

115th Anniversary Thoughts

Roger Johnson

August 8, 2021

Välkommen — Vi tackar Gud för hundra femtonde årsdagen av Bethphage Baptist Church i Chisholm, MN, USA! Translation: We thank God for the one hundred fifteenth anniversary of Bethphage Baptist Church in Chisholm, MN, USA.

Today we are celebrating God's grace and goodness to our church for 115 years. Anniversaries are times to remember! It is so easy to be busy with our todays without looking back to how we got to this place. This is a time to thank God for what He has done from the beginning when the first Swedish speaking believers came to this area and what He is continuing to do. It is good to be thankful for the faithful followers of Christ who made a strong witness in their day and above all else to THANK GOD for sustaining that witness through all these years. Today we remember and give thanks. Let us do that now--PRAY

We are going to remember some of the history of the early beginnings of our church. Although I am old, I was not here at the start of this church. However I knew some of the charter members and am related to some of them. Pictures of the pastors who have served here are set up on the wall across from the library. As a youngster I was never interested in History, but as I grew in my Christian faith, I realized the importance of knowing Biblical History as recorded in God's Word as well as the story of our church. I'm thankful that I grew up in this church and was blessed by pastors and lay people who lived for the Lord and encouraged me in my search to learn God's Word and even history!

It is a privilege to share some of the ways God has blessed this congregation. Each decade has been a time of meaningful contributions and changes. Changes are a part of our history but remember that the one thing that has not changed is the strong commitment to teaching the Word of God.

For our story we will go back to the first years of the 1900's. There were a number of Swedish people from Finland that had settled in the area. Some had been saved as a result of the spiritual awakening in their homeland. One of the immigrant ladies was concerned about the children. I've asked Gloria to share part of that story.

Gloria: Yes, this immigrant lady, Sofia Strong, was concerned about the children and she is a big part of this history. Because teaching children has been a big part of my life, this story of the significance of children in the early days of Chisholm Baptist intrigued both Joanne Berg and myself, when we came to teach school in Chisholm. How interesting it was to hear this story of how in the times of the immigrants arriving, an immigrant lady, Sofia Strong, took such interest in the children. She felt the need to begin teaching God's Word to the children of these believers. In this new land she realized they needed to have an opportunity to learn who God is and the truth of knowing Jesus as their redeemer. She also was aware that these children had left some of their family and were in a country that was strange to them. Not much has been written about how she decided to work with the children, but it stirs up my imagination. What fun to have been on her committee! This plan to set up a Sunday School for the children was started in 1903. Roger's uncle, Bill, began assisting Grandma Strong with teaching the children. In a few years the adult believers must have realized it was time to start their own church, so after the Sunday School started, this church, the Bethphage Church, with 12 charter members was established in 1906. Today we call it Chisholm Baptist Church. What a significant beginning—beginning with having an urgent need to teach children God's Word: One person with a passion to teach children God's truth—which encouraged others to join along and become a fellowship of believers. These people

must have taken the words seriously that we read in Deuteronomy 4:9: "Only be careful and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them slip from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them." This was spoken through Moses and are God's Word for us today. Grandma Strong took the lead in this effort and it is a reminder to us that one person can make a difference when God asks us to do something for Him. Sometimes we wait for someone else to do what God is asking us to do. Many people worked through the years so that small group of children became a large group when Joanne and I arrived in Chisholm. There were 275 on the Sunday school register and over 200 attended regularly. Teachers were needed so we were quickly put to work and I taught the 6th grade boys in the furnace room as there wasn't room for all the classes! The Sunday School was large at this time because more people were moving into Chisholm with opportunities for work with the mining industry, and a car and bus ministry was started to bring children into Sunday School. Anniversaries are good times to look back and learn from godly people like Grandma Strong. Some years later another lady in our church, Edla Anderson, (Jim Anderson's grandmother) took time to reach out to women who lived in the Pool Location, (today this area is part of Hib Tac's mining operation) teaching women as well as children. She led a VBS in their area for many years and many children were brought into Sunday School. Her ministry impacted many families, some of whom became a part of our church. It is good to remember how godly people have been faithful through the years and have been an example for us. Teaching children was God's plan and thankfully our church started with that plan and has continued that way. Concern for the families and children continued through the years and today we continue to reach out to the next generations, so we have a Family night ministry, VBS outreach, a Youth ministry and Bible camp opportunities, as well as Sunday School for all ages. We are thankful God is using so many

faithful workers today to continue what these immigrant believers started in 1903.

