. Early-morning times for discussion and prayer with them evolved into a book titled *The Second Incarnation*. And the image of the church as the corporate embodiment of the life of Jesus in today’s world has guided the majority of planning and function for the church since those critical days.

Christ still walks among the golden candlesticks that are his churches. He still loves and nurtures, rebukes and corrects. The great challenge to all our churches is to develop ears that can hear.

FOR TWENTY-SEVEN YEARS, **RUBEL SHELLY** MINISTERED TO THE FAMILY OF GOD AT WOODMONT HILLS IN NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE, LEADING IT THROUGH A TIME OF EXTRAORDINARY GROWTH. CURRENTLY HE IS VISITING PROFESSOR OF RELIGION, BIBLE AND MINISTRY AT ROCHESTER COLLEGE IN MICHIGAN.

