

## Q and A

“Question number one,” said Tom. “Epiphany and its seven daughter churches have an unusual history and focus ... How did they all come to be?”

“Epiphany didn’t have a specific mission focus when it organized, other than what most any other congregation that comes together does. The people loved God and wanted to formalize their common goal of spreading the good news of Christ. I’m sure they had no idea what they were getting into when calling me to be their pastor. At that point, I hadn’t done anything to gain the moniker of ‘Rogue’. I know you are now aware of the story behind this old warehouse and its conversion, so I won’t go into that.”

“Yes, and the daughter churches each have their own building story, right?”

“Perhaps not quite as dramatic, but still interesting,” said Travis.

“Redeemer was the first mission church. How did it begin?”

“First, there was no particular plan in place beforehand. For some reason, we were inundated with people desperately in need of a temporary place to stay. Perhaps it was our proximity to the interstate or just word of mouth, I don’t know. We had an arrangement with a local hotel that allowed us to access their unsold rooms at a huge discount. One day, I was talking to Gus Luneke, the owner of the hotel, when he told me he was retiring and putting the hotel up for sale. One of our retired members, Trace Mays, had extensive experience in the hotel field, and ... the bottom line ended up with us purchasing the hotel. We remodeled the large conference room into a sanctuary, and Redeemer was born. Today, it remains as a temporary place of refuge for a lot of people with such needs.”

“Next came Faith, I believe,” said Tom.

“Yes. Enrique Mercado, one of our newer members at Epiphany, came to me one day and asked if we had ever thought about starting a Hispanic ministry. In one of many conversations we had, he mentioned that he knew of a Mexican restaurant that was closing its doors. One of the things that I am incredibly grateful for at Epiphany and its network is the people with money who have not hesitated to finance our missions. We came up with

the money to purchase the restaurant and Faith was launched. The seating area was designed for rapid transformation from worship service to restaurant and vice versa. We serve three meals a day, seven days a week, for those who are hungry. The meals are aimed toward Hispanic culture, but not limited to it. We struggled a little bit with the language issue, but ultimately decided to alternate weeks with one Sunday service being in Spanish and the next week in English. Enrique felt that helping our Hispanic members assimilate into American society and learn English would go a long way towards making them productive citizens. It would also not be exclusionary toward those who don't speak Spanish.”

“Let's see,” said Tom. “And then we have St. Paul, an old school?”

“About six years ago, at one of our voter's meetings, several members with growing families broached the subject of a school. We studied it for a year, trying to gauge the feasibility for our area. A lot of discussion followed. Personally, I've had some difficulties with church schools. Not with the people or the mission, because I think the teachers and leaders are some of the finest in the world. A school starts out as a noble mission and is often

billed as a ministry. It eventually evolves into a business that charges its customers the market rate for educating their children. Oh sure, there is some ministry there that you don't get in public schools, but it seems to draw a disproportionate amount of energy away from the mission of the church. When you look at the numbers, you rarely see any increase in attendance or activity of children in church that would not have occurred with those members who have children enrolled anyway. Charging someone for schooling their child, even though it is usually worth it, dramatically changes the relationship with them. So, the project just kind of stalled for a while, and then the Lord dropped another opportunity in front of us. The school district had plans to build a new high school on a large property they owned about a mile away from the current school. They didn't think the old school was worth trying to salvage, so they were going to tear it down and sell the land. Well ... we acquired it 'as is' and the rest is history, so to speak. We restarted the project and, with some tactful negotiation and compromise, arrived at a plan. Currently, our enrollment is limited, offering it first to our members and then to the public. We charge nothing for the schooling, but the parents do have to pay for some items like their child's supplies and such. St.

Paul also offers some classes and use of the facilities to the homeschooling community. The gym is available to all our sister churches for use by their youth groups and, of course, the largest room was remodeled into a sanctuary. Certainly, the network must subsidize greatly, but that is St. Paul's mission."

"Okay," said Tom. "Then along comes Nativity, a real old-fashioned church. What happened there?"

Laughing, Travis replied, "There is nothing wrong with a traditional church building. It is the only one of the daughter churches that we built as a traditional church from the ground up. We did keep it simple, as a basic small rectangle, so there are no expensive architectural features and no complicated roof lines, though it does have a steeple and a bell. The windows are stained glass depictions of biblical stories. The interior has a lot of carved wood features donated by a couple of local artisans. It has comfortable pews and a pipe organ. The communion ware and candelabras are gold and were purchased second hand from other churches that no longer needed them. I like a traditional church and so do a lot of other people, so we felt going that route filled a gap. We do have a lot of

weddings, funerals, and other formal events there, including many open to the community at large. Having done all that, we still do some out-of-the-ordinary things. We hold a worship service every day of the week, including two nights. The world has changed in terms of people's jobs, and we felt it gave us a good opportunity to minister to all those people that must work on Sunday. Attendance on Sunday is usually at the capacity of two hundred to two hundred fifty when we set up folding chairs. They are in the planning stage for adding a second service on Sunday. Attendance at the services during the week averages forty to fifty, with many who are members of other denominations."

