

A Fond Farewell from Steve Highfill

December, 2019

Wally Norling deserves early mention in this, my farewell letter to EFCA West. I will be retiring this month after serving the district as Superintendent for 29 years. If you knew Wally, you need no explanation. For those who don't, I'm reminded of the Casting Crowns lyrics "*I don't want to leave a legacy... Only Jesus.*" With all due respect, I think that otherwise noble idea completely invalidates the tireless and timeless investment that individuals make in the lives of others. Wally's disciple-making lifestyle wove a thread of continuity and strength in ministry which makes EFCA West a living legacy of his life and vision. Not only was he an organizational pioneer who helped establish this cutting-edge regional ministry in 1966, he was also a mentor and coach to scores of young leaders. If it had not been for Wally, I would have never become the pastor of what became Cypress Evangelical Free Church. If it had not been for Wally, I would have never become a district superintendent. I still frequently hear references to Wally by various leaders as someone who taught, encouraged, or exhorted them along the way. In the Hebrew spirit of telling our children and their children the stories of how we got here, I want to honor Wally as someone who built a foundation that is standing stronger than ever a half century later.

One of Wally's penchants (dysfunctions?) was an obsession with propriety and order. As he approached age 65, he became determined to finish a 25-year run as District Superintendent and then get out of the way. That coincided with December 31, 1990, and I took the mantle from Elijah on January 1, 1991. In a private setting, he pressured me to personally commit to a 25-year tenure to duplicate his own. He firmly believed that longevity usually translates into health. January 1 of 2016 came and went, but I felt a clear sense of freedom and energy to continue in this role beyond the 25-year mark. If I had the same obsession with round numbers, I would have done anything to stay in this role for another year to make it a full 30-year run. But please hear a couple of the concepts we have been preaching to our many local church leaders over the past few years:

*Unless a leader proactively initiates their own transition process, it usually does not go well

*It is better to leave a year too early than a day too late

As anyone who reads this newsletter knows, we have been very intentional over the past few years to proactively address the tsunami of leadership transition in our network of churches. I would like to believe that we have practiced what we have preached in our own organization. I cannot adequately express my delight and joy in recounting how God worked through our pastors, our staff team, our national leadership, and even NL Moore & Associates in revealing Pastor Tim Jacobs of Compass Church in Goodyear, AZ to be my successor. In the days since the announcement, I have seen confirmation after affirmation that God plans to continue to bless what Wally started so many years ago. With all that is within me, I encourage you to renew your commitment to doing ministry as a family and as a team. Tim is clearly God's man to lead this district into the next season of obedience to the Great Commission of making disciples. And he assumes leadership of a remarkable team of servants gifted and devoted to serving you in your local setting. I eagerly look forward to watching this next chapter of the adventure unfold.

I would be remiss not to share a few thoughts and observations that I've learned over the past three decades of working with our churches. This is not an anointed or extensive list, but are ideas that float to the surface with little effort:

*The local church is still Plan A of God's strategy to fulfill the Great Commission. Whether large or small, healthy or unhealthy, urban or rural, rich or poor.... She is the tangible expression of God's abiding presence in a cooperative effort to usher the unsaved into salvation, transform families and communities, and bring hope to a chaotic and discouraged world.

*God anoints and equips a community of leaders in every local church to be His mouthpiece, arms and legs, and applied wisdom in managing day to day decisions and processes. The bar of qualification for first century leaders was probably much lower than our contemporary standards, and they did quite well. The determining qualifier is the Holy Spirit anointing leaders to do their job.

*Being comprised of imperfect humans, churches inevitably experience seasons of difficulty, even conflict. These never need to be fatal but are part of the prophesied and promised process of doing life together in the family of Jesus. When mud fights are unavoidable, so is getting muddy. Accept it, don't lose heart when it happens, and ask for help.

*Ministry in particular and the Christian life in general were never meant to be a solo undertaking. Life goes better when done with others. Teams are stronger than individuals. We are better together.

*The healthiest and most stabilizing leaders in the church do not show up spontaneously or materialize out of a vacuum. Even earthly sports dynasties are built when proactive coaches and recruiters cultivate young athletes early in their lives and invest in them over the long haul. How much more should our spiritual leaders be intentionally identifying and investing in successive generations of leaders?

*There is not a direct correlation between healthy ministry and adequate resources. Some of the best financed “ministries” in the world are bankrupt spiritually. But that is not to say that there is no room for improvement in our member churches stepping up to do their part in financing the broader effort. The adage of 80-20 (80% enjoy the benefits while 20% shoulder the burden) should not be a prescription, although it is sadly too often a description of our reality.

*No one is indispensable. Our lives are vapors, but there is nothing more satisfying and peace-giving than in knowing your loyalties, efforts, and sacrifices have been unto the Lord Himself as an audience of one with no need or expectation of recognition or fanfare.

I could go on, but hopefully you detect the deep-seated sense of well-being and optimism I share as the baton of leadership is passed. For our part, Deedee and I are enjoying life with undeserved good health, family connections, and friendships. We plan to stay rooted in Southern California with frequent visits to Texas to see our kids and grandkids. God has blessed us with a local church family we love. And the options of continued ministry seem at times to be daunting: mentoring young leaders, outreach to Camp Pendleton Marines, church consulting, community and neighborhood involvement, to name a few. Dallas Seminary professor and Pine Cove Camp director Dr. Phillip Hook once warned me: “The suffocating list of options to serve Christ will only increase with age.... get accustomed to making hard choices.” That advice has proven to be prophetic. Please know that our life investment in the ministries of EFCA West guarantee our continued prayer support and interest for the duration. It has been an honor and a privilege to serve in this role. And to honor yet another of my life mentors, Dr. Charles Feinberg, I use his sign off:

In HIS faithfulness,



Steve Highfill