

## CHANGE IN THE WIND

The reception area of the church office reflected the modest nature of Epiphany Lutheran and its mission philosophy. Though the trappings did not smell of leather or shine like well-polished wood, the workhorse computer system and office equipment looked more than capable.

“Hi, welcome to Epiphany,” said the secretary, as Tom came through the door. “You must be Mr. Peterson.”

“Yes, the last time I looked I was,” joked Tom. “And you are, of course, Miss Ahrens, the backbone of the parish work force.”

“You are too kind, Mr. Peterson. I do have a lot of help behind the scenes from a lot of different people. Pastor Sawyer is expecting you. I will let him know you are here.”

“Thank you, Miss Ahrens. And it’s Tom, okay?”

“Only if you call me Helen.”

“Deal.”

“Come on in, Tom,” said Pastor Sawyer. “Please, have a seat. Soft, comfortable chair or hard tomato crate?”

“You do have an old tomato crate, don’t you?”

“Of course. You’d be surprised how many people choose to sit on it.”

“Thank you, Pastor. And thanks again for meeting with me.”

“You’re quite welcome. So, what are two wealthy young men with a penchant for helping people going to do with their new company, Peterson & Paulson, Inc.?”

“How did you know about that?” asked Tom.

“Old habits can be hard to break sometimes.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m sure that will become clear later. What does an author and owner of a publishing company want to know about me and this church?”

“Become clear later? That could cover a lot.”

“I believe so,” answered Pastor Sawyer.

“Okay ... They probably didn’t teach you those moves I saw in the parking garage at the seminary, did they?”

“Nooo.”

“When and why did you decide to become a pastor?” asked Tom.

“That’s kind of a long story, so I’m going to give you the short version today.”

“Okay.”

“I was born into a conservative religious family and raised on a farm. I’ve always been very grateful to my parents for giving me such an upbringing, in both a spiritual sense and a work ethic sense. I had the good fortune of using that upbringing to motivate me in school, so I had very good grades and exceptional test scores. I qualified for a pilot program where I entered college as a junior and I graduated with a degree in crop science in two years. I felt like I was missing something, though. I joined the army and eventually became a Green Beret. Even though I had accomplished a lot, I couldn’t shake the feeling that there was something I should still do. The CIA recruited me for some special projects that used my knowledge and skills in agriculture. After five years of some very

dark work in some very dark places, I finally followed the path that God had lit for me and that's when I chose the pastoral route."

"That would certainly explain the parking garage," said Tom.

"I suppose so."

"Do you regret becoming a Green Beret or working with the CIA before the ministry?"

"No. The experience I had in each case taught me a great deal about life and death, especially. I regularly draw on that part of my life in my pastoral role."

"I really liked the service last Sunday," said Tom. "Your method of explaining the meaning of the Scripture and the Apostles' Creed and the hymn, well ... I found it illuminating. I came away feeling like I had actually learned something."

"Well, Tom. I firmly believe that following Christ should be a way of life and not a religion. A way of life is 7 days a week and 24 hours a day. A religion tends to be an hour or two a week for most people. So, I have tried to make the service something that helps people look at life in that light. While the service still has a lot of tradition in it, I

feel our way of doing it makes what we say and believe come alive. We've also tried to structure it in a way that a visitor could feel at home and come away with the same message as a lifetime member."

"I think you've accomplished that, Pastor. Something else simply astounded me, and that's the number of people who greeted us before and after the service."

"Not everybody has the ability to talk confidently to people they don't know, but everybody sitting in those chairs can offer a simple welcome. And the key is that they do it because they are genuinely glad to see you and not as a response to what the pastor tells them to do as part of the service. It is so simple, and yet it is the acid test for our understanding of the Good News. If we can't manage that for everyone who comes to us through those doors, then we will never truly be able to go out and tell people about Christ and what he has done for us."

"I have to talk about the building ... an old warehouse?"

"There is a story behind this particular building that maybe we can get to another time."

“It is interesting when compared to the typical church building.”

“It’s another one of those things that makes us a little different, I suppose. While I understand a lot of the motivation for building magnificent, architecturally expensive buildings, I believe Epiphany Lutheran Church is the people and not the building. I feel the best way to honor and please God is to be a vehicle for bringing the one thing that He values above all else, for the one thing that He sent His Son to come to earth for, and that’s people. By having a modest building, it frees up a lot of the money in the budget so we can reach people instead of paying for that magnificent and expensive building.”

