

## BORN FROM BELOW

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In John 3:1ff a Pharisee and ruler of the Jews named Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night with a questions that I can relate to: “Rabbi, we know that you have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.” Apparently Nicodemus was desperate enough to experience the authentic Kingdom of God in his lifetime that he would go secretly to one considered by his own as an outsider and heretic. I too have become desperate enough to find Good News that I do not have to be ashamed of, that truly has the power to save (Rom 1:16). This desperation has made me willing to go anywhere and learn from nearly anyone. Being born again or “from above” has always happened as I’ve gone below—receiving from unlikely mediators and in unexpected places.

It is urgent that people from diverse sectors of the global body of Christ humbly learn from one another and partner when possible. God’s Kingdom will break in sooner and with more power to a desperate world as people serve each other in unity. This necessity becomes especially apparent when working in extreme places where breakthroughs are urgent: among the poor, persecuted, imprisoned, addicted, disabled, terminally ill, in war-torn countries, prisons, Native reservations, hospitals and disaster areas. When the darkness and chaos of the world exposes our theologies and faith practices as lacking, we, like Nicodemus will become humbled enough to cross lines of separation. God has been calling me to receive and partner from individuals and groups that are normally isolated from each other, birthing me into an expanding family that God is bringing together as a resting place for a new movement of the Spirit committed to seeing and entering God’s Kingdom—on earth as in heaven. I invite you into a rich and evolving journey across well-established barriers into a borderless new country and empowered new immigration status as children of God and agents of God’s coming Kingdom.

After growing up in Presbyterian and Covenant churches in an affluent suburb of Seattle I began to find my own faith and calling during travels in my early twenties to Europe, Israel and Central America. For over twenty-five years now I have lived and ministered among people on the margins of society in Honduras, San Francisco, and Washington State. The challenges of ministry among the poor and excluded have led me to pursue academic training in theology and Biblical studies, ordination in a mainline protestant denomination and training in pastoral counseling. While I have seen people come to faith and experience freedom from poverty, hopelessness, addictions and negative images of God--ministry with inmates and ex-offenders in our local Skagit County Jail has humbled me, showing my knowledge, experience and spirituality as lacking. Contemplative spiritual practices have sustained me during the struggle, enriching me with the wisdom of the early church and with God’s Presence in the Eucharist and in the silence of monastic retreats. My attraction to men caught up in addictions to methamphetamine, crack cocaine, heroin and alcohol further increased my longing to see them experience true and lasting freedom. Desire for transformation became more and more desperate as I witnessed one beloved friend after another die or go off to prison for increasingly violent crimes.

The events of September 11, 2001 impacted American people, including Christians, in such a way that made it harder to see the Kingdom of God here in the USA—at least in official or mainstream places. Any focus towards people on the margins appeared lost by the panic and security-awareness that emerged as the United States invaded Afghanistan and later Iraq. Prayers for the perpetrators of violence were rare as people raised their flags high and prayed for the security and success of US soldiers deployed to the Middle East. The inability of peace activists to effectively challenge the post 9/11 war fever and patriotism leading to the invasion of Iraq further placed me in a spiritual crisis. How could a mainstream Christian community overtly associated with the nation state become a sheepfold for inmates, ex-offenders and undocumented immigrants coming to faith in the jail or area migrant camps? I found myself willing to go nearly anywhere inside or “outside the camp” to receive more wisdom and empowerment that would help me bear better news.

Jesus’ call to Nicodemus “unless a man is born from above he cannot see the Kingdom of God” has taken on new dimensions as I have sought to find the Kingdom of God in dark times and places. Not seeing the Kingdom of God in certain places seemed a necessary prerequisite for identifying it elsewhere. Yet the places where I began to see were each quite unexpected. Each revelation served to affirm pieces of a giant puzzle that seems to be bringing order of disparate life experiences, suggesting the birth of something new.

In response to our perception that the churches were over-identified with the national mood and the myth of redemptive violence, we at Tierra Nueva decided that we would need to start our own English-speaking worshipping community that would welcome dissenters, people struggling with addictions, ex-offenders and others at the margins. A group of Tierra Nueva staff and volunteers began worshipping together as an English-speaking faith community in November, 2003—at the height of the war in Iraq.

Our objective was to side with the people on the margins (as opposed to justifying the laws and policies of the State) as a body of Christ without borders committed to proclaiming the Good News of God’s Kingdom, on earth as in heaven. Four trips immediately following the beginnings of our faith community forever changed my life and ministry: Fort Benning, Georgia, Toronto, France and Honduras.

### **Pilgrimage #1, Fort Benning, Georgia, November 2003**

In late November 2003 I attended the Society of Biblical Literature and American Academy of Religion annual meeting in Atlanta, Georgia, where nearly 10,000 professional Bible scholars and theologians gathered to listen to papers on specialized topics at a luxurious convention center.

While in Atlanta I contacted the founders of an inner-city homeless shelter called the Open Door Community. This community and founding Presbyterian pastor couple Ed Loring and Murphy Davis were famous in my circles as one of the most cutting edge ministries to the homeless in North America. Ed Loring invited me to travel down on a Sunday morning in one of two vans full of homeless people to attend the annual protest demanding the closure of the

School of the Americas at Fort Benning-- a military base where thousands of police and soldiers from Central America's elite units had been trained during the 1980's.

I had known about the existence of this base and opposed it during the seven years we had lived and worked in Guatemala and Honduras beginning in 1981. I knew that tens of thousands of poor peasants, labor leaders, priests and other activists were tortured and killed by troops and intelligence agents trained at this base by US military advisors paid for by US tax dollars.

There at Fort Benning I joined a throng of some 10,000 protesters gathered that day from all across the US and Canada. The day's event consisted primarily of a peaceful march in the style of a funeral procession to commemorate Latin America's martyrs. The procession lead up to the fence at the entrance of the base between rows of mounted Georgia State Patrol and Police, passing in front of the fence that some planned to climb over as an act of civil disobedience.

As we walked in orderly lines a full width of the road across a voice announced Spanish names from a microphone on a stage. The names and ages of each known individual killed by US-trained troops and police are mentioned. I am surprised at how deeply I am moved as I begin to weep uncontrollably as the names and ages penetrate my heart: Ignacio Ellacuria, rector of the University of Central America and an outspoken critic of the Army— "presente"; Elba Ramos, the Jesuit's housekeeper, remembered as sensitive and intuitive— "presente"; Agustina Vigil, 25, pregnant at time of death— "presente"; child, 5, son of Dionisio Marquez: Marto Vigil, 75, farmer, El Mozote— "presente"; Isabel Argueta, 6, El Mozote— "presente."<sup>1</sup>

I feel sorrow over mainstream American ignorance of the US's involvement in supporting oppressive regimes and pain at the near absence of any recognition of their culpability as the protesters around me lifted white crosses and call "presente" after every name. My heart is so heavy that I cry on and on as I walk towards the base. I have been despairing about the war in Iraq, and the American public's general agreement about how the "war on terrorism" is being waged. What am I doing to resist our national direction?