ROGER: From this beginning, the church was organized in 1906 with 12 charter members. A few years ago, the great grandson of Mrs. Strong (who was a charter member) came from Finland to visit the area. He had heard about Chisholm through the family and was curious and wanted to see for himself. When they saw the family home and the church, he was emotionally moved realizing his forbears were part of something that was still vital today. Of course we know the Lord is the One who built this church, using many faithful believers.

So why did these immigrants seek to come to America? There were several reasons. Opportunities for work, a better living, more land was available. Some young men didn't want to be part of the fighting against Russia and many came for a place to worship God freely.

What was it like for the early years of this church? Even though the American Dream wasn't coined when the immigrants came, they heard about this great land of opportunities, but on arrival many had to face hard times. Employment with the mining operations was uncertain and they had to adjust to being in a community with many different ethnic groups. Services were conducted by traveling evangelists and laymen in the beginning and for many years they shared a pastor with a congregation in Duluth. Language was a challenge. Swedish was the language spoken until 1937 when Pastor Lucas Cook, the first non-swede began the first full-time ministry in English. Changing the language from Swedish to English was a big change, but this helped them have a better outreach into the community. Another challenge they faced was the obstacle of lack of finances. I recall my dad who was the treasurer looking in the small metal box containing coins and trying to determine how the bills were to be paid. On another occasion I went with two deacons to purchase groceries for a new family that had moved in. There was no deacon fund so they reached into their own pockets to

pay—and they didn't have deep pockets either. What strengthened this church was the leadership who lived and demonstrated their walk with the Lord each and every day!

The early church sought to train the children to follow God by staying separate from worldly activities and some of the older young people rebelled with that adjustment to life in America. Obviously the church later came to realize that changes had to be made in their thinking—in order to share the gospel meant that one had to become friends with all groups.

What about growth in this church? Outward evidence is demonstrated by the places of worship. They first met in homes and rented buildings and then the first constructed building in 1914, followed by expansion in 1953, and then in building a new church structure in 1991. Many of the members were involved in the construction of these facilities. These are outward signs, but growth occurred in the hearts of the people, too. Around 1917, tent meetings were held near the post office in Chisholm by Evangelist David Anderson who later became the pastor of our church and many were won to faith in Christ by these efforts. Some of our people attended not knowing the language yet but understanding the melodies of the songs and worshipped with the people. Through the years different kinds of efforts have been made to win people to faith in Christ. Evangelistic meetings, crusades, seminars, and of course the faithful preaching of God's Word and Bible study opportunities were the real encouragement for growth. These efforts are always dependent on the Holy Spirit's work in people's lives. In years past, Jane Jensen faithfully kept us up to date on missionary activities and needs. Her efforts were the forerunner of our current Missions committee which today oversees a large group of missionaries.

What became the strong points of this fellowship? I am not aware of a declared mission statement by leadership, but the sign on the front of the church stated: **HOLDING FORTH THE**

WORD OF LIFE! This speaks clearly about the commitment this church has had from the beginning. In the 100th Anniversary booklet, Pastor Dan wrote these words: "the focus of the preaching has constantly been the glories of the crucified and risen Lord, Jesus Christ. The truth continually trumpeted is that our salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, for the glory of God alone." God's Word and prayer have been central to this fellowship. We have been blessed to have pastors through all the years who have faithfully focused on this purpose. When I was younger, people would get on their knees and pray in Swedish. I probably didn't understand all of it, but that influence has made a strong impression on my life. Corporate prayer has a special blessing--praying with fellow believers and being aware of specific needs, but it is an admonishment for us as individuals also to have a personal relationship with God--to talk to our savior and listen to what He says to us. This church gathered in a large number when Eunice Peterson Kronholm (who grew up in this church) was abducted from her home in the Twin Cities by two men seeking ransom from her banker husband. Her anxiety was somewhat subdued by a verse she had memorized from Isaiah 26:3 "You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in you." And God miraculously provided her release and apprehension of the abductors. If you would like to read the story, check out the book *Held for Ransom* in the church library. It was meaningful to all of us to experience this dramatic answer to our prayers.