"So, then comes Ascension," said Tom. "An old theater?"

"Yes, but it actually was not an old building. With all the technology changes in the entertainment industry, our city just had too many traditional movie theaters for them to all make it. This one had eight theaters in the building, and we bought it at a bargain price. Our remodeling budget was modest because we didn't have to make that many changes structurally. We knocked out some walls and made one large auditorium out of six of

the theaters. One was made into an office and conference room. The last one we left as a movie theater where we run weekly family-oriented movies free of charge to the community. Of course, the auditorium works well as a sanctuary and a place for concerts and plays. A theatrical group, made up of members from numerous local denominations, just finished a dozen performances of ‘Cotton Patch Gospel’, raising substantial funds for the area’s prison ministry.”

“What about St. Luke’s?” asked Tom.

“A little bit different.”

“As if the others are just mundane?”

“Exactly,” replied Travis. “No ... St. Luke’s occupies the ground floor of a medical building. Robert Conway, a member of Ascension, recently retired from a highly successful business career in the medical field. He heard about this building going up for sale from several of his doctor friends. Robert set up a Limited Liability Company and bought the building. He leases the bottom floor to us and the rest of the five stories to all the doctors who already had offices there. With a great reputation among the doctors, he did a bunch of remodeling for them and never raised the rent. On the second floor are two Christian psychologists that we

have worked with often in the past, so that works out well. There is also a private social services group where we send many of those needing assistance. Obviously, the symbolism is rich with St. Luke being in a building with other physicians. Healing of the human spirit also fits well with healing of the body. St. Luke's is our smallest congregation, but an integral part of the big picture. Robert also donates everything he makes from the building back to St. Luke's."

"And last, but not least," said Tom. "Probably the most traditional and conservative of the lot—a shopping mall?"

"Yes ... of course, I know you're just being facetious. Holy Spirit has been the most challenging and interesting of our ventures. You know the situation with many of the shopping malls in our state. Well, we found one that desperately needed to find a tenant for a two-story unit that had been empty for a while when one of the anchor stores went out of business. After numerous brainstorming sessions with everyone we knew with retail mall experience, we came up with a plan.

We had to adapt to the hours of the mall as a starter. With the cost per square foot being rather high, we had to figure out how to use the large



amount of space efficiently, and fiscally manage the lease as a church. The legal aspects were a little tricky in making sure we didn't do anything to violate our nonprofit status, but the tax experts got that ironed out. The opportunities that such a high traffic exposure presented were enormous. Of course, we are in uncharted territory with a lot of what we are trying to do. We've had to make a few changes with the original plan as we learn, but, overall, I believe it's working. As it stands now, we have a retail Christian store, technically owned by one of our members, on the lower level that offers a ton of books, music, gifts, and more. The sanctuary is on the upper level."

"All the churches are part of the recognized national synod as well as the district, correct?" asked Tom. "But you also have a localized network among the mother and daughter churches as well, right?"

"True on both counts," answered Travis. "Events and activities freely float among the network depending on their nature and the need for facilities. Each church has a specialty mission in addition to the common mission of an individual congregation. Some of those specialized missions

are pretty obvious considering the church's unique facility."

"Can you give us some more details on those specialized missions?"

"Sure. Let's start with Epiphany. Being an old warehouse, Epiphany has a lot of storage area on the second floor. We started out with a large food pantry, but when the Baptist church across the street expanded their food outreach, we decided to partner with them on the food and change our focus to that of clothing and related needs. When someone comes to us looking for food, we talk to them about Jesus and why we do what we do, then we give them a voucher that they can take across the street and get what they need. With the voucher system, our Baptist partners know we've already talked to them about God. It works the other way around when someone comes to them looking for clothing. They give them a voucher and send them over to us. All our churches in the network also have small inventories of clothing for immediate emergencies that we replenish from our large warehouse storage as needed."

"As a hotel, Redeemer's mission seems pretty obvious," said Tom.

“Yes, providing immediate shelter is often one of the first steps in giving help. While we don’t have absolute rules on how long someone can stay, we try to minimize long-term housing at the hotel. We try to remain as flexible as possible, given everyone’s case. We have several safe rooms for victims of domestic abuse that are heavily guarded, also working with law enforcement when needed. If someone comes to one of our other network churches, we get them to Redeemer with one of our three vans—sort of like a church Uber system.”

“As a restaurant setup, Faith’s mission also seems pretty straight forward,” said Tom.