I remember feeling this acutely when I first visited Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua in 1981 and became aware of our national guilt. There I had felt for the first time the God with us (Americans) shift to a God against us and with them in a way that forever changed my life.

I walk and cry, my head hung low, up to the fence separating the protesters from the base-protectors. Scores of Military Police stand ready to make arrests, clusters of plastic handcuffs attached to their belts. Soldiers to my left play loud patriotic music through a megaphone. Regular announcements are blasted through speakers warning the protesters that they will be arrested if they step foot onto the base.

I decide to stand against the cyclone fence as the protesters cycle past and back away to make room for the rest. I watch people place their crosses and signs in the fence and continue past me. Many tear-stained faces look grey with sorrow. I look out at the base trying to figure out what I am feeling: anger, despair, sadness, powerlessness, confusion.

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<sup>1</sup> See the School of the Americas Witness website for the full list of names and informative articles, [www.soaw.org](http://www.soaw.org)

“Why am I here Oh Lord?” “What can we hope to achieve in this time of war?” “How can I best resist?” “What hope is there for real change when most Americans seem complacent or in agreement with nearly anything in the name of national defense?”

My prayer is interrupted by an impression that I must read Psalm 37. Curious, I pull my Bible out of my carrying case and begin to read the Psalm 37:1-2:

Do not fret because of the wicked; do not be envious of wrongdoers, for they will soon fade like the grass, and wither like the green herb. Trust in the Lord, and do good; so you will live in the land, and enjoy security.

As I continue to read I begin to experience a surprising freedom to not fret, to refrain from anger and to forsake wrath as I feel impressed by the truth of the words of this Psalm:

Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath. Do not fret—it leads only to evil. For the wicked shall be cut off, but those who wait for the Lord shall inherit the land. Yet a little while, and the wicked will be no more; though you look diligently for their place, they will not be there (Ps 37:8-10).

I have seen the wicked oppressing, and towering like a cedar of Lebanon. Again I passed by, and they were no more; though I sought them, they could not be found (Ps 37:35-36).

The truth of this Psalm is touching me and I feel compelled to make it my own. At the same time more questions are arising. “Who are the wicked?” I ask. As I look out through the fence I notice that most of the soldiers are African American. “Certainly not them,” I think. So many soldiers are seeking a way out of poverty, a future that beats the streets or jails and prisons.

Deep in my heart I am receiving a strong impression, almost a prophetic word: “The US is on its way down as a global empire. America will fall. The time is short. These are dangerous times.”

I know that America is in deep trouble. 9/11 gave us an opportunity to change our way of thinking—to repent of a way of wielding power that has gained us many, many enemies. Yet we act like we are invincible. The power of pride is an illusion. “Pride goes before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall,” I remember from my required grade school memory verses.

Yet a little while, and the wicked will be no more; though you look diligently for their place, they will not be there. But the meek shall inherit the land and delight in abundant prosperity (Ps 37:10-11).

The mention of the meek causes me to turn away from gazing at the soldiers and the base and look at the crowd. Could they be among the meek? I wonder. I notice that many are crying. Many look hopeless. I feel drawn to read Matthew 5:1a, 2, 3-10:

When Jesus saw the crowds, he began to speak and taught them saying:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.  
 Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.  
 Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.  
 Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.  
 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.  
 Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.  
 Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.  
 Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.  
 Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

I feel a sudden lifting of my sorrow and a call to minister to the protesters. "These are your people, serve them," I am thinking.

I approach a man who is weeping and point to Jesus' words in my open Bible to those who mourn: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." This is my place, I feel. God has called me to minister to God's people, the humble ones. At the same time I think of the soldiers across the fence, and feel compelled to return and to read another section from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount:

You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you (Matt 6:43-44).

Reading this reminds me of Paul's words written from prison in Romans 12:14 regarding enemies:

"Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them."

In a moment of inspiration I point at every soldier I see and I bless them: "I bless you in the name of Jesus!" "I bless you in the name of Jesus!" "I bless you in the name of Jesus!"

I think of the Seraph who flew to Isaiah holding a live coal from the altar. It feels like once again my mouth has been touched and my guilt has been taken away and my sin blotted out. I've heard the call and say yes to not only comforting the weak, but to Isaiah's call to speak to his own people a difficult message. Could Isaiah's very message be what I am witnesses now as mainstream America continues to live in denial as we fall under increasing debt and international disdain:

Say to this people: see see, but do not perceive, hear hear but do not understand. Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed (Isa 6:9-10).

I can see that the national blindness and deafness of Isaiah's time is now being replayed in our own. I dread the consequent fulfillment of this word in the verses that follow, which describe a more severe judgment comes that echoes the words of Psalm 37.

Then I said, "For how long, O Lord?" And he answered: "Until the cities lie ruined and without inhabitant, until the houses are left deserted and the fields ruined and ravaged, until the Lord has sent everyone far away and the land is utterly forsaken (6:11-12).

I hear the imperatives of Isaiah: "Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow (Isa 1:16b-17).

I think again of Psalm 37:3: "Trust in the Lord and do good; so you will live in the land, and enjoy security" (Ps 37:3) and am reminded of Romans 12:1:

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Is it too late for mainstream America? I wonder. As long as we are convinced that our problems are due to an abundance of wickedness that we must combat we are in serious trouble. As we learn to turn over the problem of the wicked to God and focus on the remedying the tragic absence of good. In the absence of good all efforts to combat evil are doomed to failure.

As our two vanloads of homeless men and shelter volunteers drive home, I talk with black man fresh out of jail who has been estranged from his son, who is now in prison. He is afraid to reestablish contact. He doesn't want to disappoint his son again, or risk being rejected when he makes an effort to step back into relationship. I encourage him to write his son a letter. We talk with others about reading the Bible and relate it to the struggle to stay clean and sober.

They let me off at the fancy hotel where I am staying and I walk back into the Society of Biblical Literature and American Academy of Religion meeting. I return to the vast array of papers being presented, book tables and scholars visiting among themselves. I am a man of unclean lips living among a people of unclean lips. Will we keep on seeing but not perceive? How long Oh Lord?

Like Isaiah, the prophet Jeremiah reflects a prophetic stream announcing judgment to the people of God. God called Jeremiah to announce Judah's destruction at the hands of the Babylonians (Jer 1:13-17). God empowered Jeremiah against the entire religious and political establishment of Judah.