“Do you ever get any complaints about it?” asked Tom.

“Sure, and I understand the point about giving glory to God. The complaints usually end when I offer them a choice. If you had ten thousand dollars, what would you choose to do—buy gold offering plates or help a child who needs an operation? Which will have the greatest impact, witness-wise? Which gives the greater glory to God?”

“As I understand it, there is a group of daughter churches of Epiphany that are part of an informal network. How many are there and are they all like this mother church?”

“There are seven daughter churches in our area with a total average attendance each Sunday of about two thousand. What I find encouraging with that is the very low percentage of people who come for a while and then disappear. What’s also interesting about them is that they are all being led by former vicars of this church. While they are all very similar to this church, each shepherd has their own way of doing certain things. And that’s fine. If what they learned from their vicarage here inspired them to come back, more power to them. I feel like if I left the ministry tomorrow, the mission, as I envision it, won’t miss a beat.”

“Earlier you asked me a question, ‘What does an author and owner of a publishing company want to know about me and this church?’ ... What if I said I wanted to write a book about you and everything you’ve done here?”

“Why would you want to do that, Tom?”

“I think it’s fascinating and would make a wonderful story. It’s different, and I think it would

touch on something that many people have felt about church for a long time. It would probably draw its share of criticism, but anytime you go against the grain that will happen.”

“Well, I think that what we’ve done has proved to be fairly successful in reaching its goals. And if it’s been successful in reaching people with the Gospel in a simple way, then I would never turn down the publicity and interest that such a book might generate. I’m not so sure I would want much said about me. I’m just one cog in the wheel. I have brought a lot of controversy to the table in the process, so as far as anything written about me is concerned, it must be done very carefully. I’m already considered a rogue by some higher-ups, so we would need to minimize adding any fuel to the fire.”

“I understand. Whatever I write would have to gain your approval before being published.”

“From what I know of your background, the people you’ve surrounded yourself with, and given that I’ve read a couple of your books, I don’t have any doubt that the story would be done fairly ... So, in answer to your original question, I would say, let’s give it a go.”



“Great, Pastor ... I’ve got some thinking to do on exactly how to put it together and with the format to use. I will get back to you when I have a few more of those details worked out and we can go from there.”

“I’ll wait to hear from you then, Tom ... and from now on, it’s Travis. I will always be a shepherd, but I might not always be a pastor if you understand the nuanced difference.”

“I understand, Travis.”

Two weeks later, Tom entered Pastor Sawyer’s office.

“Hi, Tom,” said Pastor Sawyer. “Please, have a seat.”

“Hi, Travis. Are you ready to lay out some groundwork?”

“Oh, I’m ready. Before we get started, though, there has been a development that might affect what we are getting ready to do.”

“What’s going on, Travis?”

“Come January, I am going to be leaving the pastoral position here at Epiphany.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Well, there are two parts to the story.”

“Still a shepherd?” asked Tom.

“Most assuredly, but in an unconventional way. First, I received a call from an old army friend of mine, Bill Adams. We served on many missions together in the military and with the CIA. He’s left his position in the government and is starting a private venture dedicated to helping people who cannot get help from traditional agencies or resources. He laid out what he’s going to do, and he asked me if I would consider joining him.”

“Is it something you want to do, Travis?”

“While I’ve only had a short time to consider it, maybe in the back of my mind, I’ve really been thinking about something like it for a long time.”

“What does it involve?”

“Well, that’s sort of open ended. Bill has recruited a team of ex-CIA and FBI agents, Navy Seals, and Green Berets, so he will have a wealth of skilled people with experience in a lot of different areas at his disposal. Initially, he will rely heavily on referrals from his many contacts in the government for cases where people have no place left to go. It was kind of funny, because when he told

me about his goals, one of the first things that popped into my mind was that I would be going out into the community as a missionary, so to speak, and would undoubtedly come across people who might need a shepherd's help. So, it could be anything. I know a lot of the people he has recruited, and they are definitely a group who know how to solve problems in unorthodox ways, especially off the grid, if necessary.”

“How does your wife feel about it?”

“Well, she's not crazy about the danger part, but, overall, she's okay with it. Fortunately, Bill has decided to base his operation right here in this city, so, for me, it wouldn't involve a move or months away from home. A big part of my decision depended on me still being able to be there for Ginny and the kids most of the time.”