“Of course, providing prepared meals is a key component in the help wheel. Faith’s expertise with the Hispanic community also serves as a hub for many other aspects of outreach besides the meals. I credit Enrique with much of the success with that outreach.”

“We’ve already gone over some of what St. Paul does with the old school. What more can you tell me about it?”

“Right now, St. Paul is not operating at maximum efficiency because we’ve got so many rooms that aren’t yet being used. We’re feeling our way along a little with fixing that, but the future has a

slate full of plans. We're kindergarten through 8<sup>th</sup> grade at present, but we want to get through high school in the next phase, again working under the premise of not charging tuition. We're also talking with regional colleges about offering some of their programs on a satellite basis. It's a slow process with meeting all the accreditation requirements, but I'm confident we will get there one day. I think we're pretty close to meeting the needs of church members, but we still have a lot of work to do with our outreach to the general community."

"I know we talked about a service being held every day at Nativity, but is there anything else unusual about this usual church?"

"Given the unusual nature of the other churches, Nativity is unusual in being usual ... that kind of reads like something St. Paul might have written ... Just kidding. Nativity has a rather conservative member profile. It is by far the best in giving on a per capita basis. We would have a hard time supporting many of the missions at the other churches, if we didn't have so many generous members at Nativity."

"That brings us back to Ascension, the theater."

“I think Ascension is merely in its infancy right now. Given a little more time, I think it will explode, kind of like the teenager who grows three inches almost overnight. But for now, while it has a solid congregational base, the building sits empty too much of the time for me. They’ve got a good planning committee that’s working on ways to bring that use rate up and I think they will with an ecumenical approach. One of the things they’re planning to do is to show more films that are made by smaller Christian production companies—films that have a harder time finding venues.”

“Okay, St. Luke is in the medical building. What other opportunities does that present?”

“St. Luke is our information pipeline for those people with medical issues. We have a vast database headquartered there. We know which of our members in our network of churches with a life experience that might correspond to an individual in need. The database has every organization in our part of the state that aids people, from medical specialists to financial aid groups, and so on. The doctors in the building, partly because of their relationship with Robert Conway and partly because we don’t ask for anything back or charge for our

services, have put a lot of trust in us and frequently recommend patients to us.”

“Holy Spirit in the shopping mall?”

“You know the old saying, ‘The Holy Spirit works in mysterious ways’ ... well, He seems to be quite active at the church in the mall. I’m talking about with both the people who visit there and the people who work there. The creative talents of the staff and volunteers that come up with ways to minister to people in that kind of setting is very inspiring. In one of their brainstorming sessions, a young mother came up with the idea of ‘quiet rooms’. In the ‘quiet room’, a mom that’s shopping in the mall could take a break and go to a quiet room where she could relax with some peaceful, spiritual music and scenic videos while her child takes a nap or if her child needed to nurse, she could do it with privacy. Another member, who is an operating room nurse supervisor, organized the sanitation program, so that every room is completely wiped down after someone uses it. We have four of those rooms set up and they are often all in use. You may think that’s nice to offer, but where does the outreach come in? Amazingly, since we started offering them, we’ve had twelve baptisms come from that program. And these were people who later joined.

There are three comfortable chairs near the entrance with these foot massagers. There is a bulletin board listing everything from fundraisers to concerts in the community. We have an information desk with a unique database/encyclopedia that a group of retired pastors built. Someone can stop at the information desk and ask any kind of question about God, the Bible, or Christianity and the person at the desk can access an answer. Part of the vicarage program in our little network involves having a vicar spend some time at the desk interacting with people, some who are not believers, on a face-to-face basis. There is a portable pamphlet rack that we can move just outside the door with meaningful questions and answers on current problems or situations. When the gift-wrapping booth in the mall closes after the Christmas season, we provide a free gift-wrapping service—of course, all our wrapping paper has low key Christian themes. I could go on and on, but the best way to learn more is to visit for yourself.”

“We’ll do that, Travis. Although, I would probably have a tough time convincing Nichole and her sister to go to the mall.”

“Uh, huh.”

“This is all fascinating, Travis. I can even envision some future stories coming from these unique settings.”

“I wouldn’t doubt that at all, Tom. I love getting together with my fellow shepherds every month. In my new situation, I think I will discover a whole new set of interesting stories.”

“I know that our time is about up for today, but in our next session, I’d like to talk more about some of your roguish ideas.”

“You know, Tom, strictly speaking, a rogue is a deceitful, unprincipled, and unreliable character.”

“Yeah, I know, but in this case, there is a whole fog of irony surrounding the title.”

“Hopefully, what we’re doing here will shine more light on that fact.”

“I know you are going to be out of town next week, so I’ll see you when you get back.”