Now, gird up your loins, and arise, and speak to them all which I command you. Do not be dismayed before them, lest I dismay you before them. Now behold, I have made you today as a fortified city, and as a pillar of iron and as walls of bronze against the whole land, to the kings of Judah, to its princes, to its priests and to the people of the land. And they will fight against you, but they will not overcome you, for I am with you to deliver you," declares the Lord (Jer 1:19-19).

The prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah invite a resistance alongside the oppressors on behalf of the oppressed to the point of even going down with them into exile.<sup>2</sup> How can I become an agent of transformation on behalf of the poor in the midst of a people committed to sanctioning, punishing and paying back the bad guys?

Before I could answer this question I was to see the Kingdom of God in the flesh in a place “down below” my normal sights among the economically and socially marginalized poor. God was about to show me that being born from above include transforming encounters with God mediated by people I would not naturally receive from because they were overly identified with the dominant culture and scandalous in my eyes: mainstream people in the charismatic renewal movement.

### **Pilgrimage #2 Toronto**

Upon returning from the Atlanta I began preparing for a week-long spiritual retreat I decide to take with my brother Andy, a Presbyterian pastor ministering in Fairbanks Alaska. I had decided to step out of my comfort zone and visit Toronto Airport Christian Fellowship (TACF), home of the infamous “Toronto Blessing.” This represented a major step for me, having been so utterly disillusioned by American charismatic tendency to over-identify with the conservative political agenda in the United States and throughout the world and with legalistic ways of interpreting the Bible that excluded “sinners” from churches in Central America.

Verbo Church’s support of Rios Mont in Guatemala in the 1980’s followed by the American Christian support of the Reagan Administration’s Contra war in Honduras as a “holy war” against communism had caused me to doubt the Holy Spirit’s involvement in many charismatic and evangelical churches. My own experience with legalistic Pentecostal churches in Honduras and earlier experiences of feeling pressured to speak in tongues as a sign of my belonging to Jesus by the Charismatic renewal movement in the 1970’s had further alienated me.

However, in recent years I had watched my youngest brother Peter go through a powerful conversion through repeated visits to the Toronto Airport Christian Fellowship and elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> Peter had struggled with addiction to cocaine and other drugs and had lost custody of his daughter to an ex-partner that appeared to be involving their young daughter in child pornography circles. Peter’s conversion was at first marked by over-zealous condescending, with regular comments to me like “your church is dead” and “there is no power in your ministry.” However I watched Peter mature at an unusually rapid rate, becoming gentler and more humble as he went from renewal conference to renewal conference in Toronto and around the country.

Finally one day while visiting in Seattle he had invited me to a Randy Clarke meeting a half an hour from home. He explained how Randy Clarke was the minister who was teaching

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<sup>2</sup>For those already in exile, a whole other model exists for prophetic ministry to those in exile. I recognize that Isaiah 40-66 offer an empowering image of ministry that recruits the down trodden as God’s change agents and begin to think on this.

<sup>3</sup>Peter had also benefited from other renewal centers like Brownsville Texas, the International House of Prayer in Kansas City, Morningstar Ministries in North Carolina, and Pensicola Florida.

when the Spirit had fallen in Toronto eight years before. People had been so overcome by the presence of God that they had fallen to the floor. Many had experienced uproarious laughter as a manifestation of the Spirit. God continued to show up like this night after night, attracting thousands of people from all over the world to nightly meetings and regular conferences that continue to today. Over five million people had visited TACF after eight years, contributing significantly to a global renewal movement marked by physical and emotional healing and a rediscovery of God as a Father who has nothing but abundant love for his children.

“Come on Bob, be open,” Peter urged. “Come and see what I’ve been into. You might like it.”

There was nothing I could come up with to resist the invitation. As I entered the church that was hosting this conference I found myself moved by worship so joyful and free that I felt for the first time in my life that maybe I could do this eternally. People from every age, social class and ethnicity did everything from dance, sit, lie prostrate, raise their arms, bow their heads, or kneel as the worship band played one engaging song after another. At the same time I was startled and at times alarmed by bizarre cries, roars and sighs ranging from people shaking, falling and charging the speaker in order to receive a blessing.

On the second night of the conference Randy Clark invited all the pastors and their spouses forward for a prayer of blessing for their lives and ministries. Gracie and I went forward along with several hundred others, and joined a line across the front of a huge auditorium. The ministry team began praying for people way down to our right at the beginning of the line as the band played contemplative worship music. I looked in horror as I watched people collapse to the floor after receiving prayer from a ministry team that moved along the line towards Gracie and I. This was not what I had expected or desired! Yet I knew I needed as many prayers as could be offered. I decided that rather than opt out I would pray the “Jesus prayer”: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on us,” as I waited, believing that Jesus would protect me from anything that he wouldn’t want me to experience. When the ministry team finally reached me and began praying I felt an incredible peace come over me, but I did not fall.

After they left I opened my eyes and looked to either side to find everyone on either side of me laying “overcome by the Spirit” on the ground. Many were laughing hysterically. I rejoined my three children near the back and immediately my second son Luke asked me if he could go up so he could receive prayer that was then being offered to everyone present. When Randy Clarke came along and prayed for Luke and me again I looked him in the eye. His comment “whoa, you look like you’ve been hit about seven times,” even though I hadn’t fallen made me feel strangely welcomed as a brother among these very different strangers. When I turned around I immediately noticed a man convulsing dramatically before a woman who prayed for him. My first thought was that she needed help so I came behind the man and laid my hands on his shoulders. Immediately he crumpled to his knees and began to worship, apparently touched by our combined prayers. I was moved to see pairs and circles of people praying for each other throughout the large room. This experience opened Gracie and I up to a part of the body of Christ that I had distrusted and even at times despised. Yet my prejudices about charismatic being politically right wing was still an obstacle.



One day my brother Peter called me from TACF to tell me that one of the main speakers had called Americans to drop their national flag and raise up the flag of the Kingdom of God. This surprising word was the final straw that broke down my resistance to going for myself to see whether there was something I could receive that would benefit me, my family and our ministry. In October 2003 Grace was the first to succumb to my brother Peter's salesmanship, deciding to attend Toronto Airport Christian Fellowship's annual Catch the Fire Conference. Grace called me every evening from the conference telling me of the amazing signs of God's Presence that she was witnessing and herself experiencing. She heard the inspiring testimonies of Heidi Baker, a North American missionary to Mozambique who had given her life to ministry to the poorest of the poor throughout the world.