“You said there were two parts to the story. What's the second part?”

“It is basically an extension of everything I've been trying to promote within the church for years. I think that we, the established church that is, have lost focus on reaching people for Christ. Look at most any church budget and see how much money they allot for outreach. It is usually a mere

pittance compared to supporting the status quo. Oh, sure, there is some overlap with many of the programs being run by the church, but it is not the focus. In the fog of denominational rules and regulations, we have failed to see the big picture of the world ahead of us, and we definitely have problems working with other denominations on a common goal. Needless to say, this view has put me at odds with the theologians above me in the ecclesiastical order. Outside of Epiphany and our daughter churches, who all seem to get it, I've sometimes felt very much alone. But judging from the growth we've experienced and the overwhelming number of requests to speak on that belief that have been coming in lately, I have to say it has been a little mind-boggling. I've always thought maybe my approach was too simplistic to generate much interest, but I now believe there are a lot of people out there who agree with me. Ginny and I have been talking about this ever since I became a pastor, so we agree that the timing is right."

"So, what form is the second part of this move going to take, Travis?"

"Ultimately, it will be some type of ministry, but on a broader scale than an individual parish

ministry. It is my goal to be able to share everything we have done, what's worked and what hasn't. We hope to encourage church leaders to be shepherds instead of executive officers, so to speak. I know we are going to be venturing into some challenging, uncharted waters, but as that old cliché says, 'Nothing ventured, nothing gained'. So, in that regard, and considering that many in the church establishment see me as something of a rogue, I have decided to put what I'm going to do under the umbrella of 'Rogue Shepherd Ventures'."

"Uh ..." started Tom.

"You're smiling, Tom. What are you smiling about?"

"Oh, it's a little uncanny, Travis. Do you know what I was going to suggest we call this book?"

"No, what?"

"Rogue Shepherd."

Travis looked at Tom for a minute and then said, "Is this where the lights go dim and eerie music begins to play?"

“It does seem to have a signature hand guiding it,” said Tom. “How could it not succeed with that? And I don’t necessarily mean from a financial perspective.”

“Too much to throw at you, today?” asked Travis.

“No, no. I’ll just need some time to change the outline a little. I think it will still work. There is a story to be told, and what you have accomplished has not changed. In fact, I think your move will simply add another dimension to the story. When we originally talked, you said you weren’t sure you wanted much said about you. Travis, I believe you are the central character in this story, and it has to be built around you; however, there are ways to tell the story that spotlight what has been done without you necessarily being in the spotlight all the time. Again, though, you will have approval over anything that I write.”

“Well, I appreciate that.”

“How does your flock at Epiphany feel about it?” asked Tom.

“Many have said they will miss me, and I will certainly miss them. If I have been an effective shepherd in leading them down the path of

following Christ and the priorities that path entails, then I should be able to leave at any time and the mission continue on uninterrupted, because it's not about me, but about each member's own relationship with their Creator and Savior. Besides, I'll still see them from time to time with the new position being based here."

"Okay, then. I will get back to you in a few days with a plan and we can go from there."

"Sounds great, Tom. Are you disappointed in any way?"

"Absolutely not, Travis. I have always believed that flexibility is a key component of life. After all, you did do a little foreshadowing when you said that you would always be a shepherd, but you may not always be a pastor."

"Yeah, I guess I did."

"I'll see you in a few days, Travis."

"Vaya con Dios, my friend."

Later that night, around the dinner table, Tom shared the new development with Rick, Nancy, and Nichole.

“How do you feel about it, Tom?” asked Nichole.

“Oh, I still think there is a story to tell. In a way, it reminds me of that quilt you girls are working on. Each block has its own meaning, but together they make the quilt. I think this move that Travis is making adds another block, with its own meaning, to the whole story. I am glad it all came about before we got started and not in the middle of things.”

“You know, I always thought, from our unusual meeting of the guy, that he didn’t quite fit the traditional mold,” said Rick. “I think a little bit more intrigue has been added and it will make a great story, Tom.”

“I can see your head beginning to smoke, dear,” said Nichole.

“Well, then I guess I need another helping of your meatloaf to slow it down,” replied Tom.

“I don’t follow the logic behind that statement,” said Rick.

“Sometimes, you don’t follow the logic of anything that doesn’t involve pizza,” said Nancy.

“But you still love me, don’t you?”



“Forever, Rick,” said Nancy.