Music has always been an integral part of this fellowship. In the early years, a string band was formed and played at the services. I recall my mother telling us that when she left the old country, she took her psalm-book and hid it in the butter crock to escape detection as written material was not to be taken with during the wartime. Later, an orchestra was formed with strings and horns and played on Sunday evenings. Choirs were formed including various soloists, trios, quartettes, and ensembles and

have also contributed to the ministry of the church. The youth were blessed by the Share Choir set up by Charlotte Johnson which had a big impact on them in the difficult questioning teenage years. They competed and won in state competition and today many from that choir are leaders in their churches as well as ours. Worshipping God is blessed with music and we are thankful for this ongoing ministry in our church today. The adult choir has presented many musical dramas during the past years during Easter week for the community.

What are the responsibilities for us today? Are there still things for us to do in God's Kingdom? Without question! We are living in a world filled with despair and questions about life so we have the best of opportunities to continue to share the gospel message. Jesus made this clear in His final words to the disciples in Matthew 28:18-20 "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

Maybe you think this is only for trained pastors and evangelists. So let's pursue this a little further. In II Corinthians 5:14-20 we read: "For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And He died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died for them and was raised again. So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that God was reconciling the world to Himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And He has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making His appeal through us."

So, how do we become an ambassador? Did Paul apply for it? Not really. He was actually persecuting the Christians when God gave him a wake-up call on the Damascus Road. That encounter transformed his life and redirected his efforts with the people. So it is for us the same—the only way we can become an ambassador is to be reconciled to Jesus Christ. The bible says that if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come. All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation. Paul says that we ARE CHRIST'S AMBASSADORS—not that we could be or want to be! And the good part is that God gave us the message to share with a lost world. When we trusted in Jesus for our personal salvation, God gave us the Holy Spirit to empower us, teach us, and encourage us. We share the message but God does the work of convicting and bringing people to Him. God has a PERFECT PLAN! Just remember, you don't have to cross the water to be an ambassador—you can start right in your family—or across the street! This church is willing to encourage and train you to be an effective ambassador. If you haven't trusted Christ for your personal salvation, today would be the best time to consider doing that.

This year marks 82 years ago since I trusted in Jesus as my personal Savior! I remember it well—we were in the little white church with an evangelist speaking in English. My parents went forward to rededicate their lives and I was asked if I would like to be saved. My response was, "yes!" I didn't know a lot about God's plan of salvation but it was the start of a wonderful journey! Through the years, this church, with God's help, has blessed me with godly examples and instructions that have shaped my life. At this time our church is reminding us of our purpose: Love God, love others, make disciples. And we are willing to help you in your Christian walk as we carry out this purpose. Please pray about this and participate—you will never regret it! There are comments about passing the baton—but this last year in observing our grandkids running the races, I observed that as they passed on the

baton, they didn't quit but continued to cheer on the runners. I think that analogy should apply to me as well.

Emmanuel Erickson, who was a charter member, and continued to be faithful in attendance at church even though he was suffering from difficulties of hearing loss and sense of balance. When he was asked why he was so faithful, his answer was, "I want them to know whose side I am on." Whose side are you on?

For this anniversary we have identified some individuals, but we could have also identified many more. We are thankful for our current pastoral leadership of Dan, Mark, Ron, and Bryan and the many faithful workers. As we have recognized them for their service to God, we acknowledge that it is God who touched their lives to bring a blessing to others. God has done the work of reconciliation in our lives and we want to truly exalt His name. So think of the words of this last hymn, "To God be the Glory!"