Heidi Baker had come to Toronto five years earlier, exhausted and thirsty for more of God after years adopting street children off the streets of Maputo. She told of God's renewing touch and call to intimacy there at TACF that had led to greater fruitfulness in her ministry, leading to a revival among the rural poor throughout the country. Her stories caused us to trust, opening our hearts more to receiving ministry from this part of the body of Christ.

Now as I was heading to Toronto I was planning to get a deeper look into a movement that I felt desperate enough to consider. I had felt a divine challenge that sounded something like this: "Bob, if you could receive one thing that would positively transform your life and ministry to the people you serve from these people, even if there were 99 features that turned you off, would you go and receive from them?"

"Yes Lord, I will go," I remember agreeing. Much like Nicodemus, I made plans to attend the conference "by night", being careful to tell no one to avoid embarrassment or criticism.

So on January 20, 2004 I arrived at Toronto Airport Christian Fellowship for their pastor's conference. My fears and feelings of vulnerability at opening myself up to such radical difference were somewhat eased by the sign at the entrance to the sanctuary: "Be not afraid little children. It is the Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom."

The conference began with an hour or more of worship that was like nothing I had ever experienced. Several thousand pastors and leaders from all over the world sang, clapped, and danced as the worship band rocked high praises to God. Then the founding pastor John A. Mott warmly welcomed all the conference participants, stressing to the Americans that not all Canadians were against them, but that many understood the need for a global policeman and were thankful to Americans for exercising this role. This "welcome" felt like a fist in the stomach, confirming my prejudices that charismatic Christians were loyal to conservative political agendas, confusing them with the Kingdom of God. Since I was half-expecting to be offended in this way I decided that I would try to remain open. Then later that day Carol A. Mott, John's wife and co-founder of TACF gave a talk entitled "Life or death in the ministry" that deeply affected me.

Carol spoke simply but compellingly about how any kind of judgment, resentment, rejection, hatred or fear functions like a dam that blocks the flow of God's blessing to people.

“What prevents us from receiving the blessing?” she asked.

“An angry father. A controlling, dominating mother. We have buried alive many hurts that come alive in later years. We have buried these things, which must be brought to the cross. There is help, freedom, wholeness. Jesus can heal these problems,” preached Carol.

She went on to describe Jesus as a man who knew he was totally loved by his Father and lived out of the security that came from a relationship with his dad. She affirmed the need to receive the Spirit of adoption a God’s children so we could come into the same place of security and intimacy with the Father as Jesus experienced.

Carol insisted that to be loved we must be healed in our inner selves, and that this begins by being reconciled with our fathers and mothers. She asked the crowd “how many of you would like to be exactly like your father or mother?” as a way of inviting any hidden resentments to surface in people’s hearts. She spoke simply but compellingly about the importance of inner healing so people can be freed from performance orientation.

“If we have not been affirmed in our inner self,” said Carol, “then we will try to get affirmation elsewhere: from position, degrees, relationships, whatever. There’s a hurt, insecure, inner heart that makes us seek for security.”

Carol went on to share familiar texts regarding forgiveness, such as Jesus’ call to not judge (Matt 7:1), to forgive from the heart as a requirement for living a life free of marked by grace and not indebtedness (Matt 18:35) and the admonition in Hebrews 12:15 to see to it that no root of bitterness springs up.

Carol talked about the commandment to “Honor your father and your mother, stressing how the promise that follows “that you may live long and it may go well with you” assures blessing. She went on to confess her sin of dishonoring her mother, and shared how God had freed her from resentment over a three-and-a-half-year-period. She invited all of us to step into a place of grace and a refuge from the accuser, citing 1 Peter 5:8:

Discipline yourselves; keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour.

“Satan wants to bring us into justice,” stated Carol. “He cannot touch us in the grace place. If you can stay in the grace of God, the enemy will not be able to get you. We want the Lord to find what is in us and deal with it so the enemy cannot find anything.”

She invited anyone who felt that God was speaking to them regarding dishonoring of their parents because of past hurts and anyone who struggled to forgive their parents completely, even if they were long dead to come up to receive prayer.

I was hit by a longing to completely release my parents from all my judgments, so I made my way up to the front to receive prayer so I could completely forgive my father and mother,

along with 400-500 others. Carol began by inviting the Holy Spirit to come, revealing the wounds that we may have long buried. Memories surfaced almost immediately of events from my childhood. When Carol invited the Spirit to sound the depths of our hearts, removing the scar tissue so we could experience emotional healing for these old hurts, I found myself crying, along with hundreds of others. Carol took us through prayers that included releasing our parent(s) into God's Grace, not because they deserved it, but because of Jesus' work on the cross. I forgave my parents of any debt they had incurred towards me, and asked God to forgive me for dishonoring them. As Carol led us through prayer after prayer I felt tremendous relief. When she prayed that God would pour out the Holy Spirit upon us, bringing us comfort and joy, I felt a blanket of comfort and joy flow over me. We ended by praying for the person beside us before breaking for dinner.

This session on forgiveness was only the first of a four-day conference that would change my life forever. On my way to listen to John Amott's session on understanding manifestations of the Spirit, I asked someone standing by the door where this workshop was being held. When he responded in French, I quickly learned his name was Jean Paul and he was from Montpellier, the city in the South of France where Grace and I had lived and studied for three years. Since he was booking for the same workshop, we ended up attending it together and I translated for him in the absence of a French translator.

At the end of the workshop John and Carol invited those who wanted prayer to line up around the periphery. Jean Paul and I stood together awaiting John and Carol, who moved rapidly from person to person, laying their hands on each one and saying "fill" or "fire." As they moved towards us I found my heart beating wildly, and feelings ranging between terror and excitement. The next thing I knew I was on my back on the floor beside Jean Paul, overcome by an incredible peace as I "rested in the Spirit" for the first time.

That afternoon Jean Paul introduced me to Serge Jacquemus, his pastor from the Église Réformée de France who I learned had participated in a doctoral program with me in psychoanalysis in Montpellier years before. As the days went on I met pastors and leaders from all over the world and must have received prayer over twenty times either from the front or from well-trained ministry team volunteers who prayed and prophesied over people who lined up for prayer after the sessions.

Speakers regularly spoke of "the anointing", a new term for me which signified our inclusion into Jesus' messianic authority through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. They emphasized the material reality of the Holy Spirit's anointing, which like oil glistens on you, soaks in and penetrates in a way that equips and enables people for ministry. This anointing comes on people through receiving an impartation from someone who is moving in "the anointing" themselves, having been baptized by the Holy Spirit or otherwise further empowered through the laying on of hands.

Speakers emphasized that the anointing is imparted in a variety of ways. In the Old Testament the Lord took the Spirit that was upon Moses and distributed to the 70 elders (Num 11:10), causing them to prophesy (Num 11:25). Elisha asks his master Elijah the prophet for a double portion of his spirit, which he passionately and attentively seeks (2 Kings 2). For the

disciples this happened when Jesus blew on them (John 20:21) or the Spirit filled them as on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2. The anointing continues to be passed on through a myriad of ways, from the laying on of hands (1 Tim 4:14) and hearing the word preached (Acts 10:44) to worship and soaking in God's presence.

On the final day in the morning I went to what I thought to be an informational session with John A. Mott on soaking prayer in a building that was an old fire station. At this session I had no expectation of receiving prayer. After teaching on soaking prayer as a form of contemplative prayer where the Spirit is welcomed to flow into people as they listen to worship music, John began to pray for the attendees to receive a special anointing for praying for others. When he came to me he slapped his hands into my palms saying "receive the full anointing of the Holy Spirit for healing, deliverance, preaching the gospel." He then placed his big hands firmly on either side of my neck under my ears and said: "receive the Holy Spirit" and blew all over my chest and face.

The next thing I knew I was feeling like a feather in the wind and found myself fully-conscious on my back on the floor. An intense, burning heat settled across my forehead just over my eyebrows, causing me to open my eyes and look up, trying to identify the source of the heat. Fluorescent lights flickered from the warehouse ceiling some thirty feet above. I felt heat radiating out of my hands and saw in my mind's eye a vision of blue flames shooting upwards out of my hands. I felt a weight on me as I lay there for a while amazed and perplexed.

Eventually I got up and made my way out, catching up with John A. Mott, who I began to talk with about my earlier upset regarding what he had said when he welcomed Americans uncritically regarding the war in Iraq. As we walked together through a parking lot in minus 20 degree temperatures, I shared with John that I had finally decided to come to Toronto because my brother shared that a leader had stated the need for Americans to lower the US flag and raise up the flag of God's universal Kingdom.

"You really came here for that reason?" John responded, causing me to realize that in fact my own thirst for more of God and desperation to see people transformed were my truest reasons for coming "by night", as Nicodemus had. I continued though to share how upsetting it was for me to hear him welcome Americans role as global policeman.

"It seems that our role is to be 100% about proclaiming the Kingdom of God and not supporting the policies of governments of this world," I urged.

John said that he had seen God make use of nations to stop evil dictatorships and to open the way for revivals, but that finally he agreed that we should be 100% about the work of the Kingdom. He excused himself and I found my seat, feeling deeply touched by God's encounter mediated through John, vulnerable for having shared but ultimately heard and yet satisfied that I had been able to voice my concern.

That afternoon Serje Jacques invited me to accompany the A. Motts for several days in France after their speaking engagements at the annual ecumenical renewal conference *Embrasse Nos Coeurs* in Paris six weeks from then. He insisted that my having received my doctorate

from the French Reformed graduate school in Montpellier, my membership in the contemplative spiritual community *Fraternité Esprituelle Les Veilleurs* and my recent induction into the spirituality there at TACF would make me a good ambassador to the French churches in need of renewal. While this invitation intrigued me, I felt far from ready to identify further with this movement. However the final afternoon and evening sessions and the days that followed further encouraged me to embrace these experiences as a new induction from below that would open my eyes to the works of God.

That afternoon and evening Randy Clark of Global Awakening and Colin Dye spoke on empowerment and healing, practicing their teaching by praying for people's healing based on words of knowledge that punctuated their talks. Each of the speakers that week emphasized that the Gospel of Jesus must not go out in word only, but also with power. This power is received by the disciples when Jesus sends "the promise of my Father upon you" that results in them being "clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24:49). This power is the enabling of the Holy Spirit to be witnesses. After the resurrection the Spirit was given so we can produce the proof that Jesus is still alive. There must be a supernatural demonstration that Jesus is alive so that words and service will be "confirmed with the signs that follow," in such a way that not-yet-believing people would come to faith in Jesus. Each of the speakers admonished people to be so full of the Holy Spirit that we would be empowered to do the works of Jesus in ways that would break through barriers of race, religion and culture, and social class. I left feeling won over to the added value of much of this teaching received "by night" from those I had written off for years as having nothing of value to offer.

The next morning as I flew back to Vancouver on an early flight I began to prepare for three sermons I had to do later that day. I began to read the Scriptures for the Common Lectionary for that day, which surprisingly were Isaiah 61 and Luke 4:18ff. As I read the readings I immediately stopped, shocked that these Scriptures that had been the texts of my life were suddenly jumping out at me in new ways:

I read through Luke 4:18-19's familiar citation of Isaiah 61:1, which suddenly came alive in a new way.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me to preach the Gospel to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives,  
And recovery of sight to the blind,  
To set free those who are down-trodden,  
To proclaim the favorable year of the Lord.

The first line "the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, and he has anointed me" was leaping off the page. Could this Spirit upon me, this anointing be what I have in some way lacked in my ministry to people at the margins? I wondered. To my left sat a Hassidic Rabbi, whose side curls bobbed as he read his prayer books. I pulled out my laptop and turned to the Hebrew text of Isaiah 61. When he finished his prayers I asked him if I could ask him a question about Isaiah 61. He agreed and I asked him if he believed that Isaiah 61 was describing the Messiah who his community awaited. "Yes," he said.

“When the Messiah returns, will he be the only anointed one, or do you believe that he will pass on his anointing to the Jewish people?”

“He will be the only one,” replied the Rabbi, revealing a significant difference from the Christian understanding of the anointing by the Spirit of all believers.

“How do you believe the prophets originally anointed the Messiah’s in ancient Israel?” I asked.

“We believe they smeared oil across the forehead,” the rabbi responded confidently, running his finger just over the tops of his eyebrows.

I sat stunned, wondering how this new experience of God would affect my ministry. In the midst of my preparations for my sermon I was interrupted by a Sikh Indian man sitting beside me to my right.

“Do you believe in God?” he asked, pointing to my open Bible.

“Yes, I replied, “and how about you?”

“Well yes, I do, but I am not very religious. Some people need God, I don’t need God,” he replied.

“Why do you believe in God?” he asked me.

I began to share about how I had seen God act to help people, and shared the story of Eugenio, a man who had been freed from alcoholism through a process of conversion that began in jail. I told him about Alcoholics Anonymous’ 12 step program, which begins with a recognition that you are incapable of stopping drinking by yourself and the affirmation that you need a higher power to free you from your addiction.

“My father drinks too much,” replied the man. “When he drinks, he is very violent,” he continued.

I immediately sensed that this man had witnessed his father beating his mother and commented.

“You have witnessed your father beating up on your mother when he drinks, haven’t you? This was very painful for you to witness because you love your mother and father. You are worried that maybe you too will do this when you’re married,” I commented, surprised by my boldness.

“Yes, you are right,” he responded. “I am just returning from three months with my family in India. At the beginning of my visit my father drank. He gets violent. He feels very bad afterwards.”

“Are you worried that you too may have a similar problem?” I asked, again surprised by my confidence.

“Yes, when I drink I am violent. I have a girlfriend. I am worried that I might become violent with her if I marry and keep drinking,” he confessed. “But I don’t need any help from God,” he clarified.

“How can my father get help where he is, there are no AA groups where he lives?” he asked.

“If you want, I would be glad to pray for you and him, that God would free you both from this problem,” I offered.

“No, I don’t need God,” he stated emphatically.

“Well, I would be glad to pray for your father if you’d like,” I backtracked.

“I would like that,” he agreed.

I asked him if I could place my hand on his arm as I prayed, and he agreed. As I began to pray I felt heat pouring into this man through my hand and he immediately began to breathe heavily, almost to the point of hyperventilating. I ended my prayer and asked him how he felt.

“Very good,” he said, looking surprised.

I was amazed by these first encounters since the conference. That afternoon in the jail I led Bible studies on Isaiah 61 and Luke 4:18ff, and preached at our English and Spanish services. At the close of each service I invited people to come up to be anointed with oil to remember their status as part of Jesus’ Messianic community.

That evening when I went to bed I wondered whether everything would fade away now that I was far from the intense environment of Toronto, with its incredible music leaders, ministry team members and speakers.

In the middle of the night of my first night home I found myself awoken by a feeling of intense energy coursing through my body. I felt like I was plugged into the electric outlet. I awoke refreshed, but unable to think about anything other than worshipping God. This continued day after day, night after night for weeks. How would this affect my ministry? I wondered.

### **Healing encounters with Zack and Fabiano**

The first week back I went to the jail for my regular Thursday Bible study, curious to see whether this retreat would in any way affect my way of operating

Upon entering the jail's multipurpose room my eye immediately notices Zack, a strapping, 31-year-old, Anglo man who stands 6'7". His shaven head, mustache, mischievous face and heavily tattooed neck and forearms make him look intimidating. About ten other Anglo guys sat around him to the right. A dozen Mexican men sat across from them to my left. After shaking hands with everyone I took a seat in the circle to begin the Bible study.

"Tonight, I don't want to impose my particular choice of a Bible study on you guys," I state in Spanish and English, looking around at each man around the circle. "Everyone is always imposing their agendas on you. I'd like to know if there's any particular question or biblical story you want to look at." Immediately Zack speaks up.

"These Mexicans all think I'm a racist, and maybe they're right. I do get into my fair share of fights and can be hard to live with. I just want them to know that I respect a lot of things about them and their culture-- the way they value family, their willingness to work hard. I guess I'd like to learn how to get along."

The Mexicans were looking a little uncomfortable as I translated Zack's words into Spanish. There had been some tensions with Zack so they seemed wary of his advances. I welcomed the question and then formally began the Bible study with a prayer inviting the Holy Spirit to be present as our guide and to bless each person. Thinking quickly of an appropriate text, I reached for Luke 15, about the judging attitude of the Pharisees towards Jesus for eating with tax collectors and sinners and his parable in response.

Together we read through the three stories that make up one parable: the story about the finding of lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son. The men become noticeably more relaxed and even happy as they see Jesus comparing God or himself to a pastor who leaves the 99 compliant sheep who have their acts together to search for the one lost sheep who's in trouble—until he finds it! They seem moved when we read about the woman who after losing one of her precious coins turns the house upside down. Here, God is revealed not like the masked and heavily-armed drug task force officers who scour apartments searching for illegal drugs—but like a lover looking for something precious that symbolizes them! Their growing amazement turns to joy as we read about the son who after hitting bottom partying, staggers back in humiliation, willing to do time in servitude only to find the father running to embrace him before a confession even leaves his lips. As I wrap up our time together by inviting people to stand for a time of prayer, something surprising happens.

Zack jumps up from his seat and runs towards me, blurting out his conviction that he thinks God wants us to pray that Fabiano's liver be healed. Fabiano, a large, heavily-tattooed, Mexican man with a shaved head—the most likely man in the room to have a racial run-in with Zack looks shocked.

"Is it true that you have a problem with your liver?" I ask. He tells me that he's been experiencing sharp pains for a while and they're getting worse and worse. "Do you mind if we pray for you?" I ask. He politely agrees.



“Don’t you have a liver problem too, Zack?” I ask, knowing from a previous encounter that his 17 years of heroin addiction has taken a heavy toll on his liver and kidneys. Zack’s hands are swollen to twice their size.

“Yeah, but listen Bob. I’m always thinking about Zack, about me and my problems. I think God wants me to focus on others, like Fabiano here.”<sup>4</sup>

He agrees to let me pray for him, too, as we gather in a circle and hold hands. I place a hand on each man’s shoulders and we pray: for God’s Spirit to come to bring healing to Zack and Fabiano’s livers. We pray too for people’s legal problems, families and that we’d all experience a greater thirst for God, and that God would fill us with faith, hope and love. God’s Spirit is all around us in the room. I feel it pulsing through my hands in our circuit of solidarity. There’s a warmth of Presence that lingers as we finish praying and say our good-byes.

Fabiano and Zack don’t show up for the next study, but a week or so later Fabiano takes his seat with a now mostly-Mexican group. I ask him how he’s feeling and he tells me there’s no more pain in his liver. I call Zack later that day, but he says he’s still feeling bad. We pray over the phone for healing and a few weeks later he attends our study.

“Everything seems to be better,” he tells me. “The doctor’s tests have even come out giving me a clean bill of health.” Zack tells me he’s been praying for lots of people and God’s been answer prayer after prayer.

I find myself unable to hold back from sharing my excitement for God’s new work in my life and in the jail with nearly everyone I know in the weeks following Toronto. I feel a constant desire to worship God and to read everything I can get my hands on regarding the Holy Spirit, healing and other topics related to renewal. Meanwhile, I make contact with Serje Jacquemus, who I agree to help as he hosts John and CarolA mott.

### **Pilgrimage #3 France**

I fly into Paris on a Saturday morning, the last day of a four-day renewal conference “Embrasse Nos Coeurs,” which I envision as a humble group of several hundred in some old Eglise Reformee de France in Paris. I take the RER train to within a few blocks of the conference site, and enter modern conference center facility. Priests in monastic habits converse outside the entrance. I join an assortment of African immigrants and French people as we make our way into the conference. At the reception area I discover to my surprise that I am an invited guest and speaker, and am told to go to the speakers meeting room for prayers before the morning session begins. There I meet Serje, who tells me that I am scheduled to share my personal story in the first afternoon session, just before CarolA mott’s keynote teaching. I cannot believe my ears. Not only am I feeling completely inadequate to speak alongside these people, I haven’t slept in nearly 24 hours and am exhausted. On my way back from lunch I run

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<sup>4</sup> While there were not overt, verbal links between Zack’s actions and our Bible study on Luke 15, I believe that Zack saw himself both as one of the sinners with whom Jesus ate and as a discriminatory Pharisee to whom he addressed the parable. In any case, Zack exercised a bold freedom, much like Jesus, in response to the reading of Scripture and the Presence of the Spirit in our Bible study.

in to John A mott in the street, who doesn't rem em ber m e. A s I beg in to share how G od has been working in m y life and m in istry, he p laces a hand on m y shou lder as w e w alk as says, "I thank you Father for your work in Bob' s life. G ive him m ore Lord, m ore." I fee l G od' s presence filling m e w ith peace a w e w alk in to the speakers lounge for prayer.

Som e fifty French and Sw iss leaders gather in a circle and each person introduces them selves, fo llow ed by a tim e of prayer for G od' s Spirit to com e. Leaders are soon laying on the ground, resting in the Spirit. Som eone approaches m e and points to a Rom an Catholic priest laying beside a m an in a suite and tie.

"That' s a leader of the Dom inicans beside the head of the A ssem bly of G od denom ination in France," he said, sm iling in astonishm ent.

"This is incred ible, never have I seen som ething like this."

A s w e near the end of this prayer tim e the conference organizer invites m e and Carol to com e in to the center of the group so they can lay hands on us. I cannot believe how quickly I am being included as an insider. Em powered by this prayer I head out. A Rom an Catholic m an approaches m e and says: "I believe that G od has show ed m e that you are here for m ore than you know . You are here to be a special blessing for France," he said.

A fter nearly an hour of worship and introductions I am invited to the podium to share m y story. I beg in in English w ith Serje interpreting, but am soon speaking for m yself in French. I tell of m y work among the poor in Honduras and in the jails and m igrant camps of Washington. I tell of how m y entire m in istry I have been inspired by Jesus' inaugural sem on in Luke 4, where he describes him self as the fulfillment of Isaiah 61. I tell how the severity of people' s problem s has pushed m e to learn from m any different perspectives w ithin the body of Christ. I share how frustrated I have become due to m y failures to really help people submerged in the darkness of heavy addictions, dom estic violence and other troubles. I tell how I have been wondering why the Gospel I bear does not appear to have the power to truly save. I share how I cannot accept either blam ing the "sinners" or G od. I tell how I have seen in the Gospels that Jesus never blam es sinners for not being transform ed. Jesus doesn' t give up on lost sheep, but looks for them *until they are found*. I share how I feel like the disciples who com e to Jesus wondering why they cannot cast the dem on out of the boy like he can. I note how Jesus does not blam e the boy but rather the disciple' s practices: "this one only through prayer and fasting can be cast out." I tell of m y journey to Toronto and m y experience of receiving the anointing through John' s prayers. I tell about the fire on m y forehead, of the Hassidic Rabb i' s interpretation and of the effects on all this on m y life and m in istry. I end m y talk telling the story of the healing of Zack and Fabiano' s livers and the new hope we have as G od confirm s our Bible studies and advocacy work w ith "signs that follow ."

A s I speak I can see that John and Carol are listening intently, undoubtedly surprised to hear such a story. I step down from the platform where I am m et by a French Jesu it priest and Am erican m issionary who offer to pray for m e off to the side.

There on the side of the stage the women pray for me for more of the Holy Spirit. I immediately feel like a tea bag that is submerged in hot water and crumple to my knees under their warm hands. As I rest there I can hear Carol speaking from the platform.

“Where is Bob?” she is asking. “Où est Bob?” says the interpreter.

I get up and make my way to my seat in the second row. Carol spots me and stops her talk, inviting me to come forward. I come up to the platform as she heads down the steps with microphone in hand to meet me.

“To the one who has been faithful in little, more will be given,” she says, grasping my hands in hers.

I immediately begin to fall forward on top of her, until I hear her yell and find myself seconds later on my back there in front of the stage, feeling the warm presence of God. Carol climbs back onto the stage and continues her talk, and I eventually make it back to my seat to listen to her speak on how she sees herself and other ordinary believers as like the donkey who humbly bears the Presence of God into Jerusalem.

Carol spots me returning to my seat and abruptly stops her talk.

“Bob, where are you going?” she asks, drawing the attention of the entire assembly back onto me.

“Come back up here,” she commands. “You pastors are all so busy, busy, busy. What you really need is to learn to just receive more love from God. You are too quick to get up and go. You can only give away what you have received. You need to be filled up so you are ministering from out of a fullness, out of an overflow,” she continues.

Carol insisted then as she had at other times that in Matthew 22:37 Jesus says: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart.” The mind comes last. She said that God told her “Carol, I have many servants, but few lovers. Lovers will outperform servants. There is an energy from love which comes from laying down and letting yourself be loved.”

“This time after I pray for you Bob, stay down and receive,” she insists. She prayed and I went down in front of the stage. This time I stay put, listening as God’s Spirit hovered over me.

The next morning I awoken earlier than I had hoped and decide to join Serje for Sunday worship at his Belleville church where he pastors several blocks away. I sit near the front and at the end respond to an invitation for people called to ministry to receive prayers of empowerment for their ministries. As I head out after the service a man in his seventies approaches me, telling me that he is a peasant from Nîmes and wants to speak with me and pray for me.

“God wants to bring the doctors of the Word together with the prophets,” he states, and asks if he can pray for me. I am amazed that this man who apparently knew nothing about me has identified the two worlds that have been only recently been coming together: my calling as a

teacher of Scripture and “doctor of the word” and the new move towards the charismatic “profets.”

That afternoon we all took a train to Valence and headed out to do a healing service in an Église Réformée de France in the Dômes. After the service we slept in center for Union de Prêtre de Cham es. Sometime in the middle of the night I had three vivid dreams that awoke me. In the first I saw a forest fire heading up from where we were East of the Cevennes and from the Southern part of the Cevennes where we were heading the next day in Saint Jean du Gard, where pastor Daniel Bourguet is based. Daniel is an Église Réformée de France pastor who has lived for the past ten years as a hem it dedicated to contemplative prayer and serves as prior of the Fraternité Espirituelle les Veilleurs. He had previously been my professor of Old Testament in Montpellier and director of my doctoral dissertation. In the second dream I saw myself laying hands on Daniel Bourguet to pray him to receive everything I had recently been receiving from God. In the third dream a voice spoke to me that I was to tell John Amott that he must not justify the actions or policies of powers like nation states or he would lose the anointing. The next afternoon as we rode the train to Nîmes I shared with John what I had received in the night, and we discussed together my concerns about Christians’ support of war. I shared with him story after story of how charismatic Christians in Central America had mistakenly sided with governments guilty of committing heinous human rights abuses.

John listened thoughtfully and responded in humility this strong warning by saying: “how could we know unless someone [like you] tells us.”

Later that day when our delegation arrived in Nîmes and we were picked up by people who drove us out to the Huguenot Mûsé du Désert. I asked our driver what she saw calling the French church into. She surprised me by repeating what the old man in Paris had told me: “God is bringing the doctors of the Word together with the prophets.” That same day I learned why this particular word was especially important for France, and for global body of Christ.

The curator of the Huguenot museum gave us a tour and told us fascinating detail about the early period when the Huguenots were worshipping underground in an arid, mountainous region of the Cevennes known by these courageous believers as the desert (the wildness). He told about a charismatic renewal movement around 1700 centered there in the Cevennes where we were. Hundreds of uneducated, peasant children between 3 and 18 were having visions and prophesying in perfect French to crowds of people who met clandestinely when the French King Louis XIV had outlawed protestants from practicing their faith.<sup>5</sup> He told how as the soldiers (called *Dragons*) of King Louis IV stepped up their persecution that the renewal movement became militant, giving rise to an armed guerilla resistance called the *Camisards* that attacked the *Dragons*, using prophetic words spoken as the Spirit came upon these children calling people to holy war. All began to change after one of the Huguenot leaders went off to Geneva for theological training. Upon his return he prohibited this charismatic prophetic movement from operating in the Protestant churches because the ecstatic utterances had become disconnected from a careful Christian interpretation of Scripture. The curator commented that from this time

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<sup>5</sup>Maximilien M. Mission, *Le Théâtre Sacré des Cévennes*, edited by Jean-Pierre Richardot, Les Éditions de Paris: Paris, 1996.

ever since the doctors of the Word have been dominant in the Église Réformée de France and the charismatic prophets have been marginalized.

That evening after our tour of the Musée du Désert a group of over thirty intercessors from all over France gathered to worship and pray. I was impressed by the humility of the French intercessors as individuals proposed ways the group should pray.

“If we are to see renewal happen we must humble ourselves before the doctors of the Word our arrogance and presumption which has led them to take offense,” said a woman.

Another person commented that judgments against Roman Catholics must be dropped and total forgiveness offered for the persecution of the past. A woman even stated that French protestants must renounce their agreement with the violent beheading of King Louis the XIV, which she saw as an wrong justification of violence and anti-authoritarianism which has kept people isolated and overly independent. Finally John A mott suggested that we pray for more of the fire of the Holy Spirit.

“You are ministering in a dark and difficult place where you need more light and more fire of God’s Presence,” said John. “I would like to pray for your torches to be lit so you can be further empowered as firelighters, he suggested, prompting me to share my dream of the night before.

At this point I shared my dream of the forest fire that was moving from tree to tree from the Eastern part of the Cevennes where we’d been the night before and from the South where we were at that moment, joining to consume the heart of French protestant country.

People were all in agreement with this suggestion, and John invited us all to stand and began calling on the Holy Spirit to send the fire of God’s Presence. Immediately people began crying out and some fell to the ground under the power the Spirit. I felt my body overcome by a heat that was almost unbearable, which burned throughout my body for the next hour or more as we all prayed for each other and for France, until the evening ended and I left the delegation for further visits and a retreat with my French doctor of the Word colleagues.

During the remaining seven days of my trip I met with my theologian (Docteur de la Parole) friends, sharing with them my recent experiences with the charismatic renewal movement. Some listened skeptically, critical of attitudes that I too had witnessed: self-righteousness, spiritual elitism, anti-intellectualism, fundamentalism, conservative political ideology. I attended a contemplative retreat led by Daniel Bourguet at the retreat center at “les Abeilleurs” in the Cevennes. Daniel and I had met daily to talk at length about my experiences. The chasm between him self as a doctor of the word and contemplative and the charismatic world appeared to gradually close as we talked, prayed and worshipped together in community with the other retreatants. Daniel wisely commented: “we will see by the fruit in your life whether this is from the Holy Spirit.” On the day of my departure I asked him to lay hands on me and bless me in my researching and teaching of Scripture. He humbly knelt and asked me to lay hands on him to receive whatever God had for him.

My final meeting in France was with Michel Bouttier, a veteran Église Réformée de France, professor of New Testament at Montpellier for over twenty years and prolific writer then in his 80s. Michel had been one of my most respected teachers and spiritual directors for over fifteen years. I had been hesitant to share with him my recent journey, afraid of his disapproval. We met for an hour and a half in a train station in Valence where I was able to stop on my way to Paris. He sat in rapt attention as I told him my recent journey, profoundly touched by the testimonies of God's intimate touch and miraculous signs. "Your stories are right in harmony with the apostolic witness in the New Testament church," he began. "I have been so thirsty for what you are experiencing. For years and years I have been working to keep the dying coals alive in my church for God to move in the ways you are describing. Pray for me!" he asked, just as my train pulled up to the *quai*. I prayed for him as we ran to get on my train.

I returned home from France convinced that God is birthing something new in me that involved a coming together of disparate parts of Christ's body and the diverse witness of Scripture in service of the poor and marginalized. It is God's pleasure to see the sanctuary and the street, the monastery and the academy, the charismatic renewal movement and progressive social activists, environmentalists and evangelists, traditional liturgists and contemporary worshippers come together. I am sure that as people respond to Jesus' invitation to join him in preaching good news to the poor we will all come to recognize our need for all the riches of our inheritance that are currently scattered among God's people in different denominations and countries. As people see the urgent need for the Kingdom of God to come in force on behalf of those who suffer, they will be increasingly willing to give up national, ethnic, partisan and denominational allegiances in favor of "on earth as in heaven." Switching from limited allegiances to being fully identified with the whole company of Jesus includes no longer being ashamed to be seen with the different ones. Nicodemus did go on to defend Jesus, but did he go far enough? Apparently he was not willing to make the break and be fully identified with God's coming kingdom. Perhaps like most Pharisees, he was unwilling to humble himself and receive John's baptism. Unity of purpose can best happen as we return to the Jordan, to the waters of baptism, where our identity as God's sons and daughters are restored and the dividing walls are broken down. It is there that we become freed and empowered to join Jesus in creating something